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MY ADVENTURES IN BOLSHEVIK RUSSIA
THE MAN WHO NEVER UNDERSTOOD
IN THE LAND OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE (translated from the French by Helen Jessiman)

PRINCE TARIEL

A Story of Georgia

BY

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§ 1

THIS story I have to tell is a true story. It unfolded itself before my eyes. It impressed me so vividly that I find it impossible to alter it or rearrange it in any fashion. I cannot, even if I felt justified in doing so, make it into a novel. I give the incidents as they occurred – generally unconnected save by my own deductions; cropping up irregularly during my peregrinations as a descriptive writer in Georgia; interspersed between many other sights and events of which I was a witness in the troubled country. Some few of these I note for the clearer comprehension of the time, place and conditions of my narrative. This explains – and to a certain degree, I hope, excuses – the desultoriness of my tale. I am quite aware of its fundamental defects, and I should never have attempted to recount it had I not been moved by an intense desire to record in some way my passionate homage to the chief actor in it. He was killed a year ago. When he was killed, I considered myself to be released from my implicit obligation of silence. I owe little consideration to the other personages of whom I speak – in any case, I have not revealed their real names, and the

complete annihilation of the pre-Bolshevik society in Georgia makes it difficult already to identify them. But I could not endure to see the memory of Prince Tariel Abhazi fall into utter darkness and forgetfulness without an effort, however feeble, to preserve it for however short a time.

§2

(1920 Tiflis, Independent Social-democratic Georgia, the Caucasus, in the early weeks of the year nineteen hundred and twenty, at eleven o'clock at night. . . .

As I must start relating my tale from one date or another, I may as well begin on the evening when I first became acquainted with a situation I had never suspected before. My coachman pulled up his two horses in front of Prince Abhazi's flat, which was at the corner of the Golovinski, the finest modern boulevard in the capital, and the Armenski Bazar, a quarter of the town which still retained its motley Oriental aspect. My carriage was an open one, and in spite of my furs I had been shivering in the sharp cold air all the way down from the *Hotel d'Orient*, where I lived. Also, I had been cursing the hour when I yielded to Princess Abhazi's coaxing and agreed to accompany both her and her husband to a social reception which held no likelihood of amusing me in the least. The ball was to be given by a notorious

Russian woman, Sonia Pavlovna Darinskaia, and I knew quite well why Vala Abhazi had set herself out to wheedle me into accepting the invitation I, like every other foreigner in Tiflis, had received. These gatherings took place fortnightly, and at them one saw the White refugee from Russia and the business adventurer from Europe at their worst. Captain Prince Tariel Abhazi, though a young man, had the old Georgian standards of manners, and he disliked the atmosphere of these entertainments extremely. His wife was cognizant of the fact, but there was good dancing to be had at Sonia Pavlovna's house, and she hoped Prince Tariel would raise fewer objections if I went with her to the peculiar ball.

Shalva, Prince Tariel's Georgian orderly, in a round fur cap and the high-necked Caucasian blouse drawn strictly without a fold on the breast, opened the door when I rang and asked me to wait in the drawing-room. The huge hall was lit only by burning logs in a monumental fireplace, and the reflections of the flames leaped up and down on the magnificent sombre carpets which covered the walls and the floor, the silks and embroideries on the divans, the low Persian tables, all gold mosaic or mother-o'-pearl incrustations, that bore ancient silver bowls and drinking-cups of pure Georgian chasing. Vala Abhazi possessed faultless taste and she had let no photographs, no European knick-knacks, no pictures even save a few Persian miniatures, desecrate her

Oriental room. Here and there the light glinted on half visible panoplies of arms, or for a moment conjured out of the darkness green and purple flowers on blazing yellow tiles – to fade back into shadows again. The orderly had forgotten to turn on the electricity, and I was enjoying this soft thick moving blackness, with its elusive revelations of the rare things of the East, when Princess Abhazi came in by a door I had not perceived.

'Really!' she said in French, with a note of annoyance in her very musical voice, as she hurried towards the principal entrance of the room. 'These Georgian soldiers are too stupid for words. . . . They think of nothing. Fancy leaving you in the dark!'

I heard her fumbling for the button before she found and pressed it with an impatient click. 'Please forgive me. . . . I do hope you haven't kept your carriage? Tariel has only just begun to dress.'

The powerful lamps revealed her in every detail as she stood against a purple Bokhara rug, with her arm still outstretched – and the grace of her, though I am not an easy admirer, almost made me hold my breath with pleasure. She was not a classically beautiful woman, but she was above average height, and slim, with perfectly moulded breasts and hips, arms that curved like the handles of Grecian urns, and fingers as paradoxically pointed and long as those in Spanish paintings. She was dressed, according to the fashion of the

day which had revived fantastic Directoire modes, in a very short plain black taffeta bodice showing three-quarters of her bust, and on her white satin skirt, narrow in the hem, black panniers swelled out stiffly from her waist. She wore white shoes and stockings, and six shining rows of jet, like a fillet, on her burnished brown hair, severely pulled back from her forehead and curling low, in two great puffs, far out on her cheeks. The eyes, long and slightly Chinese, had the colour of amber mellowed and deepened by age; the nose was straight; the mouth, mobile and full, was brilliantly red, and her complexion was the clearest and smoothest imaginable – there was not a blemish on the warm creamy skin. She wore no jewels, save an old-world pendant of oval black onyx, with a single enormous pearl set in the middle, hanging round her tall neck by a thin velvet cord, and from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet she looked what she was: thoroughly, exquisitely and exclusively French.

She was twenty-five, and had been born, bred and first married in Paris; she was hardly of age when her husband, director, before the Great War, of a big motor-car factory, was killed before Verdun. Seeking change, a temporary escape from places and people now sorrowfully associated with the memories of her very short but very happy wedded life, she had gone after the Armistice to Turkey with her uncle and aunt – the former being one of the particularly incompetent

high commissioners France sent to Constantinople to further entangle Near East affairs. There she had met Prince Tariel Abhazi, the descendant of one of the oldest and most historically famous families in Georgia, an officer himself, attached as interpreter to the mission which the recently-formed autonomous Menshevik Government in Tiflis had sent to Istamboul. In the welter of French, British, Bolshevik, Turkish and Greek intrigues in Turkey, that Menshevik mission tried to discover what chances Georgia had of being recognized by the Allies and protected against Russia without being swallowed by the Powers; and before it grew disheartened and shifted its pleadings to the shrines of other deaf gods in Paris, London and Rome, Prince Tariel had had time to court Valérie du Hablé, sweep her off her feet with his imperious, burning, brooding, absolutely implacable half-Asiatic adoration, marry her – stirred, frightened, wholly fascinated – and carry her off to Tiflis half idol and half prey.

'Prince Tariel has only begun to dress?' I repeated. 'But it's already past eleven! Has he been detained?'

Captain Abhazi belonged to the Military Staff at the Georgian War Office, and sometimes his work stretched out to long hours and carried him into strange places. Still – eleven o'clock at night, and not yet ready! I felt surprised, for Tariel had the essentially Georgian horror of taking liberties with the women he respected; and I

had reason to think that he held me in some esteem.

Princess Abhazi answered me at once, and her tone was so odd that I looked at her with sudden attention. Up till then, I had been marvelling at the charm of her whole modernly perfect figure – now I gazed only at her face. It was quite fixed, and the amber eyes were hot and very hard.

'He detained himself,' she said.

She sat down on a low couch, crossed her legs, put an elbow on her knee, and her chin in her hand. She seemed to have no bones in her body, yet every line was lithe and distinct.

'I am going to ask you a question,' she continued. 'I know you are a psychologist; you have travelled long in this country, and I am told by the Georgians themselves that you understand them very well. What do you think of them in general? I have a reason for speaking to you like this.'

'That's rather a large order,' I said lightly. 'I really don't think I could say what they are unless you allowed me to make a short sketch of their history first. Let me recommend a few volumes of Brosset: I'll expound my theories after you've read him.'

I had not the slightest intention of telling a European woman, married to a Georgian, my opinion of her husband's people, though they are a race I deeply love – and there were several well-founded reasons for my caution. One was that I did not know Vala Abhazi at all intimately.

I was already in Georgia when she arrived there, nine or ten months before, but I was so occupied with my travels and my note-taking that I had seen very little of her, though she was extremely cordial when we met. Our conversations had been vivacious and frank, but not in the least confidential – when we talked, she disclosed, quite naturally, some facts about her past life, but they were very normal, and everybody else in Tiflis was acquainted with them. No trace of anything enigmatic there. . . . I had of course formed my own impression of her, but that too was in the main exceedingly simple: only one of her characteristics had seemed to me outstanding, and rather interesting to note. I judged her to be a woman of exceptional seduction, intelligent, impulsive and sincere, but over and above everything else, intensely feminine. She came from one of those prosperous, half intellectual, half artistic circles in Paris where the men have the leisure, the means and the education to be devoted to women, and also to prove that devotion by very refined petting. She was accustomed to be told – and shown – that she was of paramount significance to those who surrounded her, and that in her alone was the supreme principle of their happiness. She was, perhaps, too well trained a woman of the world, too Latin, also, in her nature, not to possess a certain unconscious but real scepticism, and to believe that such asseverations could remain eternally true. But they were so

familiar to her, had made up so invariably her normal atmosphere, that she could not be expected to do without them, or to be long convinced of the depth and reality of feelings that eschewed them. That strain of hers had struck me already – several times, during banquets where she was toasted with the gallant Georgian exuberance, in social entertainments of which she was the centre, I had had occasion to notice how physically radiant she became when she was offered praise and homage, when she felt that she pleased. Even me, a woman, she could not help trying to captivate: unconsciously, there was always in her attitude a sort of appeal, not cloying, but eager, almost wistful, a kind of: 'It can't be that you will not love me; it can't be!' And I thought this the more remarkable in that she possessed personality, had no essential meekness, in spite of that haunting urging, in that soft creamy body of hers, and those mellow amber eyes. Circumstances had made me a great friend of Prince Abhazi; he had escorted me through his own country in a voyage of exploration some time before, and when I realized his fibre I wondered exactly how his wife dealt with it. If he had touched only her imagination and her senses, the future would not always be plain sailing – to understand him, and to accept certain of his characteristics, the heart itself had to be reached. But I had seen no cause to fear that all was not well with the pair. They were exceedingly popular in society; Vala Abhazi

appeared to bear life with great vitality and gaiety; she seemed quite satisfied with her lot, and her husband's faithfulness to her was legendary – I myself had witnessed an example of it which I did not find it easy to forget. No, there was yet no reason to suppose that such a union, though the psychological contrasts in it were singularly sharp, was not turning out happily.

Vala lifted her hand and made an abrupt movement forward, as if she was pushing my answer back.

'I have no time to consult a professor of history,' she said quietly. 'You can inform me quite as exactly, and more quickly than he.' She stared at me unwaveringly. 'Is this nation European or Asiatic? You are writing a book on it . . . Tell me – does my husband belong to the West or the East?'

It was so unexpected, apparently so uncalled-for – the directness of the question and the tenseness in the eyes – that I was dumbfounded, and stared back at Princess Abhazi without speaking. 'You must answer me,' she went on in the same quiet way. 'I know you are fond of Tariel: it may be that in answering me, you will teach me something, and so, through you, he will be spared pain one day. Will you tell me what it is necessary for me to learn?'

'But . . .' I said, still amazed, making an effort to think fast. 'How can I give an opinion when I am in the dark? In what manner can I help you

to understand Prince Tariel when I am ignorant of what he has done?'

'He has done many things,' replied Prince Tariel's wife, 'but it will be sufficient for me to relate the very last. This is what happened two hours ago. I was lying down after dinner, to rest before the ball, when Tariel came into our bedroom and asked me whether I really meant to be present at Madame Darinskaia's dance. He had been moody ever since I accepted her invitation, and his sullenness only lifted a little when he heard you were going too. But to-day his gloominess had returned.'

'Don't you think,' I interrupted hesitatingly, '– I'm fearfully sorry if I seem officious – that in these tiny things, so utterly without any real value, it would be kinder to give in? Prince Tariel is peculiarly sensitive on some points. . . .'

'I am not a slave, Tariel is not my master, and it is not fitting to possess, in the twentieth century, mediæval standards of morality,' said Vala with her unpleasant calm. 'Please let me continue. I told him my mind was quite made up. At that he asked me outright to remain at home. I replied that I could not allow his caprices to interfere with a legitimate pleasure, and that, moreover, I had no time now to put you off. Then he said: "You are going to a place where all the men you will meet are spies, and all the women are harlots. You are as well aware of this as I. But I have never known a European woman who had not,

in her moral judgments, the laxity of a prostitute.''

'I got up to strike him across the face for the insult, but he caught my wrist and threw me back upon the bed, twisting my arm so that I screamed. It was the first time he had ever touched me brusquely, and I believe that in his passion he did not realize the effect of his strength. Before I could rise again, he had snatched his revolver from his hip, forced it into my hand, closed my fingers on the trigger, and pointing the weapon at his own heart, cried out to me to kill him, for he was not worthy to live. I was powerless in his grasp and compelled to pull the trigger; but by the mercy of God I managed, in firing, to jerk my arm aside, so the bullet went through the wall instead of through his breast. But I might easily have been obliged to shoot him, as I could not free my hand, and then – what would I have felt, and who would have believed that I was not a murderess? Yet he never gave all that a moment's consideration: he thought of one thing only – that such a death would be an expiation, and that it was right that I should so revenge myself upon him for his unseemly gesture and words. After that, till you were announced, he sat silent and motionless on a chair, with his face in his hands. Now tell me: have I married a madman, a barbarian, or a child?'

Suddenly such a host of visions surged into my brain that I could not repress a gasp. They were full of colour, of scent, of intensity, and Tariel was

in the midst of each. They hurt me, for as Princess Abhazi truly said, I was fond of her husband, and from my very soul I wished him well. But I was also convinced that I could do nothing to help him. I might, as Vala demanded, explain his nature to her – even justify it – but how could I prevent her from revolting against its manifestations, if they outraged her own sensibility? Tariel and she were not divided by intellectual problems, which could be argued or modified; it was all a matter of feeling – she, highly-strung, subtle, expansive and spoilt, though without malice, like a tender child too much caressed, and he . . .

The visions continued flashing through my mind. It was useless – what did the old Greeks say: that every man's character is his fate? I could not change character, so I could not interfere with fate. Perhaps I too was enslaved, in bond to my own temperament, for with my profound compassion there came upon me, like a tombstone, a sense of doom. What was the use?

Yet Vala, too, was in pain, and her eyes darkened and widened as if with memories. 'I am beginning – yes, I am beginning – to be afraid that I have made a mistake,' she said. And then we both fell into silence, I seeing pictures, and she staring at nothing, in a trance of thought. But even if I acted wrongly, in abstaining from effort that first night – ah, God! how was I to guess what her regrets, her perplexity and her resentment were

already building up in a soul that was by no means mild?

Among the provinces I wished to describe in the book I was writing on Georgia, was the gorgeous country of Abhazetia – 'a gret marvaylle, the Kyngdom of Abcaz,' Sir John Mandeville said – which forms the eastern shore of the Black Sea. It is even more than a land of untellable beauty – there is a spirit of wildness in it that gives it an immortal charm. Just that quality of flying rapture I was never to find in the Caucasus again. On the pink-and-violet hills stand delicate diadems of snow; the rivers are clear as the water of tarns, and the fruits luscious as those that grow in the magical gardens of fairy lore. The Isabella grapes climb high into the pear, plum and quince trees, mingling their dark purple clusters with the red and yellow balls – even the cypresses are loaded with vines – and in the evening, when the sunset sheds the petals of its red flowers on the forget-me-not blue sea, the pale golden beeches are swept with breezes that have the fragrance of raspberries and the taste of new honey. The sons of that land are tall, stalwart and courteous, seething with dreams of fight; reckless riders, fearless hunters, ever booted and armed, of the essence of outlaws, loving the women, the horses, the weapons that are not theirs, plucking them away in the teeth of their opponents, for very devilry and sheer joy of peril. The centuries-old traditions

are observed there as solemnly as ecclesiastical rites; family ties, social observances, are sacred; the religious beliefs are still partly pagan, the saints are revered, but rocks and oaks are also adored. When I saw it, Abhazetia was torn by factions; for two centuries the Turks had owned it, then the Russians had tried to tame it; there were still partisans of the two régimes, and only a small group of fervent patriots had adhered to the National Socialist Government. The latter had been forced, to avoid worse disasters, to give Abhazetia a conditional independence, and a local parliament of its own, but even then the swift warlike clans, which had brains and to spare for political intrigues, kept Tiflis uneasily on the alert.

Prince Tariel, who came of a family that had once reigned in Abhazetia and that commanded much influence still, was a passionate pro-Georgian, but his uncle, Prince Alexander Abhazi, a vigorous old aristocratic swashbuckler, at the head of another important clan, was an indomitable ally of Turkey, and he stirred up heat and made unlimited mischief in his own and neighbouring domains. The Tiflis Cabinet, which did not care to embitter the position hopelessly by arresting him for treason, tried at last a heroic remedy; it dispatched Tariel on a mission to the delicious little town of Otchamtchiri near which the apoplectic old brigand lived, to make the difficult attempt of bringing Prince Alexander to his

senses. At the same time, knowing my desire to visit Abhazetia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who had helped me on many occasions with unparalleled kindness, advised me of Prince Tariel's departure, authorizing me to follow in his train, and thus avail myself of his escort and protection in an unsettled period and place. So for six weeks I lived saddle to saddle with Captain Abhazi, and in that primitive intimacy I saw and heard many things that were not, perhaps, familiar to his wife.

From the start I found him easy to understand – I think because I did not attempt to explain him, to analyse him by modern standards, as Vala Abhazi undoubtedly tried. She would have been most excellently at home in the dissection of a complex character; Tariel must have baffled her because he was so simple, composed of a series of qualities which were far more the perfect expression of his race than the accidental elements of an isolated individual. He was representative of an ethnical group, true to a national type. It was that that she could not grasp. Everything in him, good or bad – and there was very little bad – was instinctive, to be accepted as such, all notion of malice, or guile, or self-interest being ruled out when it came to a question of moral judgment. I knew enough of Georgia to see at once how genuine were his mainsprings; and loving his country as I did, I took him as he was, an emanation of his land, and loved him too.

His virtues and his faults were equally obvious. He was an admirable travelling companion in most ways – selfless and whimless, brave, generous, sober, modest, enduring, courteous beyond words. He was also astonishingly insensible, and as, in spite of a certain moral independence, I still retain some femininity, that trait of his was sometimes hard to bear. There was not in him the power to unlock himself by gentle speech or gestures towards his fellow-creatures – even if his brain had conceived endearments, his lips and his limbs would have closed, of themselves, petrified, had he tried to express them. He had a sort of Moslem reserve on him – it set an impassiveness on his magnificent face, and checked even the ardour of his impetuous body. His hands, perfect in form and strength, could not caress – often I wondered how the clear-modelled, unsensual mouth ever managed to unseal itself for kisses, though, when he laughed, his merriment broke out like a child's, at simple things, as in front of his soldiers' gay and spontaneous play. . . . The only outward tenderness I ever saw him manifest was for the dumb brutes; he would stoop to fondle a fawning dog, or bend for one second to lay his cheek on the soft muzzle of his favourite horse – a wild and beautiful thing, Othar, which he loved in a curiously primitive manner, like a comrade, not a beast. He was by inclination taciturn, except on matters of politics, not only quite incapable of small-talk, but – a much more serious

affair for a married man – invincibly silent about his feelings. There again a sort of physical inability intervened – and just as he did not confide in others, so he did not solicit others to confide in him. That this was a disastrous mistake in dealing with an emotional woman like his wife, who needed to pour herself out in words as well as give herself in actions, he did not even suspect – this incapacity of sharing his inner being even with the creature he loved best was not a trick of personal temperament or a consequence of education: it went far back, to incalculably savage heredities, and was characteristic of a constitution most of us no longer possess. He was shut up in himself, much like the animals are. But Princess Abhazi who, at least in the beginning of her married life, must have had the softness, the clingingness, the desire of spiritual subjection natural to a womanly woman, was to become embittered to the very core of her soul by this quality of Tariel's – just an inexorable form of atavism, yet so like indifference, and so murderous in its results.

Such were my opening impressions of Prince Tariel. But as we travelled, incidents occurred, and sentiments were developed, which extended my knowledge of the man. A serious episode showed up one of his deepest yet most inarticulate passions, and put a prompt and dramatic end to our stay in his uncle's dwelling. We had been there five days, and every day the two Abhazis, alike in their martial bearing, their unbreakable

obstinacy and their capacity for swift torrential rage, and wide as the poles asunder in their political convictions, met and argued in the great hall of Prince Alexander's house, while the retainers of the one and the soldiers of the other stood in the yard and endlessly smoked. Prince Tariel was undeniably put to great provocation; but he was under orders, he had a mission to perform if he could, and he endured the trial doggedly up to a certain afternoon. The crash came after dinner when, flushed with wine, the great veins standing out on his forehead, glowering and bristling, with his long white walrus moustaches on each side of his rugged face, the fierce old Prince sat at the head of his table, opposite his nephew, and began once more to cast imprecations on the Socialist Government of his country. He took no pains to pick and choose his words in his rich harsh Georgian tongue, and the conversation was launched in a blast of white-hot violence.

His chief grievance was that the Mensheviks had annexed the great estates of the nobles, cut and hacked them up to give them to the peasants, and that the rabble of the earth now held sway in the highest places. But he swung off-hand into a personal indictment of Tariel.

'You, to stand up for those mongrels, who have scuttled your own inheritance, stolen your fields and your mines, reduced your mother to selling her jewels and even suppressed the title to your

Sea Tchkhtna

name; who give you a pittance to live on, and will ever keep you from the power your ancestors won for you with their blood and their lives; you, whose fathers reigned when theirs ran howling under our thrones like curs – you, to accept gifts from the spawn of your own valets, and to foul our name like that! What have you got in your veins, boy? Not red blood!'

Captain Abhazi flushed at last under the insults, then went white, with that ghastly hard whiteness of tanned faces that makes them look like skulls – only the eyes lived, lit up by such stabbing anger that I became uneasy, though I only half understood the rush of the old Prince's words. Tariel remained immobile, however, but his voice swelled out with ominous strength.

'You forget, my lord – *batona*. . . . They have dispossessed only a class. It is true you and I suffer – do you think it made me happy to see my woods and villages go? – it is true they have neither name nor forbears, but they have delivered *Georgia*! What are your interests and mine compared with that? Remember . . . Remember! We have broken and flung away the Moscovite's yoke. *Our* flag flies high now; *our* language is spoken; *our* teachers and judges and rulers administer our land. We are Georgians once more, not "Caucasians, subjects of Russia"; one hundred and twenty years of oppression have fallen away at a blow, and we join hands again, on the other side of the gap, with the men of our race

who were free! And you would bid us yield our limbs to other fetters – those of a people still blind with ignorance and of a barbarous faith? Ho . . .! Remember farther back, my lord! Remember for how long this Abhazetia that bore us paid blood toll to Turkey, sending at appointed times, to guard the Moslem Crescent, not the Georgian Cross, her Christian sons and her Christian daughters, the lads as janissaries for the Sultans, the girls as odalisques for their harems. Is that what you want, to pay that sort of tribute again?'

'I hold it a lesser shame,' said Prince Alexander furiously, 'to be ruled by Turkish lions than by Georgian carrion.'

'Traitor and renegade,' said Prince Tariel very softly. 'May the bones of our fathers rise up, when you are laid in their grave, and fling you out to the teeth and the bellies of the jackals!'

Never did I see, out of the Russian ballets, so prodigious a leap as the one Prince Tariel then instantly took. As Alexander Abhazi jumped to his feet, gasping, and wrenching his revolver from his side, Tariel gathered himself together and hurled himself upon his uncle, vaulting the long table, never touching the wood – the sheer clean sweep of his splendid figure with its uplifted arms was like the hurtling of a meteor through space. Both men fell heavily, but Tariel did not even grapple for the weapon; he kept his body so pressed down on his adversary that the latter

could not use his arms – and it was Prince Alexander's thick throat that he gripped and flattened in his hands. They rolled upon the floor: it seemed to me that that awful old face, hardly human now in its expression and its blackness, would burst under the steel fingers of the younger man. My frantic shrieks brought in the servants and soldiers in a precipitate mass, and at last those two savage Abhazis were torn from each other by main force. There was an enormous battle, and Tariel shook himself free. 'Come out of this kennel!' he said to me imperiously; 'the offal will choke us if we try to breathe here!' Cursing Prince Alexander with the utmost Georgian vigour, our soldiers separated themselves from his servants and came with us.

'And he your father's brother!' I remonstrated, appalled, as we rode away. 'Captain Abhazi, you might have killed that old man!' He was sitting his horse like a centaur, and he turned on me a visage on which the frightful white frenzy was fixed still.

'I know no brother of my father,' he said. 'I would not know my father himself if he joined the enemies of Georgia. Do you understand what I am saying? I have no kindred and no friends save those who love the freedom of my land.' We stopped at the next militia post, and he sent a messenger immediately to Tiflis, asking for permission to arrest Prince Alexander. We did not move from the place till the answer arrived.

He was not allowed to act, but his representations had been so strong that the old Prince was exiled very shortly after, and his lands made forfeit to the State. The whole affair gave me such an impression of flaming, yet most weirdly detached ruthlessness, that I hoped with all my heart that Prince Tariel's path and mine might never cross when his notion of duty was at stake. His few passions were rooted in principle, and the combination had a terrible force, a nakedness that dismayed, like the sight of a bloodhound running, devoid of any interest of its own, even to its death, straight at the creature it had to chase.

From Otchamtchiri we went through the divine country of Samour-Zakana – and ah! how my heart aches, as I write, at the thought of the beauty I shall never see again! When the clement hour comes in which I shall be freed, I shall regret nothing of the joys that my body knew; nothing of my mind's old fierce keenness; nothing of the deep loves that seared my soul; nothing of life's small gifts of riches or fame. All those things, with my curse upon them, I throw back even now in the face of the hateful gods. But the beauty of Georgia – the rigid black Lombardy-poplars chiselled against the gold of the sky; under the quiet moon, the cold streams where the horses, bending their wild heads, drank long draughts of fluid silver; the silent serenity of the plains seen at night – such nights, so marvellously luminous, that the grass still showed emerald-

green; the frigid paleness of the maize-fields, and their broad sheaths, half-opened, revealing the flushed pearls of the corn; the sumptuous fruit-trees, bending beneath their own burden and the heavier load of the perfumed grapes that clambered over them; the churches, which centuries had caressed to smoothness, and the colour of blossoming yellow roses; the song of the nightingales in the purple-blue evenings, soft to the eye and to the touch like the bloom of plums that are ripe; over the whole land, that poignant, uncapturable spirit of waiting, in which went up, like offerings, the motion of little lives, the incense of little flowers, the light warmth of the earth itself, the last trailing sighs of the wind – ah, to be given the chance once more, once more only, to bathe senses and mind in those exquisite visions, and feel that death would be welcome because of the ecstasy – too unbearably sweet, too full of sad rapture! – that such perfection brought to my swooning soul!

I remember, along the roads, among the stretches of heather and behind the tall hieratical cypresses, the slight grey wooden houses with their covered verandas, their great empty rooms where benches ran down every side and the wickedly meditative falcons were chained to tables, chairs and beds. White and brown, so high of shoulder, those birds stood silent in their rigid proud slimness, and their round eyes, jet circled with gold, glared on everything hardly, without pity and without

fear. In the kitchens, great pots hung by chains from the rafters, over the sparkling, pungent pine logs, and cats, their orbs shining more brilliantly than pieces of jade or topaz, sat like indifferent idols by the warm hearths; in the gardens, the dead masters were buried, and peaches and grapes were piled up as offerings to the departed, in front of the quiet white tombs. I remember the vast plantations of tobacco, so full of tightly-pressed flowers that they seemed living carpets of pink, exhaling a faint sweet flavour like spring; the bright rains flashing along, painted silver and gold – suddenly come, as suddenly gone, wind-driven from the happy wild places where the gods hoard colours as radiant as gems; the swift madness of our Abhazetian soldiers, after the showers: to welcome the sun, they jumped upright on their saddles, and charged, standing, down the fresh-hued paths which smelled of invisible roses, straight into the rainbow, shouting out their savagely virile calls: '*Hé! Héla! Ia! Hia! Ho, ho, ho, ho!*'

I recall the massive white convents, where the silent black-clothed inmates gave us a pallet to sleep on, but could only feed us with fruits and bread; it was forbidden to light cigarettes in the buildings, so at night we stole out into the cypress-peopled gardens, where the lance-like trees grew so high that their point was crowned by a silver star, and we smoked while from the mountains the jackals yelled loudly – a yell which froze

us with horror, such utter despair was in its note. I remember the chapels, where the tall columns are the pistils, and the high slender arches, the petals of some fantastic grey stone flower. Under the russet tombstones, the old kings and princes of Georgia sleep after their murderous strifes – such heathens when they were living, they remembered on their death-beds that their Lord had been humble, and, Christian at last, wrote out their epitaphs: 'I, the slave of the Son of God, lay here this slab of marble, so that all people should pass over my grave.' Time had merged the figures on the frescoed walls into a mystic purple, but here and there stood out the divine melancholy Face, all graveness and compassion; the Virgin smiling at her Child, like a rose near a rosebud; the Fathers of the Church, mitred and coped, ascetic almost to harshness, coming in solemn files to adore, and, painted on the backgrounds, the castles and the citadels of mediæval Georgia reared their looming, haughty piles. Once more I see the port of Soukhoum, with its glittering houses, its magnolias and camellias, palms, green-blue cactuses and willows; its blue pines and eucalyptus-trees pouring out at every shiver their vague and poignant scent; the wild mandarins, orange balls in glossy dark foliage, with their long stabbing thorns making impenetrable hedges – and the goats rushing along in herds, carrying with them a stifling sensual odour, a memory of Pan, of fauns and naked bacchantes,

who held their gay lascivious dances in the deep heart of the pagan woods. The sunsets in that place were always bloody, while under the riot of those startling clouds, the sea never ceased to whisper, acid-green as a new apple, lilac like a couch strewn with wistaria, or of sharp resplendent silver like the gleam of a sword just forged. After we left Goudaoutti, we were met in a forest of pines, all rusty reds, exhausted greens and softened browns against the lacquered sky of a Japanese picture, by three men on horseback who had come to lead us to Prince Tariel's homestead, in a village that was still his. Othar knew the very breeze, and galloped across the streams and in the slippery lanes of fallen pine-needles like one possessed. All through the province, we had been greeted with a lavish hospitality that had surpassed what I had known even in Georgia up till then – and in Prince Tariel's house we were enclosed at once in the oldest ceremonies and traditions. His mother was waiting in her hall when we arrived – a strong, majestic woman of great manners, dressed in the Georgian robes: black, with a white lace veil, silver-fringed, that fell to her ankles; on the lace, a coif of black silk, like that of nuns, a band on her forehead and two long curls on each side of her neck. Prince Tariel bent to kiss her hand and her shoulder, while her six fine sons stood around her, and the princesses, her daughters, led me to a chamber where they undressed and bathed me themselves. We were

back in the Middle Ages. The hosts are the servants of their guests: the clear-eyed, round-faced girls of the household, still white-complexioned under their tan, brushed the clothes, took off the boots of the men; before the meals and after, they presented them with basins, and poured water from brass ewers over their hands while they washed. The women must not pronounce the name of their husbands in public; during their marriage-feasts, gorgeously clothed, they sit on a raised chair with a veil over their faces, and cannot smile; when their mate dies, they must not cry, though the house is filled with wailers; marriage by capture is still practised, it is an honour, and seemly, for a maid to be snatched away one night, on horseback, and tempestuously carried to a banquet the betrothed has prepared in his own dwelling, among his own friends. The men are born robbers, so much so that thefts are still held to be only the proof of great prowess; in relating a story, the elders commonly say, to fix its date: 'At that time, I was a lad, and had only stolen two horses. . . .' Even to-day, an Abhazetian who respects too well the modern principle of property is set down as a coward, and runs the very real risk of never finding a wife.

Prince Tariel, in his own home, lapsed instantaneously into the spirit of the ancient customs. He had always been distant, but now he became incredibly remote. Not only did I never have personal talks with him as of yore, but I could not

even see him alone. It was as if his rôle of host had dug a chasm between us: the traditions of his caste immured him in formality. In public he observed every possible social rite – he remained erect on his feet all the time I was in a room; I did not meet him except in the hall, where he kept to one side, surrounded only by men; when he had to leave my presence, he went out as at Court, walking backwards, with his face turned towards me till he reached the door; during the interminable banquets, he stood behind my chair, silent and impassive, serving me with wine while the attendants passed the viands; and every one of his tall brothers stood round the table like him, dark, abstracted, composed, as in some pageant of the knightly times. He spent the intervals between the meals riding and hunting, his falcon on his wrist, his dogs leaping on him; the whole place rang with the clamour of men and the champing of horses, and it seemed to me that during this return to his early life and training, he grew to look more and more like some pagan deity, master and lover of the free primeval things of the woods, the winds, the waters, revelling only in the glory of the untrammelled body, strong, happy, and consummately proud.

One day, however, an official dispatch came from Tiflis; Tariel lost that impenetrable aloofness of his, and changed into his ordinary demeanour again. A thorough soldier, he was reticent as the grave on the nature of his duties, so I never knew

what the order exactly contained, but he was told to go to Adler and deliver a message at headquarters there. Now Adler was beyond the Georgian north-west frontier, in Russian territory, and the Bolsheviks, who had taken and destroyed Sotchi, were advancing on the town. It could not possibly escape investment; already, the roads were blocked with fugitives, moving as quickly as they could towards Gagri, the extreme point of the Georgian line. No one could say whether Prince Tariel would have time to ride to Adler and return safely before the firing began. I was amazed at his face when he announced his departure – it was so joyous, on fire with a kind of desperately eager life; through and through, the black eyes, usually so still, were glowing. Abruptly, startlingly, he passed on to me the incomparable intoxication of danger. 'Let me come too!' I cried.

He laughed.

'And if you are killed?'

'It would be a small matter, Captain Abhazi. I hold life to be far more terrifying than death.'

The reckless exultation flared even more irresistibly in his face. 'Come, then,' he said. 'In truth, it cannot matter – a few years hence, whether we will it or not, both you and I must come to our end. So just for a few years more, to take such care . . .! *Ça ne vaut pas la peine.* We shall escape, though, if that is our destiny. So come, as you are not afraid.'

He was neither unchivalrous nor unkind in this fatalistic rashness – simply, he obeyed the prompting of his race. They had fought too long, his fathers – it had been normal and easy for them to die, swiftly, unexpectedly, right in the midst of conflict. Their son could not attach to existence the value our modern civilization has put on human life. He held it cheap – he could not help his instincts.

So we set out, after his mother and his sisters had kissed him with no show of concern, and we dashed through villages and towns, only stopping to change horses – mine, that is to say, for Othar never faltered – till we reached Gagri, where Prince Tariel had first to report. In the pretty town, all hills and gigantic rocks, we found a harassed captain, unsuccessfully coping with the problem of relieving the destitute Russian refugees. Prince Tariel refused his offer of an escort; not knowing if we could escape, he would not imperil the lives of soldiers, who would only follow us because they received orders; and when the captain expressed surprise that he took me, a woman, with him in such conditions, he curtly answered: 'It is her will: she is free.'

We asked for a few directions, put bread in our wallets, and rode out over the frontier, into the Russian road.

A curious ride, which marked me too in a curious way – if I had still retained some belief in a god, I should have hurled him from my heart into his

own hell that day. First we saw women, old men and children, rags on rags, or nakedness complete, pale as wax, the skeleton showing already through the frail unhealthy flesh. Not even the eyes lived in the martyred faces; they had lost hope, the last-hour torpor had settled on those wearily-breathing shapes. They had put tatters together on branches, and they camped beneath them, while the winds screamed and the rains stormed down. Carts, carriages, even sledges formed cumbrous masses on the road; chaos was in them; clothes, saucepans, stoves, tables, coffers gaudily painted, such sardonic reminders of more fortunate times, that those gay colours pierced the soul; starved oxen and horses huddled together in suffering patience, but not more thin and passive than their owners themselves. What the refugees found to eat, I tried to guess, but failed – not even grass was left along the way. I knew I could do nothing, yet the instinct to dismount and act was torture, but Prince Tariel would have stopped me, if he could, from even looking round. 'Hurry!' he commanded, as he kept his eyes ahead.

After the crowds of villagers and peasants, we passed the camps of the White soldiers, disbanded, drivelling, aimless. Broad, not very tall, slow, blue-eyed, with indeterminate noses and wide mouths, those Russians seemed plunged in a trance of sullen misery, stamped with failure, in indescribable rags, without arms, without food, without spirit. Some cooked maize over little

fires; some slept, heavily, where they had fallen; some were exploring their remnants of clothes for vermin; they were all yellow, haggard, inexpressive as logs. Under a shed, the wounded were lying, their sores bound up in soiled coloured bands; they groaned and muttered in their agony, while their comrades never moved; two frightful corpses I saw, their glazed eyes staring, their lips immensely parted, as if their life had gone in a great cry; everywhere reigned ordure, bits of bloody cotton, sodden hay, vessels upset and trodden, heaps of filth polluting the air. It was humanity revealing its fundamental substance, and I wondered, as I gazed, what fool among us first imagined that we were not all organs, and in sheer wantonness endowed us with a soul.

'Hurry!' said Prince Tariel only, and we cantered on.

Adler was already dying when we reached it. Its shops had been ripped open, and left empty; the doors and shutters of its houses were closed. No movement in its streets, not a beast, not a man. Bareness and silence. . . . It was exhausted, and just waited to draw its last breath. In the centre of the town we found the military bureaux, with groups of soldiers round them – all dumb, all dull; the certainty of their doom was upon them, so they no longer cared. It is not good to look at the eyes of men who are expecting a merciless death, and I was glad when Prince Tariel came out

of the building and swung himself on Othar again. 'Hurry!' he said, and as we rode out of the city, the surly boom of guns came rolling from the north, and the Red cannonade commenced. We heard it even in Gagri, where at last we drew rein. Prince Tariel complimented me briefly, as he would have complimented a man: 'You are an excellent companion in danger.' I could not help laughing, though a little ruefully: I was rocking with fatigue when he lifted me down from the saddle, hardly able to stand for pain – yet it never entered his head to speak words of pity. But he put his arms round Othar, and kissed the fine dark velvet of his muzzle, while the horse flung up his long slim neck and looked at his master with his soft wild eye.

One more picture I remembered, the grimmest of all. On the way back to Tiflis, we stopped at noon in a little village, our last halting-place before the capital. The mayor came out to greet us and take us to his house for a meal. As we approached his dwelling, we met a tall dark Georgian girl, who bowed to and addressed Prince Tariel. He had given, on seeing her, a start of surprise, almost instantly repressed.

'*Gamarjoba*,' she said – the Georgian salutation. 'May victory be with you. . . . Your mother wrote me you would pass through here, and I have been expecting you for two days now. I wish to speak to you. I shall come to the house after you have eaten.'

'Certainly,' said Prince Tariel. He added nothing more.

As we walked on, the mayor explained that the girl had called several times already, to learn whether we had arrived. She had been pointed out to me in Tiflis, so I knew her slightly: she was Princess Tamara Shervidzé, a cousin of Tariel's, reputed for her good looks, a rather brooding and haughty deportment, and for a romance that all her pride could not prevent from being bandied freely about. She and Tariel had been brought up together, in the same village, with the immense familiarity branches of the same family practise towards each other in Georgia; later on, she had gone to the same school, shared the same studies, entered the Moscow University with him. She had loved him from the very beginning; it may have been, too, that the mothers of both adolescents had decided they would marry, and she had grown up in that belief. Anyhow, her attachment never varied – during the European War, she had waited for him, while he was fighting on the Russian Front; through the first convulsions of the Revolution, when he was absorbed in the struggle for Georgian independence, she had gone on hoping he would return to her. But he went to Constantinople, and there he married Valérie du Hablé. . . . She had said nothing; she had continued to see him, but she had grown more sombre in spirit, more closed in face, more detached in attitude. That was all I had been

told, save that in spite of many proposals, she had chosen no husband among the suitors to her hand. It seemed a little odd that she should have troubled to come and meet Tariel in this village, when we were so close to Tiflis, and I wondered what pressing news she had to relate. She arrived in the afternoon, as she had announced – and Tariel and she were led to a small room opening off the hall where we had dined. I was left alone, and eager to make the most of this blessed solitude – for in Georgia it is not etiquette that a traveller should remain unattended – I lay down on a rustic *tahtébi*, one of the wooden benches that are used as beds at night. I must have sunk into a half-sleep, but suddenly I was roused by the noise of a high-pitched conversation. Prince Tariel's voice, almost always uncontrollably resonant and full, was very audible indeed, his brief sentences breaking upon the muffled but continuous murmur of a woman's rapid talk.

'It is impossible. . . .' 'It cannot be. . . .' 'I beseech you to say no more.'

'For God's sake, remember what you are and what I am to-day.'

Then the murmur changed, swelled, rang out – there was no pleading now – and, aghast, I heard Princess Tamara say:

'She will desert you, that foreign woman in whose hands you have placed your honour. Remember her eyes and her mouth. She cannot be faithful – she will go back to the men of her race,

and leave you shamed and betrayed. I know that as surely as I know that I live. I only ask this of you – that when she will have gone to her own people, you will turn to me again. I have no longer the courage to bear my pain: it was too much, and my soul has fainted. Give me only that promise, so that I should find patience to wait.'

She was speaking of Tariel's wife, prophesying her defection! I was too astounded: I could not even move. There was a slight pause, and Prince Tariel answered slowly, but the tone was as solemn as that which men use when they take a religious oath.

'I love her more than I love my mother. I believe in her as much as I believe in God. You oblige me to say it: I swear to you on my soul that whether she lives or she dies, there will never be on this earth another woman for me.'

Absolute silence – the strong cry of a man appalled – the swift rush of steps – and the dulled, ominous sound of a body that had fallen. Silence again, but so pregnant now, that though I could not see into that other fateful room, I started up, sickened. Then Tariel, with a quick crash, opened the door, and from the threshold he called me, for the first time, by my name.

'Come at once,' he said when I answered.

I ran to him immediately. Beyond us, on the floor, Princess Tamara lay with her arms outstretched. I raised the body, but the heart was

still. She had taken cyanide of potassium: she had concealed the salts, wrapped in paper, in her hand, and after Tariel's last words to her, she must have put them hastily to her lips. She was dead, and when I became certain that all was over, I let the poor warm corpse slip slowly to the ground again, in a last irrevocable submission.

Prince Tariel stood near her, his arms folded on his breast, looking at her intently – but his face was so utterly still now, I could not guess what was going on in his powerfully primordial soul. At last, gently, but without any sign of emotion in that closed face of his, he said:

'It is better for her – thus.'

That was all. He never made another comment, never gave an explanation, to me or to anyone else. He took with dignity the measures that devolved upon him as the nearest relative of the dead girl; but when, in front of him, the body was laid in its coffin for tranport to Tiflis, I saw him cover his eyes with his hand. We all turned away, and he remained alone for a long time with the poor thing that had made herself clay for him. Afterwards his face, always stately when it was in repose, assumed a profounder expression, and became unapproachably severe.

By such things had I grown to know him – events in which he was entangled, attitudes which he instinctively adopted – not by any words or confidences of his own. Primitively patriotic, sternly traditional and stoically fatalistic, simple-

minded and single-hearted almost to hardness – yes, what had a man like Prince Tariel to do with the woman whom he had made his wife?

. . . Save just this, of course: that he loved her more than the world and everything in it, more than life, and incomparably more than his own self. But it was not such love as Tariel's that could make for happiness in his case.

While I was thus sunk in my visions, and Vala Abhazi in her own thoughts – both of us silent in the big drawing-room – Prince Tariel appeared. He had made no noise on the carpets, for he was wearing the high Georgian dancing-boots, pulled above the knees, narrow as sheaths, soleless and heelless, fitting on tightly, like gloves, to the foot and the leg. Behind him walked his orderly, holding a woman's fur coat, and a gold powder-box, which looked absurdly frivolous in his rough fingers. Captain Abhazi came up to me directly – there were many good things about Prince Tariel, but none finer than this: that he did not lie – and he saluted me in the Russian military fashion, bringing his heels together, and stooping to kiss my hand.

'I beg your pardon for keeping you both waiting,' he said in excellent French. 'I have no excuse, but I am very sorry. Will you be kind enough to forget, for this once?'

At that time, Prince Tariel was thirty-two years old – six feet tall, very broad-shouldered, and

slim-waisted as a woman. He was dressed in the *tcherkesska*, the national Georgian costume – hiding the straight-cut breeches, the long black tunic fell below the top of the fine-grained boots, and stretched out on the wide robust chest without a pleat. Under the neck, a row of richly chased silver, cartridge-cases went from arm to arm; of silver, too, was the triple chain and chiselled doubloons that formed the belt, and as minutely worked as the royal ikons, the massive scabbard of a dagger flashed at his side. When Tariel was seen for the first time, one felt unable to analyse him part by part: reflection was thrown into the background for a moment, and only the senses perceived. So beautifully was he proportioned, so fine was the firm line of his muscles, at once so overpowering and so disciplined, that one received a unique impression – of something tremendously vital, vivid in every fibre, as if the very spirit of force and fleetness, winged, nervous and dominant, possessed him. It submerged every other effect. Only later did one mark the poise of the small head curving boldly; the firm smoothness of the face; the eyes, long, deeply set, very widely opened – shiningly black, and still, with the intent, far, level gaze of those who have lived long in open places; the eyebrows that the slightest movement joined together, straight where they began, prolonged to arches on the temples; the aquiline nose with thin shut nostrils of extreme delicacy; under the small dark moustache, the red lips,

cleanly modelled, fine in contour, and of a quite unsensuous sweetness; the cleft rounded chin. The whole head was instinct with youth, virility and fire, and yet, in some indescribable manner, inscrutable and *closed*. Often before had I met men who were handsome; or men sealed with the signs of their gifts of heart or mind. But this, this beauty of Tariel's, was of a grander effect, more simple, unattainable: it was, coming from the sources, the untainted, free, and active essence of life. It was outside and beyond the toning-down of civilization, and I understood how impossible it had been that a woman like Vala, unused to such a physique and to such an intensity, should not have had her brain struck into numbness, should not have been overborne when it first surged up before her, intact.

There was a little pause when Prince Tariel finished speaking. I looked at him curiously, but he bore no traces of the scene he had just been through. It was one of his characteristics – that rather hard, though ardent, immobility of countenance, which feeling rarely pierced. But even as I looked, I felt, quite unaccountably, a twinge of something – pain, pity, premonition? – clutch sharply at my heart.

'We'll see about that,' I said with a rather forced levity, trying to break an atmosphere that was distinctly constrained. 'If I forgive you, will you promise, in your turn, to dance the *lezguinka* for me to-night?'

He danced it magnificently, with the wild grace and accuracy of the mountaineers of the North Caucasus, keeping naked daggers balanced in his mouth. But his wife turned at that, and fastened her eyes on him steadily. She was no puppet, and I realized then to what depths her rancour had gone. She spoke to me, but her words were aimed at him.

'Really, I think there is no need to encourage Tariel to be a savage,' she said. 'I assure you that I find his instincts quite barbaric enough as it is.'

She moved towards the orderly. 'Put my coat on me,' she said to Shalva.

No change crossed Prince Tariel's face; he too looked steadfastly at his wife, and suddenly he bowed to her deeply. In spite of my great wish to be natural, I could think of nothing adequate to say; the other two were equally silent, and as soon as Princess Abhazi had completed her arrangements, Prince Tariel and I followed her downstairs, where my coachman waited uncomplainingly in the cold.

§3

Madame Darinskaia's house, when we reached it at last, was flaring with lights; its hall and its stairs were adorned with festival plants and carpets, and every chamber, from boudoir to bedrooms, was full

of women and men. The daughter of our hostess, a young girl of sixteen who looked like a Cinderella, ran the house, checked expenses, waited on her mother, looked after the boarders – Sonia Pavlovna always had the members of some foreign mission lodging in a few of her rooms – saw us first, came forward to greet us, and sent a guest to extract her mother from the throng. Madame Darinskaia fluttered up with a genuine dancer's suppleness – a slight and pretty woman, painted pink and dyed fair – and as she led us off to the dressing-room, she poured out torrents of inconsequential speech.

'*Chère Princesse. . . . Chère Madame. . . . Mon beau Prince. . . .* I thought you were never coming. . . . It would have spoilt all my pleasure in my poor little party had you not kept your word. . . . I was waiting for your arrival to begin my apache dance. You'll see what a divine dress I've made up. . . . Prince Andronikoff will be my partner – he dances adorably, almost as well as I. . . . We really must go to Constantinople: the Turkish mission is *so* kind – they promise to give me *so* many introductions. . . . I shall create quite a sensation there. Don't you think Constantinople would be a far better setting for me than Tiflis? Here I cannot help thinking of my poor husband, lost in those terrible Caucasus mountains in our flight from Russia. . . . He had all my jewels with him – ah! I shall never replace them! Those savage brigands must have killed

him – six months now, and not a message from him, though he had promised to swallow my great pearl rather than let them take it. It would have been better had he let them rob him – perhaps he would be still alive! Poor Dimitri Vassilievitch! He was not a good husband, it is true – how he used to beat me! And during our honeymoon – you know I was a child when I married, hardly fifteen? – he *would* go off with the maids. However, he was as God made him. . . . Come quickly to the supper-room, *mon beau Prince*. I prepared the salad myself, and you must tell me how you like it. . . .' She bore Prince Tariel off, as Vala and I were caught up in our turn and separated by the swirling lines of guests.

'Have you turned definitely Georgian?' said a rasping voice in French behind my shoulder. 'You seem to have lost your European notions of punctuality. It is past midnight. Or are you playing at *la mondaine chic* who can only give half an hour to each of her numerous hostesses of the same evening?'

The owner of the voice was pushed up brusquely against me; I felt my arm was being taken, and I was drawn forcibly aside. 'In any case, how is it you are here?'

'I accompanied the Abhazis,' I said, trying to look round, 'and I'm doing exactly what you are. Why are you here yourself, Vladimir?'

We were now in a corner, flattened against the wall, and I could see my companion, Vladimir

Kirilovitch Sobotine, as he stood beside me. He was a Russian of the Baltic provinces, a man of some thirty-eight years old, well-known before the Revolution as one of the most remarkable art-critics of an extremely advanced school. When he sensed that Denikine would finish, not on the lofty seat of a dictator, but as a carcass in the mire, he made his way from Ukrania to Tiflis, where he earned a living as lecturer on modern Russian literature in the Georgian University. He had immense erudition; a style of slashing power and irony, of an imagery that, personally, I have never seen equalled in contemporary writers; an undaunted brain, a pitiless heart, and a soul that was perverted through and through. On the body of an athlete was set a fair colourless face, exceedingly broad in the forehead, narrowing to a triangle at the pointed, obstinate chin; the lips were two thin undulating lines that snarled rather than smiled, and all the life of the peculiar countenance glittered in the blue eyes, very close together over the slightly hooked nose – intensely burning, intensely piercing, and always malevolent in the extreme.

I had come across him when I was doing some research work at the University, and during the whole of my stay in Georgia, no man ever interested me intellectually as much as he. The grip of his mind was as prodigious as his cynicism and his vanity. He would come to see me about twice a week, disconcert, by his implacable sarcasms, any visitors who happened to be in my room at

the time, tear to shreds every comment that was uttered, every personality that was mentioned, bare to its elements, and thus ravage every sort of belief, political or otherwise, that was defended before him. . . . When he had rendered the atmosphere so intolerable that no one dared remain, he would congratulate himself on having delivered me from 'those fools' jabberings,' pay absolutely no heed to my protests or my anger, and for an hour think aloud, so brilliantly, so pungently, with such range and such depth, that I would listen helplessly, like one of his own students, forgetting his outrageousness, conscious only of the electric vitality, the knowledge and the renewal that he was pouring from his mind into mine. The worst of it was that his outlook corresponded with so many of my own experiences, that even when I fought against him, in the despairing convulsions of my very enfeebled idealism, I knew that he was right. He was by nature, as well as by training, an iconoclast, and so good an artist in destruction, that the gods, once he had smashed them, did not revive – he wrapped them in winding-sheets of such subtly fine grotesque. I did not care very much when the German philosophers and the Scandinavian mystics came toppling over, but I remember with what cries I tried to keep him from eviscerating Tolstoy – and how, at last, I was obliged to look upon the prostrate giant, and see, beyond the grandeur of the face, the fermentations in the hulk.

As for Vladimir himself, he liked me, I think, as

much as he could like anybody, but after his own fashion, with all the disconnectedness, the incoherence, the aptitude for the absurd inherent to the Russian sensibility – with all its uncanny contrasts and its bewildering extremes. He fought a duel for me – for me who was absolutely nothing to him, whom he had never even kissed – and risked a painful death simply because I had been criticized in his presence. He spent hours, when he might have been working at his own articles, in translating for my benefit some special historical information I needed and which did not exist in French. If I had fever, or coughed, he was after me like an old woman, bringing me medicine, forcing me, by his unbearable insistence, to don flannels – a thing I loathed, and yet had to do, for he wore out my refusals. And yet he spared me no humiliation, no small pain that it was in his power to inflict; he held up to public ridicule, unsparingly, every error of judgment I made, every blunder my incorrigible impulsiveness led me to commit.

There was an undying irritation in him, as if the foundations of my character displeased him, and he was determined that life should violate and uproot what mysticism I retained. He was too genuine a Slav not to possess that characteristic of his nation's intelligence: the perception of the fateful blackness and suffering of the world – when he evoked the destiny of the human race, its tortures and its sadness, its irremediable disorder, the essential impossibility of our nature to

adjust itself to the laws of life, he painted such pictures, such apocalyptic visions of madness and pain that I felt I was literally suffocating in pits of mud and darkness. It was not that he ruled out completely a certain spirituality from the scheme of things, but he twisted it to our detriment, made it appear to be only another and more sinister factor of the universal insanity and distress. There was a sombre and detached compassion, even, in his philosophy. Yet I knew things about his private life that I cannot relate – his mistresses used to come to me sometimes, imagining, poor things, that I could influence him, and tell me stories, give me proofs, of such malignancy, such inconceivable callousness, that the blood was chilled in my veins. Once I tried to interfere: I begged him to have mercy in a certain case.

'She came here and complained?' he asked incredulously – and then every feature in his face shrivelled and contracted, till he looked beyond humanity, of another type of life. He said nothing more – but the woman who had confided in me disappeared. I realize as I write how incredible this must seem to a European; but we were in queer times and among queer races, and it happened just as I say – the woman dropped out of Georgia, and neither I nor anyone else who knew her ever heard of her again.

With all that, he was generous: sharing his money, giving even to strangers when he was asked for aid, and sometimes so staunch in the

protection he accorded, that it brought down reprisals on him – which he insultingly defied. Strange, strange soul, brooding and ominous, with unfathomable instincts and a dreadful mental lucidity, he was so complicated that I cannot understand him even now. . . .

'What am I here for?' he repeated. 'Oh, woman of antique candour! What do all the people in Tiflis except yourself come to do in this place?'

I was aware that Vladimir had a mysterious side to his existence – rumour had it he was a secret agent of several missions – but then that was said of everybody, Russians, natives and foreigners alike, so it meant nothing till it could be proved. As to myself, neither then nor to-day did I believe the report. Vladimir had an insatiable curiosity because he was a fiendish gossip; he docketed information so that his venomous, blistering tongue could scorch and scar; he was always hating and despising, often for no known reason, and he had an imperishable bitterness against the epoch in which he lived, and which had shattered the only work he loved as well as his own artistic ambitions. He too had been most ferociously maimed. But he had the hall-mark of the true intellectualist: an immeasurable contempt for politics and for all the men who acted with the sword and the revolver instead of with the pen. An idea that was prompted by interest, and carried out by physical violence, that did not come straight from the brain, couched in thrusting, tooth-baring

words, was to him an object of execration, the appanage of folk as inferior to him as the helots to their lords. I do not know of anything more invincible than this artist's pride: it springs up, tautest and most unyielding when it is most beaten down. But what was quite true in his case, however, was that he was acquainted with all the underworld of the capital; knew the origin of any man or woman of importance, and freely stated their interests and aims; and he generally predicted, a few days before they actually occurred, the political events of any importance. Madame Darinskaia's house was, in this respect, one of his happiest hunting-grounds, and Prince Tariel's objections to our hostess were only too well founded. Sonia Pavlovna's rooms were the rendezvous of those – Government officials and members of missions – who sought for spies, and of the numberless mongrels who were on the look-out for employers. Also, when people wished to exchange items of information out of the control of the Georgian secret police or the knowledge of rival missions, they attended the brilliant receptions of this fair and pink little woman who talked rubbish so glibly. It is difficult, when one has spoken to fifty persons, for even the best-trained sleuth attached to one's footsteps to know who exactly was the important 'indicator' one needed to see. Some agents were too well known to risk visiting their masters openly, and writing led to various and disagreeable complications in a city where the

post office was capable of amazing lapses of attention, and messengers might find themselves unexpectedly involved in unprovoked but mortal brawls.

How Madame Darinskaia managed to give balls so regularly, when every other public entertainment had to be sanctioned by a special permission of the Municipality, was also an odd phenomenon – but not funnier, when one came to think of it, than the way in which she had crossed the Georgian frontier from the Russian side, where Bolshevik commissaires and *tchekists* held deadly sway. Dimitri Vassilievitch, her ' poor husband,' whom God had made after such a singular pattern, may have died, as she averred, of the swallowing of her pearl or under the poignards of Kisst and Ossetine bandits, but she still sported in Tiflis a good many costly jewels, mysteriously saved. So it may have been, after all, as Vladimir poisonously asserted, that she was watched over by many different protectors, and offered acceptable incense on the altars of many different gods. Who knew? And who could blame, at a moment when nations, politics, religions, morals, life and death, clashed and grappled in a burlesque and sinister fray? The best of men then were all worldly scepticism and wisdom, could but hold that all was just and unjust at the same time, that there was no truth and no error, that the only reasonableness lay in making the minimum of effort to obtain the maximum of pleasure, in going through life as one goes down a path, looking lightly at the flowers, and never,

never halting to examine a single plant, lest one should see the nourishing decay at its roots. Very few were like Prince Tariel, who came of a race still so young in spirit that it believed in right and wrong. All was to be accepted with a shrug of the shoulders, till the grandest imbecility of the whole useless show, the inevitable End, came to stop the shrugging with its rattle.

The band struck up a fox-trot, and I watched the twirling couples while Vladimir talked. Every sort and species of race and individual were to be found in those overheated rooms. European high commissioners in their formal black and white, every one of them a bladder containing a few peas that made more noise than they were worth – England had sent a wine-flushed, burly sailor, as able to cope with the political turmoil as one of his own masts; France had dispatched a goodly chaplet of encumberers, one a man who took an Armenian mistress and haunted all the Armenian salons at a time when Georgia was fighting Armenia on her own frontiers; the second a little, plump-bellied, unctuous noodle, who was a Count, a *de*, and a diplomat, a triple certificate of incompetence, holding himself to be the centre of the planet and the circumference thereof; and the third a University Professor, who, inaugurating the opening of the French college in Tiflis, blandly and tactfully remarked: 'I, too, belonged to a teaching staff, gentlemen, and I am not ashamed to own that I did.'

There were to be seen the *bleu horizon* of the chatty, pleasant, volatile French; the khaki of the stiffer British, keeping a tight clutch on that national spirit so uncannily made up of ignorance and formless instinct; the grey-green of the disingenuous Italians, who flitted gaily from Germans to Anglo-Saxons, from deputies of the Georgian Menshevik Parliament to members of the recently arrived Russian Bolshevik delegation; shrewd nasal Americans, whose speech no speaker of mere English could comprehend, and whose services on behalf of the starving Armenians did not exclude vigorous, personal business activities; the disquieting, enigmatic Turks, still oscillating between the various baits eagerly tendered for their alliance; the feline Poles; the ornate-worded, cautious Persians, who spoke and spoke as water flows, and, like water drawn up into the sun, left not a trace of anything tangible behind them; ex-presidents of the evanescent North Caucasian Republics, turbulent political adventurers, masking their Oriental scheming under the finest romantic looks; rapacious, intriguing Armenians, ever in new national throes and pilfering commercial combinations; smouchy, melancholy black Moslems from Bakou; generals, princes, governors, ministers of the tzarist régime, with their shaven scalps, their Russian uniforms, their military orders blazing on their breast, and, in their *tcherkesskas*, the lively swarthy Georgians with the high courtliness of their manners.

Though they were to be found in every social gathering, scarcely any Russian refugees had the means to entertain; but the Georgians – especially the families of the aristocracy – true to their traditions of prodigal hospitality, still continued to give dances, dinners and teas. The Social-democratic Government had reduced the lands of the nobles to seven *dissetines*, but in 1920 most of them still possessed some capital or houses, and furniture, carpets, jewels, furs, laces which they sold, according to the necessity of the moment, to the members of the missions, the foreign merchants and the Jewish 'spéculants.' Treated with very special favour at the Russian Court, their sons brought up in the Imperial School for Pages and then given commands in the most dashing regiments, educated according to the tenets of Slavonic civilization, those Georgians disliked the Menshevik *roturiers* who had despoiled them. But their patriotism was of so constant, so genuine a quality, that they would have rallied round the new Government if the latter had not, with mistaken pertinacity, kept them suspiciously at a distance, and only grudgingly allowed them to remain in the Army – the only occupation and the only career, nevertheless, for which they were fit. Mingling with all those, were merchants, industrialists, commercial representatives from Europe, *brasseurs d'affaires* fishing in every pool of tainted water, men who had followed the great raids in Africa and sold slaves in remote parts of the world, come

now to organize looting in Georgia when the time was ripe; financial speculators handling the exchange, manipulating prices according to their own convenience, raising the cost of living for their own aims – all on the alert for concessions, treaties, while their humbler brethren, Greeks, Levantines, Egyptians, the children of Israel, grovelled around them, eager for their leavings. The missions were allowed the courtesy of the diplomatic valise, safe from the investigations of the Customs – and only Mercury, the god of lies and thieving, can know what quantities of precious stuffs and stones, of gold and silver, were smuggled out of Batoum. Because of their excessively favourable exchange, these missions were able to live sumptuously for relatively very little; the money they squandered in feasting was prodigious – unspeakably shocking, too, in a land where the Government and the people were day by day becoming more impoverished, were day by day finding themselves entangled in deadly complications, political, financial, economic, which the cynical foreign element cordially helped to make worse. Each and all were inspired with the spirit of grab and gain; not one of them was honest, not one frank, not one a true well-wisher of the country on which they had settled to pick to its marrow. Greedy eyes, obscene hands, gross bodies, false hearts, endlessly calculating brains – scheming, lying, bartering, bickering, trafficking, spying, cheating, scrambling, scuffling, all that

crowd reeked of the filthy loves: money, power, pleasure, fame. . . . Pah! Before those shameless profiteers, all jackals and crows, scavengers and buzzards, one was tempted to do as the Russians, and express inexpressible contempt by spitting and turning away!

Most of the well-dressed women – some of them with gorgeous jewellery still – had a motive too in their hearts that night: pecuniary or sentimental, it drove them to whisper and promise, smile and entice. The Russians, with their great physical seduction, fair hair, blue eyes, shining brightness of skin, the extraordinary femininity of their bodies and postures, the strange, supple, capricious, incalculable turn of their minds – uncertain of the morrow, of their sustenance and existence, of the very work some had managed to find, knew it was wise to have a European protector in those perilous times, and searched for lovers among the assembly. The Georgian princesses, brilliantly black-haired, black-eyed, snow-toothed, and often austerely vivid – more massively built, less dainty of form, less sparkling of wit and less animated in expression than their Russian rivals, held another kind of attraction for the men who came from Western lands. There was the lure of the Orient in them – so long they had been chosen, amongst all other women, for the beds of the Eastern kings; the glamour of romance still clung to their chivalrous, free-giving, war-like race. They too had fallen, swept off their feet by the intensity and

drama of the period in which they lived – the fighting of men, blood poured out like water, daily changes, material insecurity; their bulwarks had gone down before the rush of furious ideas and appalling events. It was better to dance than to think, to play bridge than to hoard, to kiss than to mourn, and in the midst of their despair, of the recounting of their anxieties and woes, they finished up, like the Russians, with a sudden: *Nitchevo!* a banquet, a liaison, an evening at the theatre, the concert or the ballets, straining for forgetfulness, for intoxication, avid to enjoy whatever life still offered just then.

In five minutes, Vladimir had given me the news of the week: the latest adulteries, the flirtations and business manœuvres. Also his opinion as to the course and fate of each. Men came up to ask me to dance, women came up to chatter, and as soon as they had turned away, he tacked an infamous label on their backs. A tubby, chubby, bald, ever-smiling little Russian waddled towards me, Alexis Popoieff, the bearer of a glorious name, and still very wealthy, urging me to trust myself to his arms in the vortex – but as I happen to be tall and lean, both my humour and my artistic sense recoiled from the prospect. I amiably refused, and he waddled away.

'That Alexis Popoieff . . .' I began.

'Moses Aaronovitch Sheinemann, if you please,' said Vladimir smoothly. 'Born in the most authentic Hebrew clothes-shop of the purest ghetto in Russia.'

'How!' I exclaimed, astonished. 'You never get away from his ancestors or the valour and renown of their exploits. . . .'

'Once upon a time,' said Vladimir airily, 'our indulgent Nicholas, who had none of the national prejudices so current to-day, bestowed the Ministry of Public Instruction upon an Armenian. This Armenian was a disciple of Socrates, and did all he could to resuscitate the old Greek methods of educating young men. Among the students of the University was our friend Moses, who showed himself to be specially docile, and the Minister of Public Instruction, to recompense his obedience, and encourage the return to love of the only true beauty, unearthed a resplendent title, long ago extinct, and conferred it upon the son of Aaron, with much land in Ukrania, and many oil-wells in Bakou. The proceeds were well invested in Europe, so Moses can still perpetuate the memory of his benefactor by practising his creed. Did you hear of what took place in his flat the other day? No? Well, his white and red *ephèbes* gathered round him as usual for their nightly training, but they dipped too deep in the jars of the treacherous Kahetian wine. So they mistook their lupanar for the palaestra, and they leaped and boxed, wrestled and ran with victorious cries, till a posse of Georgian militia, fetched by the neighbours, pounded their heavy way into the house. Now the Georgians, as you know, are uncouth barbarians, with the vulgarest masculine instincts most brutally

developed; they know nothing of the refinements of the Athenian philosophers, and they put the coarsest interpretation upon the æsthetic spectacle they saw. They did not consider the artistry of it: they said it was illicit, and they refused to entertain the notion that even their commissaire could believe in the reality of such goings-on. So in their zeal to convince him, they wrapped fur coats round those bright Hellenic figures, and bore them off to the police-station just as they were. Then they tore off the fur coats brusquely, like the louts they are, and revealed to their astonished chief all the godship there is in the naked human form. History says those exquisite youths spent the night among thieves and brigands, but can even a Georgian commissaire have remained insensible to the lesson of sublime culture they were trying to teach?'

For the life of me, I could not help laughing: Vladimir's picture, whether invented or not, was so preposterous; I never could see round stumpy Popoieff again without thinking of the fur coat opened, and the commissaire's astounded gaze. . . . It was by such tales that Vladimir damned everybody, rendering people ludicrous for evermore. He went on:

'Here is our Princess Salome. . . . No, she won't bow to me: she is affronted. She spent a year in Paris, and returned to impart to us the latest vices, Montparnasse and Montmartre, Lesbos and opium. I told her opium had been invented in

China, a little matter of five thousand years ago; that Sapho had risen to fame six centuries before Jesus Christ, that even Baudelaire had written *Les Femmes damnées* seventy years back from to-day, and that she was painfully late. She turned upon me her long caressing eyes, smouldering with her secret devotional fires and ringed with appropriate black, and when she saw I was not a woman she sombrely rose and went away. Hasn't she yet asked you to read *Les Chansons de Bilitis* with her on one of her divans?'

'She has not,' I said.

'Then she will. She'll be misled, like us all, by your reputation as a feminist, and she will only discover laboriously what a bourgeoise you are. Look at Paul Andreievitch Oblanoff . . .' A tall thin Russian, with a sudden sharp nose and peering eyes, was passing along. He had claw-like hands and little jerky movements; he was a rival professor whom Vladimir did not like at all.

'Do you see in him some slight resemblance to a rat? I'll tell you why – it has come through much gazing. . . . Paul Andreievitch Oblanoff is a great light in mathematics, but they are a bleaching science, and in their rarefied air he has become ascetic and sexless. Yet he has one little hobby – who has not? He likes to spend his spare time catching the small furry mice that run about his room, and when he has caught them, he hangs them by their tails out of his window, on quaint wee gallows he has carefully prepared, and watches

them behind the panes of his nice warm apartment, while they jump up and down in the air and freeze. He cuts them down next morning, when they are enveloped in a shroud of ice, and puts them away in a special box: he wouldn't part with those dear little corpses for the world. He's a delicate man. Now, what are you angry for? Oh! How can I help it? If one of Mirbeau's heroes felt pleasant emotions in collecting women's shoes, why should not Paul Andreievitch Oblanoff experience a bliss you are too gross to understand in watching little mice die upside down in the cold? We all have unsanctified dreams – think well: you yourself could not bawl out from the house-tops all the visions that have visited your brain. . . .

'Very well, we'll talk of something else, but I'm afraid you're too thin-skinned to live long and merrily in a world like this. . . . There go Natasha Dimitrievna and Lise Koutchovna.' He mentioned the wife of a rich Bakou merchant and a famous Russian singer. 'A dreadful thing happened to those two women. They were intimate friends, but one night, at a card-playing party in Natasha Dimitrievna's house, her gold bag with many bank-notes in it disappeared. Of course she accused her bosom friend of its abstraction, and the two women fought a duel, in which much hair was pulled out and many scratches were given, while the men clapped their hands in rhythmical measure, and shouted *vasha!* as at a dance. After that they went to sleep side by side on the floor,

with their hands full of trophies they had snatched from each other's garments, and there the police found them next morning when they came to announce that the gold bag had been discovered in the pocket of Prince Mirovitski, one of the guests who had clapped longest and shouted loudest the night before. Both women tried to excuse him so frantically that at last their suspicions were mutually roused, and the sad fact was disclosed that Prince Mirovitski had betrayed each for the other at the same time. Disgraceful . . . ? How silly! That man was impartial, and lavished himself on both. We are in generous Georgia – don't you realize it's all in the tone? Anyhow, Lise and Natasha showed as acute a proprietary instinct as you: they fell into each other's arms and kissed again with tears, agreeing by common consent to keep their eclectic lover locked up safely. He is still in prison. *Nou*. . . . Who have we got here?'

A group had come in that arrested attention – a young Russian girl, Daria Antonovna, all in white, like a snowflake; an indisputable Pole, Felix Mikliewicz, lithe, pretty, and treacherous-looking like a cat, and a Georgian Mussulman prince of Adjara, the troubled provinces of the South, *Bek* Rouffett Gortashvili.

Only to see him was to enter an atmosphere of storm. He was a man of about sixty, sturdy, burly, thick as one of his own mountain beech-trees, with a windy passionate ruddy face, red hair and jutting moustaches, blue eyes blazing with aggressiveness,

and a voice like the roar of an exasperated lion. I had met him before, for he lived in the same hotel as I, and when he bawled at his retainers, the whole house reverberated with his curses. The servants shrank into the walls or glided through the banisters when he went by; when he was angry he would pick up two men and bang their heads together with as much effort or compunction as a child blows away thistledown on the air. Just now he was very evidently paying his court to Daria Antonovna – if a man is attracted by what is most utterly different from him, then she must have bowled him off his feet. She was a lovely child of hardly eighteen, small, dainty, with a round Greuze face tinged like some morning spring rose, short fair hair and a serious mouth. Her eyes were steady and appealing, blue as linseed-flowers – blue all through – with a sort of translucence that made her look ideally young and pure.

Bek Rouffett was urging something upon her, but he was not used to entreating, and in his manner, his natural impetuosity and pride strove almost ridiculously with a kind of yearning. Daria Antonovna listened gravely, and in the background that cat, Felix Mikliewicz, purred over both. I knew nothing about the latter except that he was, like Daria Antonovna herself, a refugee from Russia – a youngish man still, with green eyes, the suppleness of a serpent, an insinuating, tender smile, and a sort of sweet, lisping speech. All his person was instinct with what we have hypno-

tized ourselves into admiring as the Slavonic 'charm' – something revoltingly cajoling and cynical – and, moreover, he had the Polish finesse. Bek Rouffett paid as much heed to him as to a fly, but the Pole did not detach himself from the florid brawny Georgian and the frail girl.

At that moment Princess Ita Eristavi joined Vladimir and me. She was one of the Georgian women I liked and respected most in Tiflis – already middle-aged; her two sons had been killed in the Great War, and her face was marked by sorrow, illness and loss. But she bore her grief and reverses nobly. She had worked for some time as translator at the British mission, giving one more example of her courage, but her health had broken down, and she led a retired life. Even that graceless Vladimir pulled himself up short in his scandalmongering, and bowed decorously when she approached.

'I'm chaperoning one of my daughters,' she said with a smile. 'She's gone quite mad over these modern dances, and I can't let her come here alone. But don't let me interrupt your conversation, Vladimir Kirilovitch.'

'I was only speaking about Bek Rouffett Gortashvili,' he answered. 'Doesn't he show rather boisterously that he knows what an important personage he is?'

He turned to me. 'He is practically lord of Adjara,' he continued. 'These Georgians of the South are Mahometans, as perhaps you remember, and

the system in the three provinces there has remained as feudal as in the Middle Ages. All the peasants are vassals of the great landowners, and the Government is not strong enough to modify the customs yet. Bek Rouffett is a law unto himself.'

'He is a felon!' exclaimed Princess Eristavi energetically. 'If our Government had an ounce of spirit, they would shoot him. Look at him, standing there unashamed – he who disgraces one of the royal names of Georgia, and is ready to sell our fairest counties to any foe who promises him enough!'

'But, *princesse*, how can you expect an exorbitant old despot like that to obey a socialist Government?' asked Vladimir in a falsely commiserating tone. 'He only came here to dare them to do their worst.'

She answered him with immense dignity in her look and voice.

'And we, Vladimir Kirilovitch?' she said. 'And we, the Eristavis, the Abhazis, the Dadianis, the Dadishkilianis, the Orbelianis, who have been despoiled by this same Menshevik Government, and yet who are ready to serve? We are Georgians before we are princes, and we love our country more than the estates we have lost. If Georgia was called upon to-day to fight again for her independence, we should send our husbands and sons to the battle as of yore; but this Judas would barter the graves of his fathers for another handle

to his name, or another ribbon on his breast.' 'Well, he seems at present to be laying great stress on the graves of his fathers,' observed Vladimir. 'Listen to him!'

The room was incessantly changing its aspect; as in a kaleidoscope the tiny scenes shifted; new knots of people were tied and untied. Daria Antonovna had slipped away and the Bek was now surrounded by Georgians, some of his partisans; the talk had become political; he could not stem his vehemence, and his voice was indeed thundering through the hall. We heard: 'Three times already have they requested me to leave Tiflis, those swine, those Menshevik dolls of the devil, but I told them my forbears built this town, and that I did not choose to be yapped away from my lawful place.'

It was only another edition of Alexander Abhazi's fulminations, but this man was much more powerful than the Abhazetian prince. 'He may find himself in a place "full of law" sooner than he thinks,' said Vladimir significantly, making an allusion to the *metekh*, or prison; 'but now you just solve a riddle for me, if you can. I really begin to think that a little stew is brewing. . . . Given that Felix Mikliewicz has unexpectedly – but undoubtedly – become a very cordial admirer of the Moscow *tavarishtchi* whom the Georgian Government has fraternally – but alas, most rashly!– welcomed to Tiflis, why should Bek Rouffett's insolence and unfealty be a lesser danger to him

at this very moment than the combination of the virginal girl and the fondling Pole who were attending him to-night? Are you any good at equations? If so, you may divine why the stars of those three may make fatal conjunctions yet.'

'When you've done besmirching everybody, we might revert to less monotonous subjects,' I said dryly. 'I haven't anything like your clairvoyance into the workings of souls.'

He shrugged his shoulders, and muttered something about a woman being constitutionally incapable of putting two and two together – but though I had not at all understood the drift of his last remarks, I instinctively sought for Daria Antonovna again. Escaping from Bek Rouffett's gesticulating group, she had taken refuge in a little recess, and at last I caught a glimpse of her there, her expression quite altered, very gay, very girlish, talking animatedly to Prince Tariel, who towered above her, smiling at her upturned face. She was manifestly trying to persuade him of something; like an excited child she pulled him by the arm as she laughed and pressed; he looked amused, but he shook his head. She probably wanted him to dance, but by some half unconscious sense of fitness, he never took part in the modern jigs when he was in national dress. Vladimir, who had followed the direction of my eyes, suddenly said:

'Now be contented. . . . I'll minister to your morbid hunger for conventional morality by having a good word for that fine animal down there. . . .

He's what you'd call an honourable man – serves his country, believes in duty, loves his wife – when he works or when he loves, hasn't even the sense to ask to be paid. One day his country, and his duty, and his wife will burst like bubbles in front of his perplexed eyes, but even then you won't get him to believe that he's a fool. He's a special pet of yours, I think?'

'He is,' I answered, deeply displeased. Captain Abhazi was the last person in the world whom I wished Vladimir to discuss, particularly before Princess Eristavi. With true Russian tact, he would not fail to hit at her race in clawing at Prince Tariel. 'He is. And I'll thank you, Vladimir, to keep your opinion of him to yourself. There are many kinds of fools in this universe – and to hold that only evil is wisdom is perhaps a greater form of imbecility than you think.'

'*Qui vivra verra*,' said Vladimir placidly. 'I tell you that man is doomed – our age has no use for his type. His country will soon be gulped down at a mouthful; his duty will prove useless, and his wife will be found wanting. I'm not accusing either her or anybody else – I simply say that the logic of things is against him; already it's as if he was flinging himself with his Circassian dagger on a battery of modern guns. . . .'

He gave me a most ungallant nudge. 'You see who's coming in? If you imagine that that heroic Georgian buffalo of yours, Tariel Abhazi, will be able to keep pace long with that agile French

moth, his wife, then you've no right to call yourself an analytic psychologist, and I advise you, as a brother, to give up your trade.'

I did not answer his taunt, for I was engaged in looking at Vala Abhazi, who had just entered the big room from the farthest side, with her hand on the arm of a man. Even in that gathering of handsome or charming women, her grace was such that it placed her apart. She held herself fine and straight as a flower – French all over, of a physical and mental finish, a sort of glimmering witchery that no one else possessed, fashioned in a sensitiveness and elegance that only one race in the world has produced to that degree.

She did not see her husband, for her face was turned towards her companion, a British officer in uniform who, even as I looked, drew her to him and began to dance. The eddies of people surged, fluctuated, and formed differently again. Sonia Pavlovna pounced upon Prince Tariel – she was evidently pursuing him that night; I lost sight of him for a minute; then he had gone, and Daria Antonovna, to whom Vladimir had been persistingly beckoning, threaded her way to where we stood.

'We saw you flirting most immodestly,' said Vladimir when she reached us. He could not resist a gibe even at that little girl. 'You've got all the insatiable feminine covetousness. First you profess to be in love with Felix Mikliewicz, and keep him hopping round you, as we all know; then you

make up to that guileless Bek Rouffett, whose head you've turned already; now you try to corrupt the impeccable Prince Abhazi. What more will you do to-night?'

The fun of her innocent coquetry had still been on her, but it faded off her face, and she protested fervently against Vladimir's accusations. 'I didn't. . . . I don't. . . . How can you say such things! I've never shown I was in love with anybody – Felix is only my friend, my *best* friend; but he never told me a word. . . . There's nothing between us. . . . And Bek Rouffett was simply telling me I ought to pay him a visit at his place in Adjara. He says it's so beautiful, and that I can have no idea of what Georgia really is if I remain here. That's all. . . . You are very unkind, Vladimir Kirilovitch.' Princess Eristavi and I comforted her, telling her not to mind insinuations that no one believed. She turned to me with a little sigh of regret. Her delightful voice – a really Russian voice, light and sweet – seemed to come from nowhere. 'As for Prince Tariel, I wanted him to dance,' she said, 'but he would not. Isn't it a pity? He is so nice: I like him so much! I think he would be a good comrade, if once he cared for people. He looks severe, but somehow one feels he is faithful and true. How happy his wife must be!'

'You must tell her so,' said Vladimir suddenly. He levelled at me his most disagreeable leer, and I felt he was bent on annoying me as much as he

could. He had an incredible faculty for resentment; he was for ever bearing little grudges, and had no rest till every debt, imaginary or real, was wiped out. Now he had deliberately determined to follow up a subject he saw I disliked. 'Somehow I have a curious notion – perhaps from the look she is wearing just now – that she would be surprised to learn how fortunate she is.'

Princess Abhazi was passing before us, and unluckily for the retort I was preparing, instead of the air of bored and bleak stupidity our modern dancers insist upon assuming in their jerky rotations, her countenance was all alive. It had been so hard and strained when she went out with Tariel; now it was soft and glowing, the mouth a little open, the eyes, very mellow and deep, fixed upon her partner – and there was something half wistful, half troubled, something quivering and touched, in the whole warm womanliness of her face. She was *feeling*. . . . But what on earth did that mischief-maker, Vladimir, mean? Princess Eristavi, who had been listening in silence to our altercation, put up her eye-glass and glanced at the pair.

'She is dancing with Major Cassel,' she said in a peculiar tone, as if absent-mindedly.

'Have you any objection?' asked Vladimir suavely, his malice getting the better of his outward deference.

'Oh, no!' answered Princess Eristavi slowly.

'But it would be a pity, I think, if she liked that man.'

'Why?' I demanded unsuspiciously. Lorrimer Cassel, of the Guides Cavalry, head of the Intelligence Department of the British mission in Georgia, was a very prominent figure in Tiflis society. I had come across him in Georgian drawing-rooms, notably at Vala's house, where he was a pretty assiduous visitor – but I had never talked to him otherwise than casually. He and I were not of the same texture, and the ways in which he moved were not my ways. The euphemisms employed in every language of our planet have not managed to conceal successfully from me that an Intelligence Department is the official citadel of spies – and a spy, whether he dons civilian clothes or the uniform of a soldier, is a thing that stinks in my nostrils very greatly indeed.

'Why?' I repeated.

'Do tell our friend why, *princesse*,' said Vladimir. 'She adores romances, and maintains that life ought to be like a fairy-tale, where everybody is beautiful and happy and good. You might teach her a few practical, though grievous, truths. Why isn't Major Cassel exactly like the virtuous and beneficent genius in one of her dreams?'

'He has a bad heart,' said Princess Eristavi to me, simply. 'He did a very vile thing some time ago. You know I worked for three months at the British mission, don't you? Well, one of my colleagues there was a young Russian girl, Irena Rostovna,

the daughter of a colonel killed in the war. She and her mother escaped from Moscow, and when they came to Tiflis they had nothing left, so she was very glad to obtain employment at the mission as translator of Russian newspapers and the Soviet decrees. She was a very conscientious worker and a thoroughly good, as well as pretty, girl. There was at the mission a young officer, Lieutenant Vincent, who was Major Cassel's cousin, and Irena and he fell in love with each other almost at once. He wanted to marry her, and Major Cassel was very much displeased. Family ties and combinations, I suppose – anyhow, he was quite opposed to the match, and told his cousin several times that such a marriage would not do. We all knew about it, for Irena used to cry and cry – she was very young, you see – but though Lieutenant Vincent was very unhappy about it all, he would not consent to give her up. One morning Major Cassel came into our room, and announced that a very important paper had been stolen from his table. He asked if anyone knew who had taken it. Of course we denied – and then he had the door closed, and a soldier put before it, and said that he was very sorry, but the value of the document was such that he would have to examine our desks. When he came to Irena, he pulled out her drawer, which she had not yet opened – it was quite early, we had just arrived – and there, at the bottom of all her papers, was the report he had lost. He must have had it put there in the night, while

she was at home, for nobody who knows her could believe for a moment that she was a thief – the whole thing was not even plausible: what had she to gain by such an act? I believe – and I went up to Major Cassel and told him so immediately – that she was as innocent as I myself. But of course she could not prove that she was not guilty, and he sent her away that very same hour. She did not see Lieutenant Vincent before she left, for Major Cassel had her accompanied to her house by the soldier – and later on she had no time to explain . . . Lieutenant Vincent was sent that day to Batoum, and from there dispatched on some pretext to Constantinople. Did she lose him . . . ? Naturally. . . . It was easy for Major Cassel to tell him that Irena had been caught in the act as a spy; he could not doubt the word of a superior as well as a relative; he was bewildered by the discovery, by his own rapid departure. . . . Major Cassel did not give him the chance to recover – and he, too, was very young, very unsophisticated. He lost his bearings. . . . It was inevitable. In any case, he never wrote to Irena from Constantinople, and that was the end of it all. That is why I say Major Cassel is not sound at heart, and why I hope Princess Abhazi will not make a friend of him. Life has taught me that we are not composed of sealed compartments – when the spirit is bad, it infects every thought and every deed.'

I was silent. I knew very well that things like that were done daily for 'reasons of State,' general

or personal, by governments, and missions, and political men – but it was a foul performance, to spoil thus, at its very beginning, the life of a little girl. . . .

The band was playing frantically, with passionate trumpetings at the close of the measures, furious discordant shouts throbbing with a wild nostalgia; in a corner, some Georgians, transported, beside themselves at the tempestuous music, leaped in improvised figures, as in the ardours of a chase. Once more Vala and Major Cassel drifted in front of us; they were stopped by other rushing couples, and, obliged to revolve slowly, they remained full in our view. She still had that thrilled air, and he, stooping his head, was talking. Impelled by my new knowledge, I scrutinized him more critically than I had ever done before. He certainly had great distinction; he was of fair height, flaxen, well set-up, irreproachably groomed. His face was handsome, of a classically English type – straight features, extremely still, a rather bloodless mouth, unflexible, sharply cut at the corners, which he kept closed when he smiled. From the visage alone, not much could be deduced at first, except that he had strength, and would not be easily moved. He would have passed anywhere for a good-looking, very self-possessed Briton of the military class – the poise of his head and shoulders was unmistakably a soldier's – but for his remarkable eyes. They arrested the commonplace impression, brought an element of intricacy

into it. They were amazingly fixed, so palely grey that they seemed to be absolutely without colour, save that of the mists or the water of nearly frozen lakes under cold skies; and in them, far behind, they held a glacial resoluteness, an icy irreducible daring. As I scanned him, I lost consciousness of the rest of his figure; surely, out of those eyes came an emanation, very delicate and intangible, which flitted over the regular face and, somehow, subtly, informed it too. It was quite indefinable, yet quite perceptible; it eluded me entirely, yet I sensed it was true, just like the shadow of a spirit that was the hidden but real master of all that outwardly correct form. I may have been influenced by what I had that moment heard from Princess Eristavi, but suddenly and irrevocably I was seized with the conviction that it was, uncapturable and quietly triumphant, the reflection of a spirit of evil.

Then, all at once, I felt a desperate need of movement. It was enough, this seeing and hearing of festering souls! I longed to go away to the things that were mine, that I could share and understand. I was out of my place, out of my place, among this dirt and meanness; it was always the same drama: whipped on and on by a relentless curiosity of mind, my nerves struck at last, outraged, surfeited, and refused to endure. Princess Eristavi had been absorbed into another cluster; Felix Mikliewicz had glided up and claimed Daria, and I became aware that a man was bowing before me – an

intimate friend of mine, a French officer, Captain Robert Viguières.

'Who has offended you?' he asked me, laughing. 'You look as though you yearned and yearned to hurl us all into hell! Come – I can't allow you to scowl at our poor world like that! It ought to be pitied, not to be judged. Haven't I always told you that we are only miserable withered leaves driven about by a bad wind – more often unwilling than consenting, too? . . . Come – you should be sorry for us, instead of wanting to burn us alive. . . . Come!'

'Yes, take me away, Robert,' I said, half gasping. 'I'm choked, choked, choked by slime.'

He took me in his arms with his usual affectionate, whimsical banter; I nodded unsmilingly to Vladimir, and we joined the dance.

§4

It so happened that for a brief lapse of time after Madame Darinskaia's ball, I saw Lorrimer Cassel or heard of him almost uninterruptedly. Chance has these curious whims: it seemed resolved, at a certain moment, to mix him up with all that went on in my immediate circle. The incidents in themselves appeared unimportant, and when they took place, they did not retain my attention long, but looking back now, I find in their slightness more significance than I thought. Also, they constitute

the only data I had on Cassel's singular personality before he began to play an active rôle in Princess Abhazi's life, so I set the facts down as they occurred.

At the Grand Opera in Tiflis a Georgian tragedy which roused great interest was being given. It was the first attempt made since the Russian domination to create a national drama, and the Government, which energetically encouraged the endeavour, turned out in its numbers to view the first performance of the piece. The house was crowded – all the passages blocked by spectators. . . . After the second act, as I was strolling through the *foyer*, I caught sight of Prince and Princess Abhazi in the midst of an animated group of Georgians and foreigners. Major Cassel was also standing among the latter. Vala called to me impetuously, and I joined her friends.

The discussion was about the play. The chief character in it, a medieval Georgian lord, suddenly discovered that his wife, whom he loved deeply and by whom he had had several sons, had betrayed him during his last absence from home, while he was fighting in Persia. Thereupon he slew, not only the adulteress, but all the children she had given him. In his fanatical mind the conviction had grown that, because of the mother's capacity for deceit, his sons were also tainted with an ineradicable streak of treachery, and his conscience would not permit him to let them attain to manhood, bearing a name which they were fated to dis-

grace. In his last grand convulsion of pain, before he condemned his children to death, he showed the root of his obsession: his country needed defenders; he had no right, in its desperate straits, to present it with a race rotten at core and unworthy.

The Georgians round Princess Abhazi saw something of the blind and barbarous heroism of his act, but the Europeans insisted on terming it mere mad butchery. Vala herself was extremely uncompromising in her denunciations of the murderer. 'Nothing but a savage . . .' she declared. 'It was bad enough to kill his wife – does the instinct of love, which impelled her to betray him, ever really deserve to be punished by death? I don't defend adultery, for I think it inelegant to go back upon one's word, but my dislike is æsthetic, not moral. Putting aside all our modern conceptions of the right to own one's self, even in marriage, I can't for the life of me see why an impulse of the heart, in which so much devotion and sacrifice enters, should be considered criminal just because it is directed towards a man who is not the husband. Why should the merit of a feeling be judged only by the legal situation of the man to whom it goes? That's all so absurd! But on the top of that, to slaughter the children also – not even to give them a chance . . . !' She turned to Cassel. 'What do you think?' she asked.

He smiled, and I was struck by the cold precise brilliancy of his still face, with those astonishing

pale eyes, so suggestive and so baffling at once. 'I'm afraid past things don't distress me very much,' he said. 'I look upon this play as a page of history. Why should we quarrel with passions and opinions that have nothing to do with us? Isn't that rather childish? As for what is called sexual misconduct, I am quite of your way of thinking. The whole value is in the offering, not in the person to whom it is addressed. And a woman is most exquisitely womanly when she gives. There is no question of intrinsic right or wrong about it – it is only the unjustified male sense of proprietorship that leads us to reprisals in these affairs.'

It was very deftly said – so detached, and yet a homage. . . . But I had the oddest suspicion that he was not indulging in a true statement of his views. Where did he get such advanced ideas from? They were not genuine enough – English enough – for his caste. He was a soldier, not a modern thinker – such intellectual freedom was not at all in conformity with his evident upbringing and with his profession. I had the impression that he was trying to enlist Vala's sympathies, that he was only posing as an ally. In that case, he obtained the reward of the trouble he had taken, for Princess Abhazi's glance immediately spoke her gratitude at finding a supporter.

The dispute waxed hotter, and I moved to Prince Tariel's side. 'And you?' I asked curiously. 'What do you say?'

He had been listening silently, but at my question his brows came together like a bar over his straight-looking eyes. He answered slowly, as if searching laboriously for the exact expression of a difficult idea.

'I am not of Major Cassel's opinion. . . . I believe things are good or evil in themselves, beyond the personal point of view, beyond even the personal conscience. The old lord we criticize was right to destroy his children if they were to be later on a menace to the unity and welfare of his country. It seems to me that the race has greater rights than the individual. But it is a pity he had not a better knowledge of the laws of heredity. They are not, perhaps, as hard and fast as he supposed.'

'You are not very reassuring yourself,' I remarked, 'if your criterion is just science, and not compassion or indulgence of the soul. . . . But as regards the wife – what would you have done?'

He gazed at me gravely. 'I really cannot say,' he replied. 'I cannot imagine, you see, my wife placing me in such a position.'

I felt how red I had become, but the tone of his rebuke had been so courteous that I swallowed my mortification as best I could. Vala, however, had heard, and very swiftly she put out her hand, letting it rest for a second on his arm. 'You take life too seriously, *mon ami*,' she said, and her voice sounded a little sad, a little hard. 'We cannot all live up to your level – you must allow us to laugh,

to be irrelevant from time to time. After all, only death has any real meaning.'

She hardly waited for him to finish his low answer, 'Do you think so? It is the slightest thing of all . . .' before she returned to Major Cassel again. She spoke to him in English, a language which most of the Georgians did not understand.

'Help me to escape from this conversation,' she begged him. 'It is growing so dismal – they never lose sight of patriotic issues in this land! Thank heaven you at least are so indifferent: it's like having fresh water poured over one on a burning day to meet a fellow philosopher. . . . Do invite me to go to the *buffet*.'

'I shall be delighted,' he answered, as he prepared to manœuvre her out of the group. 'But you are mistaken if you think that there is no breach in my indifference. I am interested in some things. . . .'

'What, for instance?' she rejoined instantly, but in a whisper.

'You can guess,' he said in the same way, his steady eyes full on her eyes. She did not answer, but as she went up to tell Prince Tariel where she was going, I saw her face as I had seen it at the ball, again wonderfully soft and alive.

I had just sent away one of the society *revendeuses* who pestered me from morning to night, bringing for my inspection jewels, furs, laces, knick-knacks which I did not wish to buy, and I lay down on

the sofa in my room at the *Hôtel d'Orient* with a sigh of relief at finding myself alone. Between my travels, my life in Tiflis was feverish and fatiguing. I knew a good many people in the capital, and as I was a woman, a foreigner and a writer, I had to receive many guests, and could not always evade the invitations showered upon me. I also heard a host of rumours, and they were not calculated to instil into one perfect peace of mind.

We were living in tragical times. In Russia then, Denikine's adventure was quickly and dramatically drawing to its close; he was cooped up in the Kouban, but that province was already hostile to him, and it could be predicted that very soon only Novorossisk would remain open to the Whites. Azerbeidjan, between us and the Caspian, was in the hands of Tartar puppets, and at the mercy of a Bolshevik *coup d'état* – aided by the Turks, the Reds effectively swamped it in the spring of 1920; starving Armenia to the south was distracted by fights, unparalleled in hideousness and crimes, against Kemalists, Tartars, Kurds, and between its own political factions. The Russians were progressing everywhere there, and after the fall of Kars and the capitulation of Alexandropol, they established their sovereignty on the doomed country once more. All round Georgia, the Bolshevik grip closed like a vice.

The situation, of course, had a tremendous repercussion on Tiflis. In the shock of conflicting interests and endeavours, all the old landmarks, as I

have said before, had been swept away, and Tiflis, a clean town before the Revolution, had become a seething drain. It was the best observatory for political events in the whole of the Caucasus; every rumour, every incident, every spasm in Russia, Armenia, Azerbeidjan, Turkey, Persia – fantastic, contradictory – was known in the city, and the mental agitation there was electrical, terrific, nervously exhausting in the extreme. We were all aware that we lived on a volcano; its rumblings were already menacing; it was only a question of time until it opened and belched forth such fire that no one could be sure he would be saved. Yet that volcano was the only spot still spared by the Bolshevik invasion: when it burst, where would the pitiful atoms clinging to its sides, bereft of money, of professions, of passports, of any political protection, find another shelter? They did not know; so they grew more and more desperately apathetic. In the streets, the restaurants, the drawing-rooms, they jostled against each other, and, tired of useless effort, they fastened upon what the moment could still bestow. They were helped, too, by their national temperament – it was not for nothing that Asia and Islam mingled in their veins – so, indolent, careless and fatalistic, with, not seldom, a dash of gallantry in their stoicism, they continued to drift.

The peoples of the Caucasus, affable, simple, of an intensely social turn of mind, are accustomed to a life of everlasting visits, and have no notion of

the Western need of solitude and personal thought. They give so freely that it seems natural to them to receive; they cannot help putting us down as churls and misers when we hesitate and weigh, we who have been taught so sternly by our civilization to be cautious and provident, to count upon our own resourcefulness rather than on a reply to our prayers. Those fine fingers of the Georgians, especially, never retained their hold on any possession. How many times have I not heard this answer, flung by an irritated husband at a wife who was lamenting because, though the rent was due, the servants were unpaid, and the house was lacking in essentials, he had yet lent – and lending means losing in Georgia – his month's salary, handed to him that morning, to a comrade in perhaps lesser distress than he: 'You *wicked* woman! How could I refuse to give the money when I had it in my pocket!'

With such a mentality, such habits and tastes, it is not surprising that to see friends and converse with them should be considered the very *raison d'être* of existence: the hours are made only to be filled with speeches, not with melancholy meditations or labour-exacting acts. My acquaintances – very often men and women I had only met once – would arrive in the morning, the afternoon, and at night; knock at my door, stride in without waiting for my consent – it never entered their mind that I might wish to be alone or to work! – and, whether I was in pyjamas or with a hat on my head pre-

pared for an outing, they would sit down on my divan, smoke endless cigarettes, drink tea and devour little cakes, and talk, talk, talk, till I lost the sense of my own identity in that rapid, ceaseless, shallow whirlpool of confidences, wrangles and news. . . .

Yes, I was weary. . . . I stretched myself out more comfortably on my sofa, tasting to the full the bliss of being undisturbed. I had been fortunate enough to obtain a room at the *Orient*, the most important hotel in the place. The insufficiency of dwellings was such in the over-populated city that one of the most arduous problems of life in Tiflis was to discover a decent lodging – and for foreigners, as well as for natives, the Municipality was obliged to distribute billeting-orders, just as in a captured town. The *Hôtel d' Orient* was strictly reserved for visitors of mark. Missions were quartered in it; special envoys; the *Bureau de Liaison*, a branch of the Georgian Ministry of War; some very rich merchants, prospective concessionaires of the forests, manganese, tobacco and silk of the land, with their mistresses or their wives. An idea that my descriptions might help to 'advertise' Georgia in the West had gained me a place there, too. Up the wide central staircase, where an enormous bear seemed to snarl, rearing, with a red electric lamp in its powerful jaws; in the mile-long flagged corridors, always bathed in the stifling smell of latrines; pushing against the motionless, chattering, brigand-like waiters, or the trim cool

German maids – the only servants who did any work – meeting the anxious-eyed, haggard Armenian director, with his eternal, 'Where have the Bolsheviks got to now?' one saw diplomats, soldiers, sailors, speculators, costumes of every description, very elegant women, alone or with their attendant and rapidly changing swains.

The vast building, tremendously dirty and chaotic, sparsely furnished, always deficient in something, bells or light or heating or window-panes or water, rang day and night with noise – not infrequently, revolver shots resounded from within the rooms of certain ladies, where cards were played for long hours and for high stakes. Then the brigand-like waiters rushed to the rescue and hauled out the noble crooks who had vindicated their honour by firing, and many things vanished while they were being hauled out. To add to the peculiar character of the *Orient*, arrests took place there from time to time: one caught a glimpse of a posse of Georgian militiamen, with their black fur caps and short, stiff, apricot-coloured felt coats, escorting to other regions the agent of some newborn but virulent republic, whose activities had outraged even the long-suffering Menshevik rulers. Only a night ago, Bek Rouffett Gortashvili, the Adjaran prince who had indulged so freely in invective against the Government at Madame Darinskaia's ball, had been respectfully waited upon by a group of soldiers, when he returned late to his chambers after some banquet,

and conveyed to apartments that the Cabinet had specially prepared.

Many of the hotel clients were watched, and I had been solemnly assured that certain rooms, allotted to particularly interesting people, had holes bored in invisible places, to which an attentive official ear could be conveniently applied. I myself had been chased from bedroom to bedroom – sometimes by the tenacity of odours, sometimes by the indecent activities of bugs, that filled the interior of mattresses far more abundantly than the wool did, sometimes by the greedy propensities of mice, which ate everything, from dresses to slippers. They came forth at night, squeaking and shameless, and held graceful little dances, all twirls and vaults, right in the middle of my floor – sure of impunity, as if they sensed I would never have the heart to trap those bits of soft grey living velvet, with chips of jet for eyes and rosy sticks for paws. At last I had discovered a room that pleased me, lofty and huge as a hall, where my treasures of the Armenian Bazaar, carpets and silks and vessels of silver, found a fitting abode. Far away, in front of my windows, the bare purple-pink hills of Tiflis had the scintillations of precious stones, and the Koura River, broad and quiet, sparkled in the distance like a silver shield. I was looking at the sunset, furious flaming red, like the still bleeding skins of gigantic beasts piled round a cavern of glowing gold, when a tap resounded on my panels, and Captain Viguières walked in.

I started up in terror.

'Robert! For God's sake, lock the door! I thought I had done so already. I'll *die* if another visitor comes this afternoon!'

'But fancy what will happen if that other visitor hears us talking, and yet is not admitted when he knocks,' remarked Viguières with his pleasant blend of humour and kindliness, as he obeyed my injunctions and then came to sit by my side. 'That rather queer friend of yours, Sobotine, in whom the blades of grass underneath us, and the stars above, confide, would be the first to know of it, and to spread it about. He's not quite as bad as he seems? All right! Well, little girl, why are you so tired? Shall I make you some tea? No, I won't ring for it: I know their ways here, they'll answer the bell at supper – lived in this place myself, till the bugs ate the flesh off me, and sent me, a skeleton rattling its bones, calling for vengeance to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Don't move: I know where the tea-things are, and I'll boil the water myself.'

He moved about deftly, a tall distinguished figure in his light blue uniform, painfully thin, with long, drawn, subtle lines of the face, sunken, melancholy brown eyes, and a half-quizzical, half-tender smile. Often it haunted the lips when the eyes were at their saddest, and gave a look of almost crucified kindness to his visage. He was the closest friend I had in Tiflis; a diplomat by profession, converted into an officer during the Great War, and because

of his experience of things Russian – he had been long in Petrograd – attached to the French mission at Denikine's head-quarters. There he had fallen ill with pneumonia that was afterwards to develop into consumption, and he was already undermined, though neither of us knew it, when he was sent to recuperate in Tiflis, a less strenuous post than Novorossisk. A remarkably intelligent man, honourable in every detail, and a true-hearted comrade, thinking of those he cared for before himself, he had a strain of Don Quixotism in him which set him apart from the rest. His mind, penetrative and constructive, was always in quest, beyond the usual formulas and routines, of the essential significance of things, and gave him his glance of perpetual abstraction, as if his inner sight, detached, was fixed on other horizons. But his soul was so gentle that he bore no resentment, and if his spiritual disappointments had strengthened his resolution to keep far outside the arena of life, he remained a tolerant and pitiful spectator of the realities he could not alter. And he was the only man, in all my existence, who ever treated me tenderly, as if he understood that beneath my irascibility my heart was not made of iron, but could suffer and flinch and despair.

'I've only dropped in to see whether you were frightened by yesterday night's doings,' he said. 'Did Bek Rouffett make a very great noise when he was culled? He can bellow like a bull.'

'Then they must have gagged him,' I answered,

'for I heard nothing. I only knew of the event this morning, when the chambermaid told me in an awed whisper, as if she was afraid Bek Rouffett would fly out at her, that he had been removed. Is he in prison?'

'Oh dear, no!' said Viguières. 'He was only taken down to the railway station with a guard of honour as befitted a descendant of the old Georgian kings, and conducted to a reserved wagon, so that the Government should be sure the Batoum train would carry him back to his Adjaran fastnesses again. Still, I think the expulsion was a mistake. He should have been named general of a specially created corps, given a brand-new Menshevik decoration – the Soviets have invented one already, so there's a precedent – and raised to the nominal dignity of vice-President of a shadowy Adjaran republic. It would have cost nothing, and he would have been soothed. But this Government is rather mulishly high-principled, and takes its Socialism seriously. It should conform itself to the conduct of our Governments at home . . .'

'What had he done?'

'He saw a lot of people the Government didn't particularly care for, and held a lot of conversations that were not considered to be opportune. He's a talkative man, like a good many Georgians. . . . Also, he was especially expansive with the British in Tiflis.'

'But couldn't he hob-nob with them at Batoum?' I said. 'There are plenty of them down there!'

'Well, you see, there's a British general at Batoum, who may have super-excellent qualities as a soldier, but who isn't renowned for his tact. He understands about charging, but the Bek is a susceptible Caucasian, who never forgets his ancestors, or that he is a feudal lord reigning over vassals, and has all the southern provinces in his hands. So he was inveigled to Tiflis, to be dealt with more lightly. The British mission here is diplomatic, as you know, and can be trusted to stroke in the right way. Come, drink your tea. . . .'

' . . . Better?' he continued, when I had finished. '*Pauv' petit fou!* What do you want to go capering about the world for, calling upon our planet to stop its mad red dance? You have the makings of a Joshua in you, but you won't succeed. . . . What is your new distress about?'

'It isn't new,' I said. 'It's an old one growing graver. Robert! I'm often so bewildered. . . . Tell me how things are, *clearly*, with the logic of a Frenchman – I'm so sick of the incoherent Russian gabble, and even of the Georgian dreams! Tell me what will be the end of all this.'

'In Georgia?' he inquired, stroking my hand.

'In Georgia,' I replied. 'It's the country I love.'

'She'll be engulfed in the Russian maw. Why . . . ? Mainly because, sooner or later, the Bolsheviks will triumph. Yes, I know, Vrangel may pick up the mantle that's dropping from Denikine's shoulders. The Allies may bring him back from Constantinople – there's some talk of that even

now – but even a good chief can't galvanize the anti-revolutionary corpse. Quite a corpse, I assure you – you see the carcass still; perhaps you'll go on seeing it a little longer, but the soul has left it, and no one can find again a soul that has fled. The twentieth century does not breed Christs. Well, the Bolsheviks, when they will be the victors, won't be able to practise their Internationalist doctrines out of the social domain. If it comes to a question of frontiers, they must and will grab like the rest. That's the *sine qua non* of their political existence, and – by God! – they have the will to live! Georgia is in possession of their pipe-line from Bakou to Batoum. When they'll have cuffed the Tartars into submission – just a matter of a few weeks from to-day – and got the oil-wells again, how will they export their petroleum, one of their principal sources of wealth, without perpetual friction through an independent and non-communistic State? Also, Georgia may make an alliance – either with the Turks, which would bring in against them the Mussulman tribes of the North, Azerbeidjan, Turkestan, perhaps Persia and Bokhara – don't you see how a pan-Moslem movement, properly managed, could spread? – or with the Powers, and then the Soviets would have a European enemy at their very door.'

'Georgia can resist, Robert. . . .'

'No more than you, my dear, if I choose to close my hands round your throat, like this. . . . I don't want to grieve you, but your little Georgia is

made of fluttering ribbons that can't yet be worked into chain-armour. Later on, perhaps, when she's learned a good many very hard things, and, first of all, how to govern, she may put up a more successful fight. But set aside the glamour – which I own is splendidly romantic – that comes to her from her history, the gallantry of her men, the beauty of her women, the majesty of her setting, and look at her as she is to-day. She has a people simple, charming, and irresponsible as a child; valiant, impatient, and – yes – a little vainglorious, like a race-horse, who from the beginning of their existence have had to wage war to preserve their independence and their religion, and who have done nothing else. Then their marvellous sun inclines them to see things brightly, and their marvellous soil yields them food without insisting on labour in return. So they get too much leisure, and as they are eloquent and unpunctual by nature, the combination is proving disastrous all round. They are only just beginning to feel the prick of many of the problems which we, the harassed Westerners, have had to face and solve ages ago, and of course they are a bit befuddled. Their present Ministers are patriots who spent the greater part of their lives discussing Socialism in caves watched by the tzarist *okrania*, or reading Marx's lucubrations in the prisons of Siberia. They never grappled with realities, with the cumbrous mechanism of a State, before they took charge of this land. They had a ready-made Utopia

which they're trying on their country, and they are most astonished that it won't fit on at all.

'Did you ever see a Punch-and-Judy show when the actors' hands have been taken away, and the puppets have flopped down? This Government thinks the show will go on without the actors' hands. It has no real army, because it is held, by its own Socialist programme, to be a Pacifist State; no guns and no war-material, because the little money there is is frittered away in Europe, to obtain from the Allies the recognition of an autonomy that will only last a day. It has a civic pretorian guard that is worthless and lazy, with officers that are demagogues and discourse more than they fight; it is encouraged to be so socialistic that now its liberties are greater than those of the nation itself, and the Reds are already at work on very well-prepared soil. The nobles are estranged because their estates have been torn from them, and they are kept out of every place; the peasants are displeased because the golden Land Millennium, so loudly boomed, cannot yet be perceived; the nationalized industries, mines and woods, are not exploited, so the workman is no better off than before; the merchants are angry because commerce is not really free; the small bourgeoisie, the modest officials, half starved, half clothed, sell one by one their household gods – and the rouble is going down, and the cost of living is climbing higher. Think of the little provinces in these mountains: Abhazetia wants to be independent, Adjara wants

to be Turkish, the Ossetines want their own republic; part of Kakhetia wants to be Tartar, some of the Southern Plateau wants to be Armenian again; in the North, the Svanes and the Khevsoures want to be left alone, without the new-fangled notions that come from Tiflis to interfere with their vendettas, and their guerillas, and their ancient feudal ways. Georgia needs time to settle all these things, as the lungs need air to breathe. But she won't have time – she's being stifled already, and I'm sorry to say that we're helping to strangle her too.'

'How?'

'Oh . . .! *We*, the French, simply because of our inertia – we look on and regret, as we always do. Even when we've something to gain, we don't like stirring: the more so, when we have nothing to lose! But our good friends, the British, are playing a little game of their own, and from a strictly non-Georgian point of view, it isn't badly conceived at all. They've got Batoum – though they are, officially, only keeping it for Georgia – and they're doing their level best to get the Adjaran country round it also. Hence the petting they bestow on that sturdy old rascal, the Bek, whom the Government has dispatched so high-handedly back to his lair. If he consents to become a definite rebel – he's vacillating still – and throws in his lot with the British, then they'll gather up Batoum and Adjara, and present the whole, with sincere cordiality, to the Kemalist Turks as a little peace-offering, provided the latter renounce Lenin and

all the works of Moscow. The little peace-offering, you see, can have far-reaching consequences; no Turkish alliance with the Bolsheviks; Bakou perhaps persuaded by the Kemalists to yield all its oil-concessions to England; Persia quieted; India left alone. . . . Batoum is to the Turk more than a very ripe apple is to a very thirsty little boy, and I believe that, to get it, he'd even turn his back on his new Bolshevik friends. The only hitch is that the Georgians have gone half-crazy with indignation, for they look upon Batoum as the seat of their race – and they're kicking up the hell of a row. But they have such little feet, and the British giant towers so high up above them, that he isn't very seriously discommoded by the dust they try to raise. No – all things considered, it isn't a bad plan, and it may pan out all right. . . . There's a clever man at the British mission here, pushing it on for all he's worth. Your Georgia, little girl . . . ? Bashed in. . . . Done for. . . .'

'. . . *Foutue.*'

I sat up excitedly, abandoning politics for the moment, with a sudden intense desire to learn something else.

'Is the man Major Cassel, Robert?'

'Right, O Minerva! He is.'

'What do you know about him?'

'Just what I've told you. That he's good at his trade.'

'No, no! Not that . . . I mean, in his private life?'

'*Diable!*' said Robert. 'Why all this curiosity about him?'

'I'm afraid one of my friends is going to like him,' I answered, 'and I'll be very sorry indeed if she does. Give me your opinion.'

Captain Viguières shrugged his shoulders. 'How can I say! I don't believe he has murdered anybody, though some people in Tiflis hold that he wouldn't stick at such a trifle if it furthered his aims. He made his career in India, and to judge by some of his methods, he must have picked up a lot of Oriental lore. He's brave enough, however . . .'

'Yes, against children!' I related what Princess Eristavi had told me at Madame Darinskaia's ball. 'Do you call that courage?'

'I know the story,' he said. 'The girl works at our mission now – honest and nice little thing she is, too. . . . But a man who uses his force unscrupulously may be a scoundrel: he isn't necessarily a coward. You who are always dissecting . . . Did you notice Cassel's eyes? They have audacity in them. He was with Denikine before he came here – I've seen him myself in Russia – and he did dangerous things there. Reconnaissances, escapes at the last moment. . . . He liked to dash in when there was peril, even when it was useless to go. Once, I remember, he stayed in Kharkoff after we had evacuated the city – slipped back, without telling anybody, in the true communist rags, the red star on his tattered

cap, just to see for himself what the Bolsheviks did to a captured town. He came back some days later – was nearly shot by the Whites, that time, when he approached our lines – and told us stories that made us sick, though most of us weren't exactly squeamish. He described so well. How the Reds put the hands of their prisoners, with gloves on, in boiling water, and then pulled at them brusquely, so that the gloves came off with the skin and the flesh; how eyes were gouged out with red irons; how the White officers were made to stand up, naked, and strips of skin were torn off their legs, from hip to ankle, just where the coloured bands of the military uniforms used to be inserted in the old times; how . . .'

'Oh, stop!' I said with a groan. 'But I don't know that I'd call that courage, Robert. . . . What did he want to *see* such horrors for?'

'Well, perhaps he's one of those animals whose blood moves slowly – *un de ces animaux qui ont le sang froid* – and yet who have the need of strong emotions, so they stir themselves up as they can, in unusual ways. Sometimes a strain like that, when the mind itself is not very noble, leads to curious actions. But if I were a woman, I'd fight shy of him, my dear. He doesn't strike me as having been designed by nature to love long or to love well. Now, don't begin asking me questions again – that's quite enough of Major Cassel, and of Georgia, too.'

He went up to my writing-table and rummaged

among my books, quoting to himself as he searched: ' "Send me something that speaks of Grecian gods, of temples the colour of ivory, of violet seas, of caskets of jewels, of lizards in the sun . . . for, you see, war is after all only a game that makes one drunk – a game that, for my part, I never wished to play." That's from some English author, isn't it? A good phrase. . . . My dear, we are thankless people. . . . Here is Providence taking such trouble to embroider the pitiable canvas of our lives with something less banal than her ordinary work, and we curse her high and low. Shall we take refuge in *Le Bateau Ivre*?

' "J'ai rêvé la nuit verte aux neiges éblouies,
Baisers montant aux yeux des mers avec lenteur,
La circulation des sèves inouïes,
Et l'éveil jaune et bleu des phosphores chanteurs."

'No? You want a love-poem? Then let me read you *La Mort des Amants*.

' "Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères,
Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux,
Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères,
Ecloses pour nous sous des cieux plus beaux.

. . . . Un soir fait de rose et de bleu mystique,
Nous échangerons un éclair unique,
Comme un long sanglot, tout chargé d'adieux.

Et plus tard un Ange, entr'ouvrant les portes,
Viendra ranimer, fidèle et joyeux,
Les miroirs ternis et les flammes mortes."

' . . . Come and sit near me, darling, and we'll imagine that we're both going to sleep – to forget – to be happy – like that. . . .'

One evening, a few days later, as I was brushing my hair to go down to supper in the dining-room of my hotel, Vladimir presented himself with an unexpected invitation. Would I dine with him at the *Himerion*, a particularly select restaurant in a cellar, where Russian geniuses with advanced realistic views had painted on the walls broad-bellied, naked women, suckling demons who pulled at their breasts in a way that caused the beholder physical pain. Vladimir was extremely gracious, and did not seem to remember the disagreement we had had at the ball. So I, too, let well alone, and pleasantly accepted his offer.

'I must change my dress,' I said. 'Turn your back and don't look till I'm ready.'

The arrangements at the *Hôtel d'Orient* were such that unless a guest was banished to wait outside in the icy corridors, one's toilet had to be made before him, with much simplicity and haste.

'No, no!' he exclaimed peremptorily. 'How queer that a woman should never be content unless she's conspicuous! You're all right as you are now, in black. And for Heaven's sake don't put on

that embroidered coat of yours that howls of Paris: haven't you got something decently subdued?' I was shortly to understand why even he had not dared to expose me to recognition.

He continued to be charming during supper, and at about eleven o'clock we left the restaurant. 'Now I'm going to take you somewhere,' he said as he hailed a carriage; 'there's an entertainment given to-night which you must see.'

We came to a house I did not know, in a street where I had never been – and I noticed that he gave a very long tug at the bell at first, then two very short ones before a shaven-headed Russian opened the door. In the hall, as we were about to mount the staircase, Vladimir thrust a small object into my hand.

'Put it on,' he said.

It was a black silk mask. 'But why . . . ?' I began.

'Put it on,' he repeated impatiently, and waited till, wondering, I had obeyed. Thus equipped, and with my hat pulled down to my nose, as was the fashion, no one could tell who I was.

We were ushered into a room where some twenty men and one woman – a Russian, her face uncovered – were standing still. I recognized some people, mostly officers of the missions and foreigners. Not a single Georgian in the place . . .

One side of the room consisted of two wide curtains. As I looked, they separated, and a man came out. He bowed and began a speech in

Russian: I could not follow all he said, but I gathered that he was promising us a spectacle of the rarest artistic interest which we, as modern and highly civilized persons, free of all clogging and hypocritical bourgeois prejudices, would appreciate as it deserved. There was some talk of the perfect purity of the senses, the harmony of attitudes, and the lost ideal of beauty unhampered and serene. Then he drew the curtains back slowly, and we saw, in a sort of alcove tapestried with the finest carpets, a low couch covered with dark red silk, on which an unclothed man and woman kissed and embraced.

I understood at once. As soon as the Russians came anywhere, these tableaux vivants, these poses plastiques, were organized by them for amateurs. I had been told they now took place in Tiflis, and that the actors in them, quite well-known Russian people, were so utterly amoral that they saw no cause for shame in what they publicly did – mingling with a smile, on equal social terms next day, with the very spectators who had watched them. We dance publicly, they said; why not an open display of caresses? Far more than the deeds themselves, it was just that – that extraordinary *inconscience*, that cynicism which almost attained to candour, so total was it – that were so essentially Russian; for in other races only the scum consents to take part in such performances. But one must be erotic to enjoy them, and no one knew better than Vladimir how lacking I was in that particular

disposition of mind. He had brought me here just to be revenged, to disgust and shame me. He was smiling at me like a devil, as I turned upon him, beside myself with rage.

'Let me pass,' I said furiously. 'And as soon as we're out in the street, my friend, I shall strike you across the face.'

I had no time to say more, for a pathetic little thing happened, which I shall never forget. Among the spectators was a French lieutenant, a youngster, just arrived – I had observed him among other officers, looking ill at his ease, as if he had come in from bravado, for they were chaffing him with hushed laughs – and it chanced that the woman he had been brought to see, quite unsuspectingly of course, was his mistress, whom he loved. And he saw her on that couch, in that position.

I heard something like a sob behind me, and then that boy leaped out, tearing off his tunic as he ran, and he caught the woman to him, half strangling with emotion, covering her and dragging her away.

I still see how the Russian in the alcove jumped up, astounded, the commotion in our group, and I hear the tragical cry of the lad, '*Toi . . . ! Toi . . . ! C'est toi . . . !*' as he frantically bore his mistress towards the door, whilst she repeated, amazed, half crying, wholly sincere: '*Mais pourquoi, Raymond, pourquoi? Qu'est-ce que ça fait? Pourquoi!* . . . What can it matter? Why . . . ?'

'I will go,' I said. 'Now . . . ! Instantly . . . !'

'No,' said Vladimir. 'Wait.' And he would have talked. He would have attempted witticisms then. I pushed away from him, and regardless of consequences, I ran out into the passage alone. He did not follow me. I tried to find my way out of that house, but at first I could not do so. In my perplexity I came upon a door half opened, and within were lights and people. I broke full upon a scene of flagellation: a bare-backed woman was tied by her uplifted arms to a pillar, and a youth, one of the best-known Russian dancers in Tiflis, was flogging her with a whip. Still rarer artistic interest!

But I hardly took in the sadist show. I saw the face of a man standing on the opposite side to mine. It was a still and handsome face, a little bent, as if considering; the eyes were so fixed on the woman before them that the eyelids never seemed to flutter – yet the look was mysteriously remote, as though the real vision which held that fascinated glance came from within; and on the pallid clean-cut lips a smile was set, faint, indefinably closed, sickeningly sweet, as of deep, delicate gloating on some secretly pleasing thing. It was Major Cassel's face, and, in a flash, I knew what quality of his it was that had evaded me, some time before, when I had tried to read him, dancing with Vala Abhazi at the ball.

Cruelty . . .

Cruel . . . That man was *cruel.*

And as at the ball, I was again overwhelmed by

a sensation of horror, smitten soul-deep by a conviction of unutterable futility. Empty, empty, even more than wicked – it was all empty: that officer with his intent, faintly smiling, loathsomely handsome face; that body striped crimson; that Russian youth wielding high his lash; Vladimir's jeers; my own ceaseless, questioning thinking; every feeling, good or evil, that came out of our organs or our brain. What was it all worth? What did it all mean? What aim could it serve? All was hateful, all was void. Dirty creatures, playing dirtily with the gift of our souls and bodies!

I turned, unnoticed, and made my way out of the house into the street, under a distant sky where the stars hung coldly, as indifferent as the Deity itself to men.

§ 5

'Wait for me!'

The cry stopped me as I was hurrying along the Golovinski, one dazzling afternoon of sunny cold, just in front of the pink *Constituante*, the House of Parliament, where in other days the Viceroys of the Caucasus had held their court. The narrow pavement was so crowded with people and the trees so thick that at first I could not distinguish who among the throng had called.

'Wait for me . . .'

Princess Abhazi came running up, her face,

between her glossy fur coat and her brown suède hat, looking more like a flower than ever. 'I've just been to your hotel,' she panted. 'Heavens! one sees you're not from here. . . . You walk as fast as a *chasseur alpin*. Where are you going?'

'To visit the church of M'zkht,' I replied.

'You must first come with me to the Armenski Bazar. I've got a spending fit on, and I want a carpet at that old Persian's, Pakaroff. I am aware that you go to tea at his house, and that you flirt scandalously with his nephew – a married man, too! If you accompany me, he won't cheat me as much as if I was by myself. Come – in this virtuous world of ours, where immanent justice reigns, as you very well know, one must pay the penalty of one's iniquities.'

'Where do you get all this interesting information from?' I asked as we moved on.

'I've got my police too,' she answered mischievously. 'What a town for gossip! I was solemnly warned the other day that you were in love with my husband, and that I had better look out.' We both laughed, then, in a moment, the radiant face darkened. 'I wish he was in love with you,' she said.

My mouth opened in sheer stupefaction, and I did not reply.

'I'm quite serious,' said Princess Abhazi, in a queer new voice. 'You're cleverer than I am, so perhaps, if he loved you, you would make him understand something about women. Sometimes

I wonder how Georgian mothers and wives bring up their men.'

'Very simply,' I said boldly. 'Perhaps that's what you don't quite grasp. They all are essentially simple. When they have a deep feeling, they are just content with having it, and don't experience the need of embellishing it with expressive words. Except when they are poets or politicians, of course. . . . But you haven't to do with a poet or a politician, you know.'

'No,' she replied with so much dryness that I was sorry I had spoken. 'No – I have to do with a patriot, and a soldier, and a lover who only caresses his horse. – What do you think Pakaroff will ask me for a really good little rug? Those wretched Americans pay for his carpets in dollars, so now he skins us all as if we were Yankees.'

I took the hint, and as we went down the crooked, narrow, infamously paved little streets of the Armenian Bazar, we talked of the way in which the wife of an American Colonel bought up every single jewel, and carpet, and bibelot of value in the town. It was freely predicted that she intended to smuggle them through the Customs of her own country by means of the diplomatic valise, and if she sold her spoils the proceeds would certainly keep her in opulence for the rest of her days. (But some sort of divinity must have been moved to vengeance, for when she went off with her booty, two months later, the ship was held up by brigands in the Black Sea, and she was left

bereft even of her own diamonds and pearls.) In the tiny shops, like cupboards, that flanked both sides of the road, all sorts of charming little objects lay on the shelves in the windows: boxes, with the great rough emeralds and rubies of the Caucasus; old necklaces of heavy chiselled gold; the black, yellow and pink enamelled vases of Vladikavkaz; the *niellé* drinking-vessels of the Georgians, their huge silver-chased horns, which are filled with wine in the banquets, and may only be set down when they are drained to the last drop; Persian bowls of the purest blue, as though carved out of a sole prodigious turquoise; chains of luscious amber; furs fit for a coronation; laces so fine that it seemed as though they could hardly bear to be touched with the tips of one's fingers; glaring red embroideries from Resht, soft grey-and-pink silks from Noukha, the marvellous stuffs from Bokhara, stiff green, blue and purple clumps on white, the thick, soberly sumptuous *djidjines*, and all the naïve woodwork that came from the interior, polished by age till its sheen was like that of satin itself. At last we arrived at Pakaroff's, a big dark den in a little court; the old Persian looked like a wizard, so small, fragile and pale was he, with his big black eyes and skull-cap; if he waved his hand in anger, the djinns would surely appear to carry us away. . . . He spoke no foreign language, but his nephew was proficient in very flowery French. Two mute attendants unrolled the carpets, laying them one on the top of

the other on the black-grimed floor; and we settled down to the business of turning up our noses at everything we saw.

'*Madame, je vous salue* . . .' This was for my benefit, and the opening of the very urbane wrangle. 'You enter as a ray of light in a poor man's cave. There is no more the need of sun. . . . It is a long, long time since we were so warmed and brightened. . . . What have I got to show you? Madame, all the shop is yours!'

'I only want the tiniest part of it, *cher Monsieur Pakaroff*. My purse is very, very small. . . .'

'You have all the riches of the world in your smile, Madame. What is this talk of purses? Purses are nothing – your presence is all. Carpets? Every carpet belongs to you. . . . Bring the carpets! This: Bokhara – silk, like the brilliant heart of a red carnation. This: Khorassan, brown like a burnt topaz and blue like the eyes of a new-born babe. This: Tekinski – *œuvre d'art*, Madame, *œuvre d'art!* Only one worker makes it, and it takes fifteen years. . . . *Chef-d'œuvre d'art!*'

'Monsieur Pakaroff, the Bokhara is too dark, and the Khorassan is too faded. Also, *chef-d'œuvres* cost greatly, and I have only three hundred francs with me to-day. Only a carpet of Koniah can I buy.'

'It is nothing. I should die of shame only to show you a Koniah carpet. Threads . . . Every Jew sells them in the Bazar. The Tekinski will be

sent to your house this minute, and you will give me two thousand francs when you pass again this way – next week, next month, next year, when you deign. . . .'

'Monsieur Pakaroff, you are much too obliging, but the Bolsheviks may be here before I can pay you, and then my carpet would be nationalized and your money would be lost. Four hundred francs, perhaps, could I muster altogether, if my friend here, Princess Abhazi, will be kind enough to lend me her purse.'

'Take the carpet as a present, Madame, I implore you! You can choose what you like in the shop. . . . All is yours. Only fifteen hundred francs do I ask for the Tekinski, and I have five children to feed and clothe.'

'Monsieur Pakaroff, if I went to my bank and took out all my money, and left myself not a sou for another meal, I could not find more than five hundred francs with which to present you . . .'

'Madame, as you will not condescend to accept the carpet in homage, I shall part with it for only twelve notes of one hundred francs each. Then I shall close this shop and retire to a hut in the mountains of Persia, for I see I cannot earn my living here.'

'Monsieur Pakaroff, I should never sleep again if such a sad thing happened. For six hundred francs you will build a villa in your mountains, and go there in summer to breathe the good air.'

'By the head of your father, Madame, I beseech

you! From the north to the south, from the east to the west of Caucasia, one thousand francs would not get you the half of a carpet like this!'

'Six hundred and fifty francs, Monsieur Pakaroff, would bring me in two of those carpets to-morrow if I just put up a notice in this one little town.'

'Madame, what is a carpet, that you and I should quarrel? All the carpets can go provided you are pleased. We shall say nine hundred, though I cannot replace this carpet for four thousand. It will be in your room in half an hour. Ali!'

'Monsieur Pakaroff, it would be an eternal load upon my conscience to send Ali so far on a bootless errand. If I had to borrow from all the friends I have in Tiflis, I might just manage to give him seven hundred francs when he accompanies me home.'

'Madame, it is an honour only to cross your threshold. He wishes for nothing more. Seven hundred and fifty francs: it shall be as you say. . . . What is a carpet? All I have is yours . . .'

'Now for the church,' I said to Vala, when we had seen Ali off. 'By the way, in return for my haggling, I wish you'd tell me when I can find your husband at home. I really must begin to write this book on Georgia, and I cannot work in Tiflis, where I am disturbed every hour of the day. I know the Government lets a few privileged persons live in some of the nationalized domains,

where the houses are eating their heads off – if they'd let me go down to Tchakvi, the tea plantation near Batoum, I'd be blessedly quiet, beautifully warm, and I'd also see something of Adjara, which I still have to explore. I'm sure Captain Abhazi will help me if he can.'

'Of course he will,' said Vala cordially. 'But Tariel's hours are most irregular just now – the activities of the War Office seem to be frantic. I myself only see him at meals. You must come to dinner. Do come to-day! It's better that you should take steps at once – you know how things drag on here. . . . Do come: we shall be quite by ourselves. I keep to European habits as much as I can – I really can't bear to lunch at eleven in the morning, dine at three in the afternoon, and sup in the middle of the night!'

I consented at once, for they had many engagements, and I might have had to wait long for the chance of meeting Prince Tariel again. Then, hiring a car, we drove to the church I was eager to visit – past the slow, broad Koura River between its naked hills, along the streets in the old quarters, where the brown wooden Georgian and Armenian houses still have their covered balconies exquisitely worked with pierced cornices and garlands, and festoons sculptured so finely that they look like the edging of some precious lace. The great empty yards open on the thoroughfares by arches, and between the massive piles of worn grey stone we saw the straight high poplars

barring a sky as pure as a plain of forget-me-nots – dark sentinels keeping watch in boxes made of soft blue. . . . The town, which starts in a handsome up-to-date avenue, finishes, like a mermaid's straggling tail, in unpaved roads, huts made of planks, small maize-fields, and the ubiquitous, inevitable, ever-aggrieved and voluble pigs. Beyond it, we rushed through woods and hillocks, studded here and there with monasteries and hamlets, till we came to M'zkht.

Standing in the midst of a wide stretch of level land, the majestic pile of the old cathedral looks at first sight more like a citadel than a church. It formed part of the very strongly fortified precincts where for centuries the Georgian kings had their abode, and it still seems to be defended by the gigantic walls, battlemented, crenellated and turreted, which enclose it with their flat towers and the ruins of palaces and bastions showing in their massive circle of brick and stone. The church, grey-red in its real colour, has been toned down by age to a cold pale green; the shallow arcades have steps cut in them, where the bishops – Catholicos and Metropolites of the independent Georgian Orthodox rite – sat after Mass to hear the complaints of the people and deal out justice, coming straight as they did from the service of the highest Judge. Among the throng of pillars, the long, narrow, deep-set windows are adorned with bands of severely beautiful carving, complicated, rigid, and yet as harmonious in their almost geometrical

precision as the wonderful arabesques of Moslem sculpture – soundless and visible rhythm, as soothing as music when it attains to its supreme degree of perfection. Even when figures were represented, the intertwined shapes gave the impression of the richest design. . . . The symbols of Christianity lie profoundly engraven in the enormous sides: the Cross, the lamb, the vine, a sun, from which dart out the rays of the twelve Apostles, with the sheaf of Judas broken and bent. The red and yellow lions of Persia and Turkey crouch vanquished under the Crucifix; and on a wall, two angels, in a magnificent downward sweep, tie lighted torches to the horns of oxen, those patient benefactors of man.

Grave and dark is the interior, where almost every stone is impregnated with legends. Saint Sidonia rests there, the first Christian in Georgia, long before the conversion of the land, for to her brother, one of the soldiers present at the Crucifixion, was given a garment of Christ's, and when she wore it, she a heathen, the grace of the Lord opened her heart to the knowledge and love of divine things. Three centuries later, Saint Nina, the first missionary of Georgia, who preached the gospel to the pagan monarch, found on her tomb a cypress which exuded myrrh – and round the miraculous tree she built the primitive wooden church of M'zkht. Level with the flagged floor are the austere royal gravestones – and black, flat, strangely modest and sad, is the tomb of a

queen, wife of that George the Thirteenth whom the Russians dispossessed. Lying on her bed, heavy with child, she rose when the Russian governor entered her presence to announce that she was exiled to Russia. 'I am a Georgian,' she said; 'I do not leave the country which is mine'; and grasping her husband's sword which she had hid under her pillows, she killed the man where he stood. She rests here now, having by death won for herself a parcel of her soil that even her foes cannot snatch out of her keep. On the partly whitewashed walls, so fearfully mutilated by the barbarously ignorant Russian authorities, who attempted to modernize the church by destroying its true beauty, some of the old frescoes have been brought again to light – faint blues and reds, with the vague glimmer of gold; long, rigid, naïve figures, gorgeously robed, every detail of their vestments worked out with the subtlest care, and dark-eyed melancholy Oriental faces, plunged in that pensive, overburdened adoration that is the hall-mark of the Georgian saints. Strictly hieratical is the intense asceticism of those thin, prayer-worn forms, and their stiffness is impregnated with a mysterious sorrow. In every church where Hellenic influences have not softened and refined the national spirit of religious art, I found the Georgian paintings stamped with the same characteristics – a sort of hard simplicity, an almost sparkling yet impassive violence which called up great and ancient visions: souls like the drawn

swords of the Bible, flamboyant, inexorable and chaste. Vala should have studied those faces: in their essentials, every one of them was like her husband's; there was the enigma she could not fathom, there, in those ancestors, those closed, severe and primitive spirits, from which Tariel directly came. . . . The founders of churches clustered round Mary, Persian-like with her long eyes, her pointed hands lifted in pleading, the fixed seriousness of her mouth – and they bore in their open palms, for her acceptance, the model of the temple they built to the glory of her Son; while behind them surged the snow-covered mountains, the black forests, the blank ranges of huge rocks, the strong forbidding castles, all the august and formidable scenery of the land.

Roaming round the church on our last exploration we stopped before an ikon which had a strange sweetness in the figures it portrayed. Against a gold background the Virgin stood out clearly – she was clasping her Son to her breast, her great eyes were smiling, her lips were touched with pity, and one of her long hands caressed the divine little head. She was impressed with warmth and suggestion, charged with tenderness and inspired dreams, wholly human and yet clairvoyant: one felt she could be moved by entreaties, and from secret springs of wisdom and compassion would answer them well. Princess Abhazi looked at her long.

'She looks kind,' she said. 'Isn't it odd, how

these Georgian ikons touch one, as if what they represented was true? I'm going to turn into a superstitious savage again. . . .' Before the ikon a round brass table bore slim yellow candles of wax: Vala lay down some money and chose a taper from the heap.

'What wish would she best understand?' she asked me in a whisper. 'And most readily grant?'

'The wish to attain to holiness,' I whispered back.

She shook her head decisively. 'I don't care about that at all.'

'The wish that there should be peace and goodwill among men,' I suggested.

'No, no! My heart is not large enough to embrace the world. . . .'

'The wish,' I said reflectively, 'that all happiness and all good should come to the one we love most.'

'Ah . . . !' she murmured wistfully. 'Then I shall ask her that too. See – I am lighting this candle for her to know.'

She stuck it on the brass table, and I moved away. She did not follow, and after some moments, I looked back. She was crying – noiselessly, pitifully, swallowing her sobs, and the straight gold flame of the taper made her big tears shine as they fell. I continued my tour alone.

She came up to me at last, and asked if we could go home. 'I have an engagement – people are coming. . . . One never seems to be let alone here, never! Yet I'd like to think, like to talk,

sometimes, heart to heart, with another – who for once would understand. I wonder if there is another woman in all Georgia who feels as forlorn and amazed as I sometimes. . . . This ikon has struck me silly, I'm afraid. . . . Do let's go. . . .'

But as we raced back to Tiflis, silent in the car, I pondered. For whom had she lit the little candle? Was it for Prince Tariel still?

Princess Abhazi set me down at my hotel, and I only went to her flat in the evening. I found a few of her guests still lingering in the drawing-room, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. There were two young Georgian officers, a Professor of history at the University – a sad, saturnine man of much finesse – and a Russian White who had just escaped from his country. He was relating an anecdote: how, fleeing before the Bolsheviks, on his way to the south of Russia, he had come to a village where the peasants were all gathered, disputing, round a magnificent old Venetian mirror, dragged out of a castle which they had sacked. Each of them wanted it for himself.

'So I went up to them and gave them some sound advice. I said: "Brothers, why do you quarrel? This is the reign of fraternity and of the equal distribution of all good things. Every one of you has a right to that mirror. Take a hammer and break it into as many pieces as you are *isbas* here – and so you will all be happy, and justice will have been accomplished." They applauded

me loudly, and called me *barine*; then they took a hammer, and as I went away I saw them shattering that mirror into a hundred morsels, and scrambling for the bits. *Nou*. . . . What can you do with the Russian moujiks?'

I should have liked to answer that peasants with their monstrous history, half-Mongolian in blood, and kept for ages in check, like dogs, under the knout and the nagaika, could not be expected to develop, all in a moment, the nice discernment an aristocrat would have applied to the preservation of that Venetian mirror, but the two Georgian lieutenants had burst into a loud laugh. Here was another glimpse of a different national temper. They cried out:

'And those are the people who've ruled us so long, and who dare to threaten us again! Let them come. . . . We are strong against all Russia: she will be received this time on the point of our *kandjalis*, and sent back to her lair. But it will never happen now – never, for in any case Europe will have to protect us. Independent Georgia is necessary to Europe: the fate of France and England is mixed up with ours – the end of *us* would be the end of *them*!' The worst of it was that they really believed the foolish things they said; even in that vital hour, when they should have strained every nerve to become efficient, they relied on foreign politicians, tripped through the days sparring and joking; most of them, even to their Ministers, perceiving their fate only through

the glamour of their desires. Knowing as I did the invincible optimism of the people, the joyous unconcern with which they build castles in Spain, and persist in living in their débris after they have crashed down, I found nothing to say. What was the use? You cannot make water flow upwards. Viguières was right when he declared that their sun inclined them to see brightly. The race was child-like in its promptness to forget past disagreeable experiences: quite suddenly, in the very midst of a tragical cry, it would turn round and play with its own misfortunes. So many qualities it has, so few vices, so little malice – and yet all its gifts are like sheaves unbound, useless, because of that fundamental lack of constancy which scatters to the winds the efforts it makes! One of those very lads who were laughing at the Russians was, only a few weeks later, to kill himself in a characteristic way: he had been trying on a suit that did not fit, that he had sent back several times to his tailor – and at last, beside himself with impatience, with the swift Georgian capacity for letting go, for anger and for any want of foresight, he caught up his revolver and put a bullet through his brain. – The Professor of history spoke, though, after those two hilarious youngsters had gone off to dance, or to play cards, or to drink. . . .

'You heard them? All the Georgian spirit is in their challenge – brave, thoughtless, sincere, vain. . . . All we think of is our national independence,

but as a fact in itself, and of the means to work it out we have no idea. We dream dreams, and imagine we have acted; we say great words with all our heart, and are convinced no other attempt need be made. Because we wish, we are persuaded we have obtained. We are children, and before we come to a man's stature we shall weep many tears, and our feet shall bleed, stumbling, among the stones of a very bitter way.' I believe he was right, and that it is only now, in the pain and blood of the Bolshevik domination, that his country is finding itself slowly, and building up in grim resistance and endurance, a national consistency, a linked mentality which will enable it one day to oppose to events a common and homogeneous force.

He departed at length with the Russian, and Vala turned dejectedly to me. 'I'm bored to the marrow of my bones,' she said. 'I've had fifteen people here to-day, and they discussed the political situation all the afternoon.'

I returned the obvious answer that there was really nothing else to talk about, except the mounting cost of living, which was a most depressing subject, and the morals of acquaintances, which we already knew by heart. She shrugged her shoulders.

'I can't help it. . . . I'm so bored with it all! I don't care for politics, and I don't understand a word about them. Now the Georgians have taken it into their head that the British are up to some

mischief in Adjara, and you hear nothing else. It's so fearfully monotonous . . . !'

'But surely Prince Tariel has told you that it's true?' I said.

'Oh, I don't know. . . . Tariel is so reticent, he never lets himself go. And besides, *qui n'entend qu'une cloche n'entend qu'un son* – when you listen to the other party, the matter changes aspect. But the real fact is that I don't care, I don't care! I'm not of this country, and I can't take things to heart as the Georgians do. I'd like a little pleasantness, I'd like to be normal again. . . . All these strange faces, these harsh difficult languages, these sombre, intricate, *different* souls!' She shuddered. 'They see otherwise, they feel otherwise – are they quite human, do you think? Oh, for the speech of our "doulce France," that a woman smiles only to hear! For the clearness of the thoughts, the urbane deeds, the orderliness of the kind, familiar life! I long for it so!' She started: the door-bell was ringing. 'Oh, God! Another! Oh, why didn't I tell Shalva to say I'm not at home!'

I had been wondering who was the 'other party' she had alluded to, and who presented the Adjaran intrigues in a plausible light, but at her terrified exclamation I could not help sympathizing with her – it was so exactly the feeling I had had only a few evenings ago, when Viguières had come to see me. I was still laughing when the door opened, and Major Cassel was announced. Prin-

cess Abhazi's face, which was blenched with horror, underwent an instant change, trembling up with an irrepressibly eager delight.

'You . . . ! So late! I did not expect you. . . . What a pleasant surprise . . . !'

'I know this is a shockingly indecorous visit,' said Major Cassel easily, as he shook hands, 'but I shall not keep you long. I must ask Captain Abhazi to do something for us very early tomorrow, and I telephoned to the War Office, but he had gone. So I hoped to meet him here.'

'He will certainly be back soon,' replied Vala. 'Please sit down. I'm going to tell the orderly we must not be disturbed again – excuse me just for a moment.' She was longer than she said, and Major Cassel and I, left alone, exchanged some comments on insignificant matters. Then, very smoothly, he plunged me in a conversation which, for all its disguise of civility, was hostile through and through. Those pale eyes of his, colour of mists or frozen lakes, were fixed on me unflinchingly.

'It's quite a relief to see you looking so well,' he said politely. I had just returned from Khevsouria, a north-east mountainous province, where I had had a bad time. 'I'm told you had a most dramatic experience on your last journey. But luckily you're not easily upset, are you?'

For a few seconds the sheer ferocity of his jibe kept me paralysed. Throughout my voyage in

Khevsouria I had had as official aide-de-camp a Georgian lieutenant, a boy of some twenty years old; and the difficulties and hardships we had encountered, the attacks, when we were shut up in small huts, firing opened all round us, waiting for a final assault to take place, the nature of the redoubtable country, all glaciers, torrents and chasms, had scraped our nerves raw, undermined our self-control: we became just a frayed sensibility, always throbbing. On our way back to Tiflis, we were obliged to spend a night in a village, and at eight o'clock in the evening Prince Dodi, the officer, had asked me for permission to visit one of his uncles who lived in the neighbourhood, promising he would be back very soon. I assented, but at midnight he had not returned. At two in the morning, convinced now that he had been killed by the brigands who infested the country, I roused the inn, asked to see the authorities, insisting that a search-party should go out to find him. It was all in vain.

Late next day, Prince Dodi entered my room, and informed me light-heartedly that he had not gone to his uncle's, but had repaired instead to the village club, where he had played bridge with such remarkable effect that he had lost all his own money and all mine, which I had entrusted to him at the beginning of our travels. There we were, stranded in a spot from which we could not communicate with Tiflis, without means, without credit – and I had spent a night of intensest

anguish thinking that young fool was dead! I put down the *Modern Utopia* I had been reading, such an ironical comment on real life that it goaded me to fury, and, springing from my bed, I struck Prince Dodi across the face. He bowed correctly, and went out of the room. As soon as he had passed the threshold, on the other side of the closed door, he took out his revolver and shot himself through the breast. What I felt when I saw that prostrate figure, with its bleeding wound and its ghastly face, I do not wish even my foulest enemy – and there are not a few men who have given me cause to hate them to the last second of my existence – to know; and the days that followed, when Prince Dodi's mother arrived and I had to live, cooped up in one small chamber, with a woman who accused me practically of being her son's murderess, will remain a waking delirium till I die. Tiflis, of course, had rung with the scandal, and it was freely opined that I had been that child's mistress, and that my financial exigencies had pushed him, in despair, to try his luck at cards. Major Cassel was deliberately endeavouring to hurt me. But why?

'Yes,' I said nonchalantly, when my breath came back, 'I'm pretty tough – don't be so concerned about me, though it's awfully kind of you to trouble. It's all in the day's work – Georgian extravagance, Russian epilepsy, even British cynicism, whether it shows in the Adjaran imbroglio or in little affairs such as the breaking

of betrothals in a mission by blackguardly means. . . .'

He switched off at that, as indeed he had need to; and though the impertinence of his next speech was consummate, it told me why he had attacked.

'I have just read an article of yours in the – ,' he said. He named a French political review which had published a study of mine dealing with events in Georgia and directed against the British occupation of Batoum. 'I found it quite absorbing.'

'I'm glad you liked it,' I answered. 'I did my best to enlighten my European readers.'

'It is greatly to be regretted, however,' he continued, ' that you do not appreciate our presence here.'

What was he aiming at? If we were fencing, I should have said he had begun to lunge.

'I'm afraid I don't,' I replied. 'I happen not to admire gluttony, whoever may be the glutton, and it has always rather sickened me to see big wolves eat up little lambs. Especially when the wolves have already marked out for themselves great bits of this planet in which to roam.'

'How dreadful!' he remarked mildly. 'What a really horrible picture – the English like the devil, seeking whom they may devour. So you don't like us at all?'

He was an excellent player, following exactly the traditions of his profession, with his insincerely good-tempered baiting. But I do not care for

feints. If he was angling for a true expression of my opinions, he would get it at once.

'I like you well enough when you're in England,' I said. 'I hear you have some very honest people there. But I can't for the life of me understand why, as soon as you come into a country like this, you turn into swashbucklers and bullies. Especially when you adorn yourselves with khaki. Maybe the East doesn't agree with you: it seems to go up to your heads, and disarranges all those high principles of conduct instilled into you when you go to school.' I meditated. 'You see, you haven't intelligence, you haven't knowledge, you haven't sympathy – so when you suppress your conscience, which you appear to do with the greatest facility when you're not tucked away safely in your island, you're the most appalling race alive.'

'How interesting!' he observed again simply.

I had no time to retort, for Vala was returning. She stopped us at once.

'What are you saying?' she demanded. 'Don't discuss politics – don't, *don't!* Major Cassel, you are not to answer; *mon amie*, leave that man alone. He didn't convert himself into a British officer just to spite you, and Englishmen can be very, very charming. . . .' She sank on the divan. 'I'm so tired. . . . You won't mind if I stretch myself out?' She did not wait for our permission, but curled herself up with the grace of a kitten. Her sleeveless dress of vivid green silk slipped off

one shoulder, showing the exquisite curve of her neck and arm. She was wholly lovely and fragrant, wholly desirable, as she lay there, and Major Cassel turned on her his steady eyes. Did she attract him, I wondered? I longed to ask him if, when he loved women, he liked to tie them up and lash them.

'Come nearer,' said Vala to both of us, softly, and we drew in our chairs. 'Talk to us,' she added to Major Cassel, 'please talk to us now. . . . Not of the things that concern men – their horrible business of war – shapes like satyrs come before me then, so grim and laughing so lewdly, with their tongues out. . . . Talk to me of the things we women want to hear.' She moved quickly and put out the central light, so that only a small lamp, with a dark purple shade, remained burning. '*Comme ça*. . . . Now I shall imagine that I'm at home in France, and you must tell me what men tell me there.'

'What do they say?' asked Major Cassel in a low quiet voice, as if he was soothing a child.

'Just tender little things,' she murmured; 'that they want me to be happy; that I'm nice; that they're glad to be with me; that they care. . . .'

She sat up with a tremulous laugh. 'I'm dreaming. . . . And I suppose I'm too old a baby to be petted, though – Does a woman really ever wish for anything else?'

'I should like very much to obey you,' said Major Cassel with the same gentleness, 'but what will

your friend think if I do? Won't she say that it isn't safe to have me here?'

If he meant to sting by this insinuation, he was unsuccessful, for Vala put out her arm and took my hand. 'Would you really betray me?' she asked jokingly, but I noted with increasing uneasiness how untrue her merriment rang. I found the whole pretence indecent and already subtly disloyal; it was high time to scatter this atmosphere of enervating romance.

'It's only that you're tired,' I said briskly. 'I am to blame: I took you too far out this afternoon. You want a meal and a good sleep – and then you'll see that life is not made up of flimsy cajoleries.'

'No, no,' she answered fretfully. 'One afternoon's fatigue has nothing to do with it. I can't explain. But you, who are really kind and comprehensive, don't you understand that one can't be fed for ever on – on great things like patriotism, for instance, or esteem, or reason, or nobility of mind? One wants to be whispered things that one can remember in the hours when one is lonely, or grieved, or doubting – in those black hours that are so long, that come to every heart. Things that one can treasure: little flames, always sparkling, to warm that heart in those hours of night. . . . There must be memories that are like flowers – so full of scent and colour that their sweetness cannot fade. Am I never to have them too?'

What was she saying! What was she saying!

Before such a man, showing her soul's sores to such icy eyes! They never would, never could hold in them a divine glance of healing; the very spirit of cold was in them; they would freeze her down to her sources, chill and stop the flow of her heart's blood. She was mad, mad, if she hoped that she would ever kindle them to fire, though she was already betraying Prince Tariel for that mere hope! And whilst I thus reflected – in spite of the passionate anger I felt on behalf of her husband, I was smitten with fear for her. It seemed to me then that in the forest of Fate the thick gloom lifted for a moment, and that I saw her, groping and gone astray.

Then Prince Tariel arrived.

We did not hear him open the door, but he turned on the electricity as he entered, and we were surprised by the sudden flood of light. Vala jumped up.

'*C'est toi enfin?* How brusque you are!' she exclaimed reproachfully. 'You startled us all. Come quickly, Tariel: Major Cassel wants to ask you something, and he has been waiting ages for your return.'

Captain Abhazi saluted Major Cassel as he approached his wife and me to kiss our hands. 'I'm very sorry, but how could I guess?' he said pleasantly. Both officers moved aside and talked for a few minutes, and I heard Prince Tariel giving a polite assurance that he would get the Minister for War to sign a certain document that

very night. Official relations appeared to be perfectly correct, even amicable, between the two men. But almost immediately afterwards, we all grasped what a line Prince Tariel drew between his duties as a soldier and his independence as a man. As Major Cassel was taking leave of Vala and me, Captain Abhazi drew from his pocket a silver embossed cigarette-case, of which, unopened, he retained hold. Major Cassel advanced and put out his hand. The cigarette-case dropped to the floor, and Prince Tariel stooped swiftly to recover it. Major Cassel's still face never changed, nor did the frigid grey eyes even glitter, but when Prince Tariel stood up again, the hand of the British officer was no longer outstretched.

Princess Abhazi had gone burning scarlet. Her husband formally escorted Major Cassel to the door of the flat, and she waited in silence till he returned. She spoke to him in a low and very distinct voice, using this time the ceremonious plural French form of address.

'You did that on purpose,' she said. 'You did not want to give Major Cassel your hand. Under your own roof. . . . To a guest. . . . Have you not even the Georgian courtesy left?'

'I had my reasons,' answered Prince Tariel as quietly. 'Major Cassel understands quite well. I do not shake hands with a man who is trying to filch the very heart from Georgia.'

'I do not consider that your patriotism justifies

you in shaming your wife in her own house.' She turned to me. 'Never marry a Georgian. They will respect you, and be faithful to you, and even leave you free. They will protect you – they will shoot a man if he only breathes your name. They will understand as much about you as their own Caucasus mountains understand about the rising and the setting of the sun, and they will care for your feelings as much as their own avalanches care for a little plant they smother when they hurl themselves down. Let us go in to dinner: it is very late.'

She did not touch her food, though she talked normally at first of mundane topics. Then without the slightest warning, while a servant was presenting her with a dish, she put both hands up to her face and, just as she had done in the church at M'zkht, she began soundlessly to weep. Through the slim jewelled fingers, the tears glistened and rolled. I remember how, even in the midst of my irritated pity, I could not prevent myself from wondering at the faultless grace she retained. She pushed her chair back quietly, and left the table. In her bedroom, on the other side of the door, we heard her breaking into terrible sobs.

I bent over towards Prince Tariel. He had crossed his arms on his breast, his eyelids were lowered, and his face wore an extraordinary expression of inflexible sadness.

'Go to her!' I said with desperate earnestness.

'She's wrought up, all on edge. . . . Go to her at once, now that she is in pain, because she is in pain. . . . Don't you see that it is only now that you can make her listen, make her understand? She needs you *now*. Go to her while she is feeling so deeply that you can turn the feeling as you will. Go, go!'

He did not raise his eyes, and answered me gently, but with a sort of immensely remote severeness.

'It is impossible. Did you not hear what she said? I must leave her alone.'

'Captain Abhazi, for God's sake listen to me! It is not her words that count, it is her temperament: you must deal with what she feels, not with what she says!' I stood up and clutched him by the arm so fiercely that he was forced to rise; he looked at me then, and I realized how deep and yet how inexorable his own sorrow was.

'She knows how much I love her,' he said. 'It is useless to repeat the things one knows.'

'She knows it, but sometimes she does not *feel* it!' I cried. 'Oh, God, that I should not be able to make you listen! A woman like her wants to have it said and shown. Pay no heed to her words: we are not like men – listen to me, I implore you! – words with us are a mask, a hope, or a desire: what they express bears no relation to what we really mean. . . . Go, I beg you, go!' It seemed to me that I was struggling for a life.

'I cannot.'

The sadness of the face had grown, if possible, greater – greater, too, that implacable, uncanny aloofness, as if the soul had withdrawn and had submitted to something far inside, unseen, which laid upon it a command it could not disobey. He could no more move or show his heart at that moment, could no more unlock his lips, than she, solitary and crying, could forgive him for keeping away. Sick with regret, I made another effort, though conscious in every fibre that I would fail. The invisible force that held him was like a rigor, not to be conquered.

'I cannot,' he said again.

It was the truth. The depths in him could not break up in such conditions. I dropped my arm and stopped my urging. In silence we stood there, I and that mysteriously absorbed figure, listening to the terrible weeping that went on in the other room. 'Go . . .' I said once more in a whisper.

He did not even answer, and after a long time the sobs grew fainter and fainter, and at last died away.

§ 6

I received a pencilled letter next day from Vala Abhazi. Of course I had left the flat without seeing her, and she wrote to apologize for her break-down. The letter is no longer in my possession, but I remember its trend, and some of

the passages are still impressed on my memory: I conned them dismally enough. . . .

After expressing her regrets, and saying she meant to come and see me very soon, she swung into a sort of confession – but as she was evidently calmer, her social training, her essential French subtleness, made partly of discretion and partly of formalism, had asserted their rights, and though sincere, she was not completely direct. The note consisted almost entirely of implications: Prince Tariel's name was not once mentioned. 'It is a mistake to suppose that love, however true and profound at its origin, can weld together characters that are of different texture. When I probe things, I see that all my suffering comes from that initial error I made. I have no cause to accuse, for there is nothing wrong, nothing vile, in the nature that is opposed to mine, but I cannot help complaining, because I feel that all that was most spontaneous in me, most eager, that most yearned to overflow, is broken and beaten up like water heaving against a dam, torn ragged and scattered to the winds. I am painfully learning. . . . One's imagination is fired, one's senses beguiled by beauty of form and grandeur of allure – but I think I may have over-estimated the part they play. It is only one's heart that is insatiable: what time it takes to starve it to death! Mine goes on wailing out its hunger, and I do not know what to do to stop its cries. Yet so little is required to feed it – but that little, it seems, it

cannot obtain; there are eyes that are blind, and hands that do not give. . . .'

I pondered long over that letter, and did my best to classify my impressions and my deductions. It was a pathetic letter, in that the writer really suffered; it was exasperating, in that she showed herself thoroughly, though unconsciously, selfish, without a thought, an allowance, for Tariel's rights, or his own reactions and grief; and it pointed to a dangerous frame of mind, in that it was so disenchanted. It clinched all my previous surmises. So young, emotional, sensuous, so alive to physical fineness, Vala Abhazi had been overmastered by Prince Tariel when he first appeared; lapped in affection as she had been, craving incessantly to have it expressed, accustomed to receive far more than to pay service, she was unable to grasp the core of things – naked steel cut her flesh, she wanted wrappings, sought for them, could not find them – could never have them, her husband being what he was – and so recoiled in a bewilderment that might soon change into a graver feeling. There was still a touching note in her letter, a hurt cry for love, but resentment, disbelief, underlay it, and they were powerful ferments in a wilful nature. What could be done?

Supposing I spoke plainly, since Prince Tariel himself was incapable of tearing the veils away; supposing I exposed the springs of his temperament, showed how unavoidable they were, and

how dreadfully, how unjustly she misunderstood their manifestations, how could that help? She might admit I was right in my analysis, something of the bitterness that bit and rankled in her might go; but her craving for tenderness was indestructible, her very fibre, I would not rule it out by arguments, she would ever continue bleeding, longing, judging herself maimed. Her love for Tariel was not selfless, she could not sink herself in an unexacting attachment, content with the one great fact of his utter devotion, silencing the voice of her smaller protests. I saw no way out, except through her own prodigality, but she was not attuned just now to any largess.

From that most unsatisfactory conclusion I turned to other cogitations. If she went on brooding over what seemed to her grievances; laboured, disconcerted, over a growing estrangement that she herself fostered, could it be that she would at last concentrate on some other interest? That she liked Major Cassel was patent. That she was inexperienced in the discernment of the innermost mettle of men, no judge of real character, not responsive, immediately and unerringly, to the quality of their secret nature, was as obvious. She was intelligent, but she had been too well guarded – her life had been smooth and protected; she had not gone out into the world, fending for herself, and so acquiring that wit like lightning, like a sentinel, born of the mortal necessity of self-preservation, that senses sharply

the hidden things. Both by reason and by intuition I was sure that Lorrimer Cassel was bad, bad, bad all through, and that the element of steadfast coldness in him would keep him bad irrevocably. But she, whom life had not battered into a sort of instinctive wisdom, how did she perceive him? She saw a man, handsome and very cool – which gave an edge to his attraction – not over-ready, but not reluctant, to be enticed, gentle in outward manners – that heart of his was embedded in safe recesses: he did not flaunt its ensigns on his sleeve – and though he and she were not of the same race or the same sensibility, they belonged to the same *civilization*. To that, in her present mood, she was prone to attribute an enormous importance – sad, lonely, discouraged, she must have felt – God knows! But I think I am right – like a bird, bruised, on the track of the nest it had lost. Lorrimer Cassel a nest! I could have rocked with mirth at my own conceit; she would find out soon enough what resemblance he bore to the Jungfrau of Augsburg, who opened her arms to crush men to her, and cut them to pieces on the pointed spears in her breast. Still, her infatuation, if indeed she had already journeyed as far as that, was only at its beginning, and had to be nourished to develop. I did not see very clearly how it was to expand, for intimacy was vital to such a relationship, and Major Cassel had just been shown, grimly enough, that he was unwelcome at Prince Tariel's house.

Even if he was daring, and if difficulties only whetted his appetite – Tariel's antagonism may have added savour to the charm of Tariel's wife – he lacked neither arrogance nor pride, and it was not believable that he would expose himself a second time to such a rebuff. On the other hand, as he was unmarried, Princess Abhazi could not visit him conveniently at the British mission; Tiflis was not Paris, and there were no quarters that ensured concealment. They might meet, of course, on neutral ground, at common acquaintances', but that meant only snatches, nothing vivid enough, or deep and long enough, to set fancy on the heights and make it leap full-fledged into passion.

I hugged that sorry comfort to my bosom, proved to myself there was no definite peril, and swore that the very next time I saw Vala Abhazi I should muster all my resources and let her have my full mind. She trusted me, and my words might leave a slight trace. I wondered why I was taking such trouble – adultery, though a filthy thing because of its lies and deceit, has always seemed to me the inevitable corollary of our insensate system of marriage, and it was not my business if Vala Abhazi ever chose to misbehave. But there was Tariel, and the mere thought of him roused me, flaming, out of my philosophical indifference. I, too, attained to knowledge in those conjunctures, for it was revealed to me exactly how I loved Tariel – like a man loves a man, with

loyalty, and with no wish for any kind of personal gain. If I could head pain off him, I would strain every nerve to succeed. But I left out of my reckoning the malignant gods, and they laughed. so that none of my plans bore fruit.

Vala duly came to pay me the visit she had promised, but I happened to be that day on the terrace at the top of the *Hôtel d'Orient*, surrounded by a host of people. We were watching a military review, followed by a workmen's procession, which took place in the boulevard below, and the hotel commanded such a fine view that not a few outsiders had managed, by bribing our porter, to wend their way up to the terrace too. When I mounted, I found Daria Antonovna, who must have smiled down all objections, in possession of a corner, and I joined her when she signalled, pleased to rest my eyes on that angelically childish face. Princess Abhazi, who had knocked at my door during my absence, was sent up also by the maids, but it was impossible to isolate ourselves immediately, so I had perforce to put off all confidential conversation till we could go downstairs again. In the meantime, we turned our attention to the parade.

The street was lined with peaceably cheering crowds and benevolent policemen, and on the balcony of the House of Parliament, in the projecting official *tribune*, surrounded by the foreign high commissioners, the military attachés, and some aides-de-camp, the President of Georgia

and his Cabinet were standing. One could distinctly perceive the dignified figure of Jordania, with his calm eyes and serene meditative face, the face of a noble statesman; the piercing, indomitable swarthiness of Ramishvili, the Minister of the Interior, compact of force and determination; the wily, wary, courteous, unrevealing Gueguetchkori, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, a Mingrelian, come from a province where every man is a diplomatist born, and his Under Secretary, Sabakhtarashvili, powerful, virile, of a half barbaric handsomeness and suddenness of decision; the tall nervous shape of the Mayor of Tiflis, Tchikvishvili, with his long brown beard and intense glance, who governed the town with a hand of iron – inspecting schools, hospitals, museums, every sort of institution, at unexpected times, making his rounds alone, at night, to see whether the militia on guard were all at their posts; ardent, wilful, unsparing of himself and others, so keen on creating order that it was a common saying in Tiflis that even the leaves of the trees were not allowed to drop from their branches before he gave them permission to float down. Bearing, as I do, no love to any army, the regiments that tramped by, though I knew their spirit was not aggressive, and though they looked spruce and well-equipped, did not move me to enthusiasm. Here and there the tcherkesskas of some special corps, with gigantic fur bonnets showing all the wool, hanging and wriggling

like some tremendous Medusa's head, struck an historically martial note; the officers, too, in their *bourkas*, wide capes of sheepskin falling to the ankle, and the gleam of their silver poniards, cartridge-cases and belts, brought a breath of the wild mountains into the city. After the soldiers came the workmen, marshalled in syndicates by the democratic leaders – banners and red pennons flying, with inscriptions the wind unrolled: '*Vive* the Second International!' '*Vive* the dictatorship of the Proletariat!' and portraits, borne high, of Marx, Jaurès, and the lesser socialist doctrinaires. Behind those bands rolled cars, slowly, containing symbolic figures of the workman's progressive emancipation, and groups representing the various provinces of Georgia. The Khevsoures of the extreme north were there, stubborn and stalwart as their own mighty rocks, arrayed in massive chain-armour of the sixteenth century, which they have never discarded, helmets on their head and lances in their hands; the Svanes, sallow, lean, hunters of bears, wolves and wild goats over chasms, luxurious lovers of women, prodigious dancers, unmatched thieves, lithe, elegant, and of high manners like lords; the quiet melancholy Pshaves; the Kahetians, those blithe scoffers, ever with a quip and a pot of wine at their lips; the diligent villagers of Ratcha and Letchhoumi, carpenters and masons, whose cottages are as neat as the Swiss châlets; the slow, contemplative peasants of Adjara, with their woollen brown

hoods over their faces; the nimble, eager Gourians, always in the fore of any socialist movement; the Mingrelians, delicate and subtle like cats, politicians to their marrow, who have a past of the fiercest strifes in the world; the chivalrous, undisciplined Abhazetians, surcharged with romance; and the richest race of all, the poetic, inspired and intelligent Imeretians. It was an interesting show ethnologically, and besides providing play for the harassed people, amusing their eyes and filling their day, it helped them to mingle and consolidate their national recollections, and gave them once more a necessary thrill of fellowship and pride.

By the time the processions were over, it was five o'clock, and I was panting for tea. Vala said Prince Tariel was coming to fetch her as soon as he was released from duty, for he had some news to give me about Tchakvi, the place where I wanted to settle and write; so with Daria Antonovna, whom I could not help inviting, we went down to my room. I had hardly boiled the water, when Captain Abhazi and Captain Viguières came in. They were both in blazing military attire.

'We met on the lofty platform of the *Constituante*,' said Robert to Vala; 'and I dragged your too-conscientious husband away. I am the bearer of invitations, and there are weighty matters to be discussed.' He produced two letters, one for her and one for me, joking with Daria while we read

them and while Tariel, who had been in attendance all day at the Parliament, smoked with taciturn relief.

The notes were from Princess Marguerite Farjon de Barron, a Frenchwoman whose father had married the daughter of the last Mingrelian queen; she had two brothers, one a general in the Georgian army, and the other a colleague of Viguières at the French mission; and they all took, as was natural, a great interest in the French colony in Tiflis, showing it all the civility they could. Before the Revolution, they had owned half Mingrelia, with untold forests, villages and vineyards; now they only held seven *dissetines* and their old castle, but their prestige was still great in their province, and their hospitality unimpaired. Princess Marguerite, writing from Salkhino, her seat in Mingrelia, informed us that she had organized a wild-boar hunt on her land and her neighbours', and convened us to assist. Robert put up his hand magisterially.

'Now listen, and don't flood us with questions. Captain Abhazi and I have arranged it all. He thinks he can get five days' leave from his Ministry, so there's no question of Princess Vala refusing. As to you,' – he addressed himself to me – 'though we all know you abhor sportsmen as much as soldiers, you will have an admirable opportunity to study Mingrelia, and in the interest of that book of yours you cannot remain behind. We'll all travel together, for there is a

good deal of rough riding to be done. *Entendu?*'

'I had proposed to go to Adjara,' I was beginning, when Prince Tariel broke in.

'You can go to Adjara immediately after,' he observed. 'Every permission has been granted, and I've settled things with the director of the Tchakvi plantation. He puts all his house at your disposal, as his family lives in Batoum; and he himself won't cause you any annoyance, for he's out on horseback from dawn to night. You only need a servant now.'

I thanked Tariel effusively. 'I'll take Djaki,' I said. Djaki was a Kahetian, the most lovable rogue that ever Georgia produced, cook, valet, bodyguard all rolled into one, deftness itself – a rare thing in a Caucasian – a fearful chatterbox, an incorrigible pilferer, and most staunchly devoted. He had attended me in different capacities in several journeys I had made, and I knew his failings and his virtues to a hair.

'Very well,' said Prince Tariel, smiling. 'But I'll have two words with him myself before he goes down. I feel responsible for you, and you must remember that your Djaki is a Kahetian, and loves a prank more than his life. So you'll come to Salkhino with us?'

'Of course,' I replied heartily. I quickly rehearsed all the advantages. I would see Mingrelia, learn all the legends and traditions Princess Marguerite would be sure to recount, and I would have Vala to myself, in an unhoped-for *tête-à-tête*.

Many views could be discussed during five days.'

'Of course. . . . I'm delighted!'

'So am I,' said Vala vivaciously. 'Oh, how nice to have a change! I'm going to get young again. . . .' She opened a thin gold cigarette-case that hung from her wrist and drew out a cigarette. 'Who's going to be at Salkhino, Captain Viguières?'

'Every single officer of our mission who can coax or bully the Colonel into giving him leave,' answered Robert. 'Julien de Barron told me that his sister has got up this hunt to group all the Frenchmen in Tiflis round her: they want some relaxation, poor overworked *bougres*! But I hear she's invited, probably at his instigation, some other off – Look out!'

In a flash, terrified, we were all on our feet. Vala had struck a match, and had bent her head to light her cigarette; she stooped so low that her hat, covered with black aigrettes, caught fire, and in a twinkling the flames ran over the thin overhanging plumes. She jumped up instinctively with a scream, but in that very second, Prince Tariel, who was farthest from his wife, was on her, snatched the flaring hat off her hair, and trampled it under his boots. We literally had had no time to act. Princess Abhazi, who was a plucky woman, recovered swiftly from her fright, laughed it off, and mourned over the ruins of the hat, a Paris model, which she could not replace in Tiflis – but every drop of blood seemed to have

vanished from her husband's face. He returned to his chair in silence, sat with his eyes on Vala, and kept his fixed blanched look.

Viguières left shortly after: he too was tired with the long official day; and then Daria got up to go. 'I have a secret to tell you,' she whispered, 'but only you must know. I am pledged to silence, but just for once, I *must* speak it out! Come with me to the door.' I had screened off part of the room with tapestries; it formed a little entry, so that near the corridor we were quite alone. She took my hands and folded them on her breast: every feature was radiant with deep glowing joy. 'Oh, I am so happy!' she said; 'I can't keep it in! I am engaged, and I love him, I love him so!'

I kissed the child affectionately, and wished her felicity, but indeed she was melting with it already. She was so young and defenceless, I thought it was best that she should have a protector in those tumultuous times. 'And who is the very fortunate man who's going to have you?' I asked.

'You know him,' she answered. 'Felix Mikliewicz.'

I started. That mellifluous, treacherous-looking Pole! The green eyes came before me, the sweetish voice, the cajoling, cynical air: I'd rather have yielded myself up to fire as a mate. . . . She did not notice my recoil: she could notice nothing, bewitched by her enraptured dreams. She went on:

'Oh, it is I who am fortunate to have him, fortunate, fortunate above everyone else! I never thought – I never dared to hope; it all happened so suddenly, after Madame Darinskaia's ball. . . . He is so good and tender: I want to lay down my life at his feet. . . . Oh, if I could but serve him, give him some return for all his kindness! It crushes me, this gratitude and love I have to bear. . . .' She let my hands go, and gripped hers on her bosom. 'I have been so much alone, so frightened. . . . Now everything is full of sun again. I love him so!' She was almost moaning: a true lover, though so young, and who considered only her unworth, and that the debt was hers. The words welled out, always the same, eager and warm: she could not repress them: 'I love him so. . . . He is so tender – what can I give him in exchange!' Well – it seemed that the love of women was destined to flow towards the wrong men, botched and mutilated gods when they are not leering satyrs. I could alter nothing. I asked: 'When will the marriage take place?'

'Not yet,' said Daria. 'Felix says he must have a better situation: he wants me to have all I need. That is why we are quiet about it. . . . But I need nothing: if I had a crust of bread in a cell, but was with him, it would be riches. . . .'

Could I have misjudged that cat? I began limpingly to take myself to task for my shrewishness – yet no, I could not help it, I could not beat down my dislike, he was too fawning, too purely a

Slav. . . . I hoped again it would go well with the child, and told her to give me her news when I was away. Then shutting the door softly on her, after a moment's more marvelling, I walked across the entry in the direction of my room.

I stopped short and stiffened. Vala was sitting on the divan opposite me, upright like a statue, looking intently at Prince Tariel, who was on his knees in front of her, his arms round her waist, his face on her hands, kissing them in the wildest, most passionate frenzy, as if he was tortured, while his words came out with great gasps, between pauses, as painful to hear as groans: 'My darling. . . . My dear love. . . . My darling. . . . If you had . . . If the fire . . . You might have been hurt. . . . My darling! *Mon amour, mon cher amour!* Oh, my dear love!' She never moved, not a sign betrayed that composed face, considering, weighing, even, untouched, with its retracted hard eyes. His words choked him at last, and he laid his head down on her lap, now kissing her dress, her knees. I had never witnessed such utter abandonment, such throttling emotion, in a man before. She gave a little sigh, drew her arms from his clasp, and pushed him gently away.

Three or four nights later, Vladimir brought himself along when I was already asleep, woke me without the slightest compunction, sat on the foot of my bed, and discoursed for half an hour, with

the most exquisite feeling and an admirable choice of words, on the merits of Michael Angelo's poetry. From the Sonnets he went on to expatiate on that constant and grave sentiment of death that ever preoccupied the great Florentine masters, and how different were the pity and nobility of their conception from the morbid and grimly burlesque imagery of the French and German schools. He concluded by a spirited and scathing description of a modern funeral, heaven knows why; puffed meditatively at his last cigarette, and suddenly remarked:

'Daria Antonovna is engaged.'

'I know it,' I answered loftily, pleased to be for once beforehand with some news.

'How do you know it?'

'She told me so herself.'

'Then be sure it's the last time she'll ever confide in you. He'll take pains to nip her friendship for you in the bud.'

'Who, "he"?' I asked.

'Never you mind. If you're so dense that you can't guess, then you don't deserve to be told. Now he's got one silly partridge in the net, and the other will soon come floundering along.'

'But *who*?' I exclaimed, exasperated.

'The fowler. You're poor at deductions. You've had all the elements of this neat little farce laid open before your young eyes just as well as I, but you can't build. That's like a woman – no inventive vision. Well, the fowler will line his nest,

which will not be for Daria Antonovna, with feathers plucked from the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks too. He traces his descent from a dozen canonized saints, and half a dozen anointed kings, but that doesn't prevent him from carrying on the more lucrative business of being a maquereau. Quite right too, for times are hard – yes, parlous times, when no one knows to whom to cringe and truckle, or whose boots to lick. But a woman has that within her which makes her an immortal commodity – Lenins and Jordanias come and go, according to the necessity of the flitting moment, but women remain for evermore. Therefore are they a surer refuge than any governments or missions on this earth, and wise is the man who builds his house upon their usage and destinies. What is the matter with you? Can't I even state anatomical truths? If you're not careful you'll fall one of these days under the malediction of the Lord's judgment: He called some people whited sepulchres, if I remember well. There, there – don't pull your sheets up to your ears: I've done quoting Scripture. Good night: dream sweetly of a Mikliewicz-less world.'

A hitch occurred at the last hour, and Prince Tariel was detained for a short time in Tiflis. He promised to follow as soon as he could get himself replaced at the Ministry, and Vala, Viguières, Julien de Barron, two other French officers and I took the road to Salkhino. The rest of the

party had either left, or were to come later, as they could manage to obtain leave. We had some beautiful riding through the woodlands of Mingrelia, and when we reached Salkhino, signalled as we were long before by runners, we found Princess Marguerite waiting to receive us at the bottom of the royal avenue of planes that led to the castle. She was a woman of about forty, tall, hardy, with an extremely sympathetic plainness of face, laughing brown eyes, a short nose, a kind firm mouth, and a blunt, cheerful manner of speaking. In past days, she had administered the huge family domain better than any man – now she had founded on her land workshops, weaving-factories of which she had herself built the wooden plant, and a mill; she ran a poultry farm, bred rabbits, kept cows and sheep, and stood up to meet events with an unruffled mien. She had barricaded herself in her house during the riots of the Revolution, alone with two sick Frenchwomen, her old servants, and three or four Georgian retainers; gun in hand, she had appeared at a window to tell the plunderers she would shoot the first man among them who mounted the steps of the porch; refused to open the monumental doors, laughed in the face of the infuriates when they threatened to burn the house over her head, and by her incisive words and unflinching front had quelled and driven back the horde. Every inch of that plain bluff figure was informed with the spirit of the patrician, in that she knew how to

command herself. As we went up the avenue, leading our horses by the reins, she told us that eight of her guests had already arrived – French and Georgian, and one Italian. 'Major Cassel came yesterday,' she added.

Major Cassel! Major Cassel here, of all places in the world, and with Prince Tariel away! I stared at her stupidly. Such a gust of anger clutched me by the throat that I turned round and switched sharply at my unoffending horse. 'What the devil . . .' I began. Then I caught myself up.

'Major Cassel?' I said sourly. 'I didn't know you knew him.'

'No more I did,' she answered. 'But Julien has obligations towards him, and as he's very keen on hunting, he wanted to come. Don't you like him? He's very English, of course, but he seems quite a nice man.'

So then I knew that the gods had looked at my plans, and had laughed them to pieces. 'Damn you!' I said to all the Divinities, as I stalked into the house.

The party, from first to last, was a brilliant success, extremely gay, with Vala in madcap spirits the whole time, beautifully clothed, playing cards, singing to us in the evening, dancing tirelessly, like a witch, most winning in smiles and voice, bubbling with repartee and amusing innuendo, full of wiles, fascinating each of the men but hurting none. She was at her best, raying pleasure in

the atmosphere of admiration and homage with which she was freely surrounded, and giving thanks by pleasing everybody else. She came to my room on the night of our arrival, glittering in a white pearl-embroidered dress, and starry-eyed. 'Oh, my dear,' she said, 'I'm so happy to be here! I feel I'm going to have such a nice stay! I'm out of school, out of bonds, out of every duty: I'm just going to enjoy myself as I used to do when I was at home.' She bent over and kissed me lightly. 'How pretty you look in that frock! Don't grudge me my bit of gaiety – I'm breathing again, and I shall forget every single thing that is perplexing or bitter. I want to laugh and dance all the hours away.' But I was impatient. 'One would think, to hear you talk, that you are in jail in Tiflis,' I said. Her enchanted face clouded for a second. 'I'm not in jail, but I'm *starved*,' she answered. Clearly, this was not the opportune moment for the bestowing of grave counsel, and I told myself I would wait till she had had her fling.

Well, she had food enough at Salkhino, and to spare, for approval and flattery were lavished upon her from all sides. At first, the heady incense intoxicated her: I did not mind, for such an intoxication was harmless, but it effectively prevented me from ever seeing her alone. There was positively no time for chats: she was always with people, and always doing something. I could not break into the lightly feverish dream she was living, and hammer realities into her head. So

again I bided my time, especially as, in spite of her high frolicking, she did not lose her tact. It is true she spent as much time as she could with Major Cassel, and that as soon as he entered a room she manœuvred to bring him into her circle, but there were no pointed *apartés* – and indeed there was little leisure for them, as he was out all day. By and by, however, petulance and eagerness crept into her attitude towards him; she would follow him with her eyes and try, though still subtly, to draw him on. But he refused, apparently, to come out. I suspect that he held off on purpose: he was not the sort of man to be magnanimous in his court to a woman; he would have judged himself cheapened to be a spendthrift, even if his blood had impelled him to ardour. That it most surely could not do; his gait was ever orderly and calculated; the temerity he had in him never forced passion into the open; he held it rigidly in check, and it only flashed forth when the cool, discriminating brain decreed that the appointed hour had arrived. I do not believe he ever loved her – when the end of it all came, he proved it – but she would be a desirable mistress, honey even to insensitive lips. She had a delicious face and a lovely body; because of Tariel, there was some excitement in wooing her – if he liked danger, here was secret cause for satisfaction; she herself was obliged to be prudent, so the fear of an unsavoury scandal was averted; a liaison in the future would cost him nothing, and promised on

the contrary to yield mixed kinds of delight. What was there in his nature to bid him abstain? Vladimir was wrong when he said that only maquereaux trafficked in women; those who take hearts and minds, drain them to get their pleasure, and fling them away when they are empty, with no return for the bounty on which they have grown bloated, belong just to another class of the same brotherhood, and can lay claim to the same name. Lorrimer Cassel and Felix Mikliewicz were not so very far apart.

I noticed that Cassel was progressing, and one night a bit of byplay rammed it into me that Vala had definitely changed. She had insisted that morning on going out with the hunters; she came home four hours later, struggling desperately with fatigue, limp and bedraggled, conquered by the headlong race. Viguières escorted her – Major Cassel had not chosen to turn back. After dinner Vala took Cassel markedly aside, and spoke to him reproachfully till, working herself up, she laid her hand upon his arm and shook it, as if to press from him something he would not say. He had been listening and smiling, but suddenly he struck the smile off his cold still face, and lifting his eyelids, looked long and deep in silence in her eyes. I was convinced that his action was deliberate, that he was testing just how far he had got to with her. She let her hand fall as if hypnotized, half shivered, and as she stared into the room she had for a moment the air of one lost,

dominated. Later she regained her self-control, and was not less merry, and I think it was only I and that frosty thief who was beginning to play upon her who knew that she had plunged one step forward. I should never have called her a huntress – she was too simple and sincere in the showing of her egotistical needs – but she had been ready to attract or pluck from others what she had wanted; now, good heavens! she was becoming languid, and being lured. Moreover, after that incident, she seemed to spring abruptly on her guard, and gave me absolutely no opening for any sort of conversation. I had lost the chance of speaking of Prince Tariel, and of the efforts she should make to tighten loosening bonds. I cursed my own remissness, and Cassel, and the invitation to Salkhino till I was short of invective and breath.

All this time I had given Major Cassel as wide a berth as I could, and he did the same for me, so there was no outward friction. When we met we held desultory talk; he did not refer to Khevsouria or my articles again, and I made no allusion to little tricks of tampering with papers in closed drawers. But he once mentioned casually at table that he had a right to take ten days' leave – it may have been correct, or he may have wanted to learn as much as he could about conditions in that part of the country – and Princess Marguerite, who was not half a Georgian for nothing, immediately asked him to prolong his stay. So he remained

even when the boar had been chased and the house-party had dwindled down to Vala, Robert and me.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, Prince Tariel arrived, too late for the hunt, but free for a week, and so surfeited with his work in town that Princess Marguerite told Vala she had never seen him look so fagged. She was a far-off cousin of his on her mother's side, and plainly very fond of him. 'Now,' she said, 'you're going to rest and be fed.'

But he energetically refused every species of molly-coddling. 'I want some good riding,' he said, 'and open spaces. Open spaces, my God! Give me the plains and the mountains of Georgia, and I shall call you blessed above all other women. Don't keep me shut up in the house, or I may batter in the walls.' To avert such a catastrophe, Princess Marguerite held a solemn conclave and decided to indulge Prince Tariel in his craving. The best thing we could do was to ride through the north of Mingrelia, visiting on the roads such haunts as were most famous; go through the formidable Pass of Djvahri into Southern Svanetia, the realm of the Caucasus glaciers, and then gallop back home, so that Major Cassel should not outstretch his leave. I must say that though he was very eager for the expedition, he was also quite firm on the score of his return to Tiflis in time. He was fated, however, to be late.

Then arose the question: could Vala bear the

hardships? She was a frail woman, of unequal health, not used to discomfort, and had an unsteady seat on her horse. She was accustomed to the *Allée des Cavaliers* in the Bois de Boulogne, not to Georgian hills. But she was wild to go – clamoured, implored, threatened. I supported her, because if she remained behind, neither Princess Marguerite nor I could decently leave her alone in Salkhino, and that meant the end of the adventure for *us*. Prince Tariel, for whom physical fatigue was an incomprehensible degradation which, constitutionally, he could not experience, was heedless in such matters – it was not his fault, they were altogether outside his ken – and he accepted without demur his wife's emphatic assurances that she could hold out. Robert shook his head, and said it was palpable folly, but then he was ever tender of women, so we cried him down; Major Cassel did not interfere. We chose the best horses in the village – they were not first-rate, as the Government commandeered all the beasts it could, and though Tariel had of course brought Othar with him, he offered him to nobody, for the creature was a fiend towards everyone except his master – and we set out at once, with three Mingrelian servants of the Princess.

It was all loveliness at first, all grace, vividness, the quick capricious changingness of a land of milk, maize, and honey. Every exquisite, carved wooden house, raised on a platform of stones, was isolated in the midst of its own sward of green

velvet; the flat high brinks of wells shone among the grass in rings of cool whiteness; the women wore their dark hair in two long plaits down their back, and every one of them, with her large light eyes of blue or grey, her clear skin, her tall slim body, neat and coquettish in every turn, looked like a picture stepping out of an old historical book. We saw cataracts that resembled the fall and flow of thick white laces, and rivers that drove me to despair by their indescribable hue: prisms of blue and pink and yellow, with sudden tangles of black in their currents; shallows like caskets, soft with living moss; stretches of water blazing like molten metal, translucent as tinted glass, or as opaque as jade or cornaline. We saw the shining light plains and the rich vineyards, with the black hedges of poplars round them; the pale fragile roses of the laurels; the passionate pink of the Japanese lilacs; the regal magnolias, so massive in their polished verdure that no breeze could stir them; the deep burning orange of unfamiliar flowers hung in garlands and hoops over the columns and balconies of every house; and the ardent breath of millions of aromatic plants surged up like a torrent, almost choking us as we went by. We saw the church of Martvili, one of the most sumptuous in Georgia, and from the brilliancy outside we stepped into a miracle of stone, rose-coloured, with undulating waves of black – chapel on chapel, arcade on arcade, fold on fold, angle on angle, every line intricate, fading

into another, speeding like arrows, such subtleness and richness of architecture, such litheness in that rock hewn and worked and sharpened into the grace of running water, that at last one stood bewildered, unable to grasp the plan. The ikons glittered with gems as big as pebbles; on their gold backgrounds the enamelled figures had as much freshness and smoothness as on the day they were made, so many centuries ago, by the devout artisans who gave all their life to their work, and judged themselves sanctified by their toil; on the frescoed walls evangelical scenes were portrayed, the grave, dark, spiritualized forms clad with all the glory of medieval raiment, cloaks of black and white, tunics of mystical blue, the shimmer of gold crowns and haloes, the purple of throned kings, and the pale brightness of hovering angels. The deep-set windows, where the glass flashed blue like a blade, hardly let in the sun – but above the ikons and frescoes, the roseate tinge of the dome flowed into an ineffable greyness, an immaterial radiancy, the essence of white light mysteriously transmuted into an emanation: that, perhaps, of an unstained soul radiating prayer. We saw the town of Zougdidi, the seat of the last Mingrelian monarchs; the noble castle was closed, but the city was as active as a hive: all in wide streets, with its little canals where the tall rushes swayed; its walks of plane and lime-trees; its hundreds of tiny shops, windowless and doorless, overflowing with gaudy stuffs, the magical fruits

of the East, and peppers scarlet and pointed as the out-thrust tongues of devils. And whether we were in town, or village, or wood, or plain, in the evenings, all round the green hills, the sky of Mingrelia flushed into pure lacquered violet, a mounting of amethysts closing on emeralds, and then the fields, that kept the caress of the sunset, glinted in the lustrous blue of the night.

We met the frantic Ingouri River and came to Djvahri, where we had a foretaste of what Svanetia was to bestow. Rock here, livid and morose, cliffs dropping sheerly, or carved by wind and rain into fantastic heads and figures: in a fit of fever these mountains had shaken their summits to pieces, and the prodigious stone tatters lay sullenly about. We entered into the sudden violent cold of inanimate matter and water, then into a welter of plants: the tough boxwood, the wicked black berries of the *antzli*, from which the Svanes brew the deadly alcoholic spirits that are murdering their race, the varnished robust laurels pressing in throngs against each other, ivy clambering over all, and trees, trees, trees, scrambling straight up the sides of the mountains, at right angles sometimes to the slopes, in a magnificent and permanent assault. We left behind us Haishi, where the hills were wooded, the air light, and the greenness serene, and the Ingouri, far down, looked like a thick flowing grey mirror, powerfully slow. The children there were pale and frail, most of them bearing the stigmata of

consumption, for their fathers burn themselves to death with the *araki*, and are incontinent in the extreme; the women too were thin and pallid, dressed drearily in black, with a long narrow bodice tightly buttoned on their hard sharp breasts, and a dark kerchief on their heads, which they pulled round their faces, hiding the mouth like the Arabs do. Sallow, sallow were the Svanes, with vivid eyes, lean and graceful in their movements as the chamois they chase, and finely courteous, stopping to salute us as soon as we appeared. We reached Tavrari; there we were in the realm of the mountains, and the villages began to take on the distinctive martial aspect of Higher Svanetia – every other house built into a flat-topped tower, startlingly white, with walls that only battering-rams or cannon could shatter: the towers where for ages the Svanes took shelter from their enemies in their inextricable feuds and vendettas, and to which every soul in the village repaired when the Kissts, the Kabardines and Ossetines swooped down from their own fastnesses to make their perennial raids. The scenery was crushing: I believe that only Tariel was really at his ease in the stupendous majesty of those heights – mountain air made him breathe deeper, and quickened the glowing jet of his eyes. Through the medley of greens and blacks that formed the forests, studded rarely with the grey pin-heads of hamlets, the rock slashed in bands of bare savage purple, and blood-red boulders hung

enthroned among more flaming clouds; over these, again, jutted the arid scintillating pinks, the cold tawny browns of the lower peaks, topped in their turn by rolling sheets of aching white; and crowning forests, villages, rocks, peaks and the shining hosts of snowfields, the diamond glaciers, inviolate, pierced to the heart, with their rigid triangles of crystallized brilliancy, the blue fluid vault of the sky.

The Svanes danced for us one night at Tavrari – such a night, when the firmament glided smoothly like a silvery azure river, and from the clear lake of light made by the moon shadows of white velvet and rays of blond opals fell, softly as feathers from the wing of a swan, on the black motionless pines. . . . Fifty men, slender and tall, clad in the tcherkesskas which outlined their slimness, broad-brimmed hats upturned, as in some picture of Rembrandt, gun on back, cartridge-cases slung over shoulder and on breast, their hands on their revolvers or on their comrades' waist, one leg lifted, bent at the knee, flung over the other thigh – all slow rhythm, concerted precision – then the sharpest, wildest leap sideways, and the deep, deep, ardent and wordless chant, what we sang in rut and war and our savage first adorations: *Oh-ho! Huh-ho! Oh-héla-ho! Shaimadi! Shamarira! Vaisadi! Shamirara! Oh-ho, huh-ho, huh-vahéi, ho, ho!* We rode on to see Ushba, the 'storm peak, the tutelary giant' of the Caucasus, a thing that was created when the Makers threw into the

spaces their order that out of nothingness should arise the incarnation of ultimate beauty. And first we passed through boundless meadows of wild flowers, glens, glades, dells like an aerial mosaic where the horses were hidden from view by the fragrant, living loveliness into which they stepped and disappeared; gold azaleas, purple rhododendrons, yellow lilies, tulips, bluebells and campanulas, lupines and forget-me-nots, the white spires of the ten-thousand-blossomed heracleum, red irises, and the pink wild-rose, warm animate silk, thornless, nourished with sun alone. Surely, surely, these were not earthly flowers, nor earthly visions: the fairies had spun them out of pure perfume and colour; they were a many-hued incense, just divine voluptuousness and joy, music seen, scent tasted; only to look at them the body itself, burning its elements, became fine spirit – and in the evenings, under the stars, among the melodies of myriads of insects, tinkling out epithalamiums, the elves and sprites danced nuptial ballets on those radiant corollas, and kissed them into a new day's freshness when they left for their felicity at dawn.

We passed through sylvan landscapes, long rolling expanses of grass, maize, and corn; in the distance we could not see the houses, and only the towers forcefully sprang from that idyllic, shining greenness, like bold white jets of stone; we crossed the underwoods, an extravagant opulence of high ferns and plants, red and black berries, streams

chattering to their pebbles, long curving tunnels piercing the compact verdure, through which the sun threw a profusion of quivering gold doubloons – wildernesses of beeches, birches, wild fruit-trees, alders, and planes – till we reached the forests, endless amplitude, obscurity and cold. . . . Temples these were, where reverence quickly passed into fear, so rigid, hardly living, were the black geometrical pines, parents of the rocks on which they engraved their metallic feet; so thick that the gliding winds cannot move them; so mournful that the sun cannot brighten them; so independent that they resist the spring's renewal; so inflexible that not even grass dares to grow between their roots. They fill the spaces and yet make them naked – we walked for hours in the dull dark shadows of those closed cathedrals, under silent arcades, among solemn columns and pillars; the pale branches mount like funereal torches, and the harsh aroma inspires no happy dreams. . . . At last, one evening, we arrived at a place from which, at an incalculable distance, we could view Ushba, and we fell into a stupefaction which overcomes me again as I remember and write. However much I tried, I could not even suggest the grandeur of the mountain basis – how, above sombre forests, rose tier on tier of livid, densely grey rock, the most tremendous spectacle I ever witnessed of frozen and hostile mineral matter, absolutely pure, barred only by massive and immobile white clouds. Set on that

august socle – utterly alone in the glacial sky – was a throne, empty, destined to the gods, a stupendous Papal Chair, carved in a flaming orange substance – not a streak of colour in the firmament above or in the ice and stone beneath: all the prodigious brilliancy of the vivid sunset had gathered from the four points of the horizon solely to illuminate that imperial seat, and had informed it with a sublime interior fire. The sky paled into an ethereal whiteness, the rocks darkened into a looming mass of black – and long, long into the evening, that solitary orange throne continued blazing, waiting for the Master of All to fill it, and we continued looking, struck down to the earth by the most intolerable sensation of our own smallness, our weakness and futility, that has ever overwhelmed my spirit and ground to powder my pride.

It was after that halt that we began to be aware of some yet impalpable danger. We had heard in Mingrelia that conditions in Svanetia were unsettled, but the first Svane villages we had crossed were quiet, and we had yielded to the passion for travel, and to the lure of the magnificent land. Now rumours became steadily ominous, and at last stabilized themselves into facts. Part of Svanetia had risen in open defiance to the Tiflis Government, and it was just that part through which we had to return.

The position was this. The Svanes, who had ever been practically ungovernable, even by the

Russians – Freshfield, recording the Georgian belief that the Garden of Eden was placed in Svanetia, adds that Cain, at least, certainly took refuge in that country – had given extravagant licence, since the Revolution, to their mania for attacking, robbing, or exterminating those rival factions and families of which they did not happen to approve. Tiflis had been at first too occupied in protecting Georgia against Russians, Turks, Tartars and Armenians, to turn its active attention to the Svanes; it had expostulated, but admonitions couched on paper are inoperative in a country of defiles and glaciers, where almost every other pass can be defended against law-enforcing intruders by half a dozen mountaineers. So the Svanes had coolly continued those little practices of reciprocal assassination which, according to Renan, are the first system of administration invented by man. Now things had reached a point of unruliness which threatened peril to the State. The Georgian Government girded up its loins and proceeded to strike, though with great prudence and a paternal regard for the peculiar temper of its northern sons. It sent a delegation of deputies, flanked by numerous soldiers and some machine-guns, to expound the Socialist doctrines of Tiflis, hear in exchange the complaints and claims of Svanetia, promise it satisfaction, and confiscate all the guns of the inhabitants that were not indispensable to mere hunting purposes. It was a Herculean task, but Georgian oratory is

overwhelming, and after listening to the speeches of Kipiani – a most remarkable diplomat and a very brave leader – most of the Svanes were hypnotized into delivering their weapons into his hands. They also had to swear, on their most revered ikons – and their faith is still fanatical: no woman is allowed to penetrate into their churches – that they had not buried extra rifles in their forests, to be disinterred at a more convenient moment. But the great district of Tchouberi, duly approached in its turn, began to rumble with protestations, and, rising up one day, furiously vomited its only half-digested submission. It wasted no time in making civilized intimation of hostility, but barbarously and swiftly cut off the roads to white-towered Mestia, where Kipiani was quartered just then, blocked him up in the village, and severed him, his guns and his troopers, from the rest of western Svanetia by some few hundreds of hot-headed, determined, and excellently armed men. By the same goodly stratagem, it placed us too in a very neat fix.

When the hints of perturbation began flying thickly about, our small group was in an independent hamlet of some twenty houses, where, after seeing Ushba, we had stopped for a few hours on our way home. Mestia was due east, straight onwards, and the district of Tchouberi was behind us. At first we gave up all idea of returning to Mingrelia through Djvahri, and resolved to push on and join Kipiani, for through

the marvellous Pass of Latpari and Lower Svanetia we could make our way to Salkhino again – a matter, perhaps, of eight or ten days. Major Cassel's calculations were upset, but that could not be remedied. Yet when we learned that the Svanes had besieged Kipiani, we found ourselves compelled to turn back, though how, only the gods could tell. Tchouberi, by the main road, was out of the question. We did not belong, it is true, to Kipiani's delegation, but we were strangers in the region, we had horses, saddle-bags packed with provisions, and, above all, we had revolvers and guns. Arms are to the Svanes as the very light of their eyes. The mountaineers have no time to draw hair-splitting distinctions between highway robbery and honourable warfare – we were a poor nine against a district expert in throat-cutting, and whether we fell into the hands of the villagers or into those of the rebels, our shrift might be very short indeed.

When Prince Tariel had gathered all the information that was possible, he called us into the house of the village headman – no official authorities there – where we found a thoroughly irate Abhazetian and a vehemently explanatory Svane. Tariel informed us that he had decided we would attempt a rush back to Mingrelia, skirting round Tchouberi, and heading for Djvahri. As all the valid Svanes of the locality were encircling Mestia, of the many evils that beset us, this plan was perhaps the one that comprised the least degree of

peril. We were to go through the forests – no roads for us this time! The quarrel was about the necessary guides. The chief, with one eye on the rebels, did not wish any of his villagers to be mixed up in our affairs; but the other eye was on Tiflis, and if the Government got the upper hand it might be awkward to be involved in the possible murder of a Georgian staff-officer, as well as of that of two foreigners who belonged to missions. I really do not think the women of the party entered into any account. Tariel wanted men to lead us through the forests, and the chief was warding off his imperious and unreasonable exactions as best he could contrive.

He did not succeed, for patience is not the principal Georgian virtue, and Tariel speedily grew tired of promising much money if we were served. In the midst of a new harangue, he drew his revolver and covered the Svane. 'Now, then,' he said, 'will you give me the guides? Don't move towards that gun, or I fire at once. I shall allow you time to consider while I count up to ten.'

The chief waved propitiatory hands. '*Apa, batona*,' he said, 'it shall be as Your High Nobility desires. Let me consult with the old men.' The old men were fetched in, and after a heated confabulation, they agreed to give us three guides. It was decided that we should leave at nightfall – Tariel asked us, for politeness' sake, if we had any objections, but it was clear that he did not intend to modify his plans, and indeed he had

taken up the command – so we went off to prepare for the expedition, each of us according to the promptings of his nature. Princess Marguerite was as self-possessed as ever, keeping a twinkle in her brown eyes; Tariel carried off his wife, who had turned white enough, but bore up bravely still, and I struck far out among the dark companies of the pine-trees away from the hamlet, to commune with my own soul – a habit which has grown upon me, and has proved unfailingly wise. The adventure bade fair to be our last, and I wanted to know where I stood.

'Well, comrade?' I said. 'You and I have been through many straits together; I've seen you blowsed and dishevelled with love – not a very pretty figure you cut then, either – bitter as winter with hate; squirming with horror in religion; rather light-headed in your last craze for Socialism; and, above all, desperate at your constant and mystical unsuccess. You've met with not a few buffets in that shadowy realm of the spirit in which you wander; and I, in the life I've led among men, have had my features so distorted that now I can't recognize my own face. Old sport, it was all a very silly affair, and I've never been able to explain for what purpose we were brought into it. However, there it is: we meant well enough, you and I, at the outset, but something went awry. Now we may have to go out with what will be a rather beastly puff – for me because of the pain of the body, for you because

of the terror of the mind. Are you ready, old friend?'

'Quite ready,' said the soul. 'And mark you this: even if I wasn't, *I wouldn't let you know*.' So then I was certain that it had kept, through its many misadventures, what is more necessary than God, or mother, or lover, or conscience, or work, or aim in life: pride – and I blessed it, well content. . . .

Viguières had tracked me, however, and came up to join me amidst the trees. He showed dispositions that were different from mine, but then he was a man, and partly in love.

'*Eh bien*, darling,' he began, 'I have something to say. We may not have the chance to kiss again on this planet, and from the discouraging reports we have of the others, the opportunities there will also be very small. Will you . . .? May I . . .? Oh, my dear, I have been patient so long!'

I looked at the drawn, yearning face, and the deep gaunt eyes.

Well, what did it matter? I was free, and he had always been a true and tender friend. If he wished to pass out with the sharp relish of life on his lips, why should I hinder him? And I shall long remember that moment when, pressing me against a pine, in the keen exhilaration of the stinging forest scents, the stately gloom of the black trees, the hurried whisper of running water, and the fear of death all round us, he kissed me, standing, like some serious creature come out of the deep

woods, some pensive unsmiling faun who had renounced the gay service of Pan.

We started in the evening, as had been arranged. We had been threatened with rain all day, and an hour after our departure, all Hell opened, and the fiends streamed out, each bestriding a wind. Water! It drove down like jagged lances, in gales and squalls and contortions of frenzy, raced slanting along, a curtain so thick that, pressed girth against girth as we were, we could not see each other at all. The gloom of that frightful night was witch-like, with those cataclysms beating down on us, and those mad winds yelling, tearing, whistling, in their furious scampers on every side. We had to bend and twist on our saddles to break the snapping of those wild invisible jaws: they tried to wrench us off our beasts. By ten o'clock we were rocking with fatigue, and had to be helped down when Tariel called a halt. Till then, he had kept beside his wife – she had turned to him instinctively: in such straits, the old habit of seeking his protection was not to be denied, and she clung to him with evident fervour. But now, it seemed, he had to leave her. We were quitting the track we had followed, and were about to grapple with the unknown woods. Tariel put little faith in the loyalty of our Svane guides; they could easily slip off in the howling obscurity, so now he had to take the head of the party, with the three men safely in his own keep. 'I have no need, gentlemen,' he said ceremoniously to the two officers

with us, 'to commend the women to your particular guard.' He took his wife in his arms and kissed her before us, on her eyes and mouth. She did not respond, remained passive, relaxed and crumpled. When he turned away, though for a few moments he was still quite near us, he became invisible at once. Vala made a movement towards me, and said slowly, with a sort of horror-smitten incredulity:

'He's left me!'

'But, how can he help it?' I answered. 'You don't expect him to give over the command to foreigners – Viguières or Cassel! What could he do?' But she repeated, as if stunned, her low shocked utterance:

'He's left me!'

We mounted again, strenuously endeavouring to keep in touch with each other, but it was almost impossible, and during the next eight hours we expiated many sins. We tried to kindle torches, but the rain beat them out, and though Princess Marguerite extracted from her saddle-bag a portable electric lamp she had thoughtfully packed at Salkhino, we dared not use it long, but kept it for the guides in an emergency – even they lost their way in that sinister maze, and again and again led us back to a point we had left behind us, to start afresh in a better direction. That infernal forest was one of the deepest and fiercest in Svanetia, rolling down a vertical mountain slope, jagged and pierced and hacked like a cliff. Not two yards

were on the same level; the horses jumped and staggered from ledge to ledge; they gathered their legs under them, poor brutes, and leaped at unexpected moments, like goats; they crashed into the gigantic pine-trees, between which sometimes they could not even squeeze; they battered themselves against the awful boulders, squelched, knee-deep, into the sodden spongy ferns and mosses, sank to the girth in morasses, struck into logs that barred their advance, and that we had to raise to let them creep beneath; split their hoofs on the iron roots lying above ground, spreading like petrified octopuses to shatter their legs; tumbled over each other, backing, rearing, whinnying, they too half insane, carried uncontrollably forward, by their own impetus, on the abrupt and vicious inclines. How I am still alive to tamely tell this tale I do not know. And ever came thundering down the rain, ever strained and eddied the wind, ever roared and smashed along the invisible rivers – and that bawling and thudding of the hidden torrents was worse to bear than death. Blind as we were in that cave of Hell, we could not tell how to avoid them; they were all round us with their fury and clamour, their bellowing and pounding – and at last the noise and the night broke down my defences, I felt hysteria rising, the animal cries of sheer terror were battling upwards to my throat; I wanted to stop, at any cost to stop, to stop and sprawl down on the solid familiar earth, clutching it to me, earth I

could feel and hold, safe from those rivers, yelling out under the heavens the torments of fear fighting in my breast. I let go the reins, and gripped my two hands over my mouth; if I had opened my lips for a second, every shred of self-control would have come howling through. Vala must have journeyed through the same processes, for all at once she burst into shrieks.

'Tariel! Tariel!' she screamed.

The tone was so piercing, so fraught with insuperable anguish, showed so plainly that now she was beyond her own mastery, that we all reined up in alarm. In a moment Cassel had dismounted and had gone to her horse's head.

'Come,' he said quietly. 'Let me lift you down. We shall walk together – let me hold you . . . so. Now there is nothing to fear: I shall guide you. Just take the bridle . . . there. . . . It's all right, I shan't let you go.' He put his arm round her, soothing her with touch and words; she moaned like a child, hanging on him. . . . Viguières too had jumped down.

'I think we had better all walk,' he said.

I waited for a moment, till I could frame words: my lips were trembling and writhing with a life of their own. 'Very well,' I said at last as nonchalantly as I could, 'just give me your hand, Robert; where's Princess Marguerite?' She was there, cheerful as usual, refused to encumber Viguières, and tramped on by our little group. It was better now, on our own feet, feeling our

way ourselves; and so we plodded on till we were checked by our crowning emotion. It came to us first of all in the form of a river, swollen and foaming, spluttering imprecations and spells as it churned along. It had to be crossed. We found Prince Tariel and the Svanes exploring the bank. 'There's a bridge here,' said Prince Tariel, 'a bridge for horses, think the guides. But it must be very old, and I don't know if it's safe. I'm going forward to try it; nobody must follow till I've found out.'

Even Princess Marguerite looked grave. The bridges in all the North Caucasus are an invention of murder-planning demons; two pine-trunks thrown from shore to shore, some planks between them, a little loose earth that crumbles away, and the whole contraption swaying and floating like a cord in air. I would as lief be drowned at once as use those bridges even in broad day.

It was no good protesting, Tariel was quite firm. 'I am not sure that your horses can swim across easily,' he said. 'Remember that they are not mountain-bred like mine. If the bridge holds, we shall avoid the risk.' The rain, at least, had abated by now, and the Svanes, most dexterous in such matters, succeeded in lighting a pine branch as a torch. The wind drove the flame in all directions, and I still recall the fitful relief into which it threw Prince Tariel, standing on the brink of the river, with his sword, a Turkish sabre, curving at his side, straight and tall in his

high-buttoned Georgian blouse and the *gallifet* riding-breeches of the Caucasus, tight on the leg, swelling into stiff panniers on the thigh, that showed his great length from hip to ankle. His first thought and words, when we came up, had been for Vala – but he had had no caresses; he was ready for action and absorbed in his aim. The ardent immobile face had fallen into keen lines of concentration, and the eyes were level and far-looking as a hawk's. Princess Marguerite put her electric lamp in one of his pockets, and fastened the flap. 'If the torch goes out,' she said briskly, 'you will at least have that.' He took the crackling, flaring bough, and set out. We could see Othar pawing long at the planks, then bending his head to sniff before he advanced again. He was cautious in every step, but the bridge shivered and rocked under his weight. Ages and ages went by; the torch crept onward, farther and farther from where we huddled; it neared the opposite bank. The wind swept back the sound of a crash, and the flaming torch plunged into the waters. A terrible cry surged up from the men.

'*Tavadi! Tavadi!* The Prince has fallen!'

I do not know what we did then – our group broke loose and scattered, we were all crying out together, the guides shouting instructions, spurring the demented horses into the river; Major Cassel lifted Vala bodily and bore her aside: she had collapsed.

'Go after him, go after him!' cried Princess Marguerite to the guides, and a Svane and one of her Mingrelian servants started, but their beasts were out of hand, and retreated, clambering up the bank again with furious snorts.

'Wait, wait,' called Viguières at the top of his voice, trying to dominate the confusion, 'wait till we see something, he may have swum to the other side.' It was a horror, this wrestling and disorder, nobody knowing immediately what to do, with those panic-stricken animals fighting against each other, and the men at their heads, forcing them apart. I was knee-deep in the water, clapping my hands, I really can't understand why, useless, frantic to go forwards, while Princess Marguerite kept dragging me back. Viguières's vigorous advice prevailed at last, and we waited, in such agony that even after four years, when I remember, I feel sickened and faint. Then another deep shout was raised by the men.

'A light! A light!'

'Look, look!' cried Major Cassel to Vala. Both his arms were round her, and her face was hidden on his breast; he freed one of his hands, and forcibly turned her head.

Prince Tariel was signalling with the electric lamp: the strong small disk of light waved to and fro in the massive blackness like a star. He told us afterwards that when the bridge broke, Othar had instantly headed for the nearest bank, and that he only had had to follow. Born in a land of

rivers, he was as much at home in the water as a triton, and he was strong enough to resist the current in spite of his clothes. The horse found a fording place and climbed up, his master doing the same, and thanks to the electric lamp, safely tucked in his pocket, Tariel was able to reassure us as soon as he was on land. After a very short time, we saw the fixed glow descending the bank, carried towards us, right on the river. Tariel was manifestly on Othar again, and returning to our side of the forest.

'It's for his wife . . .' said Princess Marguerite. 'He's coming back to fetch Vala.'

I cannot tell whether Major Cassel heard her, or whether he too had been struck by the same reflection. In any case, he acted with the greatest promptitude – that brain, though frigid, was good, it never lost sight of its purpose, never went astray among shifting lights. Here was an unmatchable opportunity to clinch the impression of strength, devotion, protection made already upon that distraught woman he had taken in charge. If he got her across the river instead of her husband, he would always remain in her emotional consciousness as her saviour, enveloped in a powerful, a lasting aura of gratitude and romance; the still indefinite things trembling in her could come to their maturity, blossom far more quickly than in normal circumstances, and with what a special intensity and savour! He had to forestall Tariel. He must have tasted, too, the biting rush of primi-

tive, fierce pleasure that a male feels in snatching away a female who is owned, under the very eyes of her mate. Vala was still half dazed, capable only of obeying: I do not think she even understood just then that Tariel was returning, or why – and Cassel certainly did not enlighten her; he gave her absolutely no time to comprehend what was really taking place. He drew her aside again, speaking rapidly and low. 'Yes, yes,' I heard her say; then: 'No, with you I am not afraid.' He set her on his own horse, and swung himself into the saddle in front of her; he himself clasped her arms round his waist. Before we had quite realized what he was about, he had urged his horse into the torrent, and in a few moments the beast was swimming out, battling to reach the other shore. It seems they met Prince Tariel above midstream, and Cassel shouted to him that Vala was safe. Tariel called out some directions about landing, and came straight on to us. I turned to Robert.

'Did you see that?' I asked.

'I did,' he answered. 'Anyone with eyes in his head would have seen it. It lacked discretion. However, this is not the hour in which to give Major Cassel a lesson in tact. Shall we follow the example of our excellent friend?'

But by now I had recovered my poise. Faced with a definite necessity, something practical to be accomplished, my confounded imagination, mother of all my disasters, was beaten into the

background, could no longer madden me with fancies.

'Of course not,' I said. 'D'you picture me cowering behind you? I'd never be able to call myself a modern woman again, and revile men as the inferior creatures they really are. How could I ever bully you after such a capitulation? I'm going over by my own indomitable self.'

We waited for Tariel, who pressingly made the same proposal as Viguières, but I refused once more. 'Very well,' said Robert, 'as you've evidently built up an heroic little image of yourself in the rôle of mermaid, it's not for us to gainsay you. Hold your horse's mane, sit close, and above all, don't hamper your beast. *A Dieu vat!*'

We swam across all together, and a most disagreeable experience it proved, too: I can think of no consideration whatever that would make me repeat it – but after the first sickening minute, when the horse lost touch with the ground and struck out, giving me the flurried sensation of being astride on a drifting cork, I pulled through without disgracing myself more than anybody else. Cassel and Vala had naturally landed some time ago. Once ashore, Prince Tariel went up to the Englishman and thanked him, but with a good deal of stiffness. It was not that the slightest suspicion of Cassel's motives ever entered his head, but he was displeased because it seemed to him that his wife had been made to run a perfectly useless risk. 'You were not wise to put a double

load on that horse of yours,' he said. 'It would have been better if you had waited for my return.'

'Much Cassel cares!' I said, dripping and wrathfully, to Robert; 'he's done a good night's work.' He had: an even better one than I imagined.

The rest of our journey was comparatively quiet, for with the torrent the forest had ceased, and hills replaced it. Dawn came, and the livid sky hung heavily over us, like a ghastly face streaked and discoloured with blows. Still, even that lugubrious light was welcomed with rapture. When we entered the low-lying village of Tobari, just beyond the fringe of the dangerous region, it was grey morning, and every one of us sighed to Tariel for a halt. He was sorry for us, but could not help showing he thought we lacked sprightliness.

'What on earth do you imagine we are?' I said, extremely irritated by his want of appreciation. 'Hippopotamuses, to enjoy that wallowing in your Svane streams? As well knock us on the head at once as compel us to continue in this state.'

He turned on me a brilliantly white smile. 'You look exactly like a boy,' he observed irrelevantly; 'one of our wicked Abhazetian boys, come back from stealing horses one wild night. What have you done with your hair?'

He would ask for no villager's hospitality, however, as the Svanes were clannish in that district, so we rode direct to the school, a place where not

a pane of glass had been left in the windows, or a stool in the rooms. But great fires were made up by our men in the chimneys, and we three women were given a chamber to ourselves. We stood in dire need of drying: soaked through, rigid with cramp, shot all over with rheumatic pains. Princess Marguerite rubbed us both down, then stretched herself out on the floor, turned over on her side, and went instantly to sleep. But Vala disturbed me – she was shivering and moaning, now hot, now cold, constantly chattering, as if her mind was feebly but invincibly restless, straining after escaping things. At last she sat up, pushed her hair off her fever-drawn face, gazed at nothing with wide, unwinking eyes, and, to my consternation, rehearsed before me all the night's doings – a sort of limping, delirious travesty of them that was tragical to behold.

'He's left me!' she cried, wringing her hands, and I knew then that she was thinking of Tariel. 'He's left me! He always leaves me. . . . I cannot see, I cannot see – no one is with me. Oh, God, I cannot see the river! The noise – on what side is the noise?' The terrified voice changed, sank to a murmur, became charged with the softest gratitude. 'You . . .! Yes, hold me; yes, I know you are my friend; yes, I shall keep you as my friend – I need you more than you believe, more than I can say. . . . You want me to trust myself to you – want to be near me in peril, to protect me yourself . . .? We shall swim

over together – yes, with you I am not afraid.' She had said the same words in the forest; the hallucination evidently continued, for she screamed out that the water was icy, and that the horse was rocking. 'We shall be washed away!' she cried. She must have remembered how he comforted her, for as if in obedience to some injunction, she made a circle with her arms, wreathing them round an imaginary body, and went off at once on another tack. 'What is it you say? I have your heart between my hands . . .?' She gave a low little laugh of content, of infinite sweetness. 'Must I really keep it like that?' Quite suddenly – fearfully – sense returned; she peered at me out of eyes that for a moment were sane. 'Ah, it is you. . . . What was I saying? That Major Cassel took me over the river . . .? Ah, you don't like him – he told me so – you misunderstand him. I assure you he is so kind. . . . The river . . . I should have been drowned in the river. . . .' She began crooning again.

I was at my wits' end, alone with this half-conscious, wandering creature – not daring to wake Princess Marguerite, not daring to call Tariel, lest they should hear her muttering and harping on that man's name, on what he meant to her already. At length I got up, drew her to me and kept her in my arms, with her head on my breast. She was soothed by the warmth and the embrace, nestled closer, and whispered, still speaking to that haunting phantom of her dream: 'Now you

will always hold me safe.' With that thought dwelling in her brain, she fell into a quieter doze.

Yes, it was not to be doubted: Major Cassel had done a good night's work.

§7

We resumed our march four hours later. Vala was now clear-headed – enough, at least, to betray herself no further – but with a body as heavy as lead, and incessantly drowsy. Prince Tariel walked by her side, supporting her, but when it became apparent that she was utterly exhausted, he wrapped her in a cloak, put her on Othar and mounted behind her. She slept against him, looking as helpless as a child. We reached Haishi, all glades and flowers, late in the evening, and went in a mass to the Dadish Kilianis, relatives of Tariel's, for centuries the feudal sovereigns of Higher Svanetia: they had a modern country-house in the village, where the Prince, a general in the Russian army, had retired after the Revolution. His wife had lost all her children – four sons – in the war, and she led the life of a nun in that voluntary solitude, dressed all in black with thick veils, and a face like marble. I never saw her smile; she hardly spoke, never sat down with us at meals, went about like a shadow on her household duties, ever mourning and praying to herself, in

the thraldom of a religious consecration. But all the resources of the place were put at the service of our bedraggled party; we were fed and clothed, given all the available rooms – the peasants themselves, hearing the Dadish Kilianis had guests, continually brought presents of honey and fowls to the house. Early next morning, Viguières and Major Cassel started for Tiflis, bearing a message from Tariel to the Ministry of War: he asked for a prolongation of leave, determined not to abandon his wife in her present state – we could not tell at once what turn her fatigue would take. Princess Marguerite and I left two days later: I was glad of any pretext to avoid travelling back with Cassel: he tainted the very air for me, made it fetid, it clogged my eyes. . . .

I said as much to Robert when he came to see me in Tiflis, just before I went down to Tchakvi. Vala had returned by then, but she wanted rest, and denied her door to everybody. Prince Tariel dropped in one night to present her excuses to me, but I made no other attempt to visit her, not knowing what she remembered of her ramblings at Tobari, and not sure that she really wished to find herself alone with me again. Viguières smiled a little sadly.

'You were not born a French Protestant for nothing,' he said. 'Do what you will, you remain didactic to your bones – just like your forefathers, who mounted on the stake so as to continue preaching to the very last breath they drew in the

flames. When will you learn that this world is not a kindergarten school of which you are the sole and responsible teacher? *You* desire Princess Abhazi to remain faithful to her husband; *she* desires to be loved in her own way. As you cannot give her that love, how can you exact that faithfulness? It's an ill wind, I'm afraid, that will blow no one except Cassel any good, but what can you change? I wish I could instil into you some of the pagan joy of sheer living: you wreck your own existence – and that of others – by these useless spiritual sicknesses and shibboleths that infest your soul. Why, for instance, are you so determined to go to Tchakvi and write your book now, as if your life depended upon it? Just an unreasonable manifestation of atavism. . . . You have no faiths left, but you are goaded by your heredities to build up a line of conduct, any senseless aim, to assuage your vague instinct of duty, your exaggerated but unfocussed idealism. Let me remind you of Vigny's injunctions: "*Aimez ce que jamais vous ne verrez deux fois.*" ' But I shook my head – Viguières may have been right in his indictment, but I was restless and uneasy, frittering my time away in mere love-making, when my real need was to express what was in me, not to yield myself up in companionship to any man. I must go on, however superfluous is the going; for me the gesture of the sower, who throws at hazard a handful of seeds in the air, but cannot stay to reap. Each of us, it is true, creates his own hell,

but somehow we prefer our sulphur and matches, and the suffocating fumes of our own making, to any heaven foisted upon us by other hands. So I took Djaki, whom Prince Tariel had summoned one morning to the War Office, and who emerged from the interview in a remarkably chastened mood, and we departed for Tchakvi one fine spring day.

I had the luck to find at Tchakvi, not only the director of the immense plantation, an intelligent and well-informed man, but also his son, Kotcha Vadjadzé, a Lieutenant in the Georgian army, detached on militia duty to Shavshetia, one of the Southern provinces. His post was near enough the State domain to permit of occasional flying visits to his father, and as he was a good Georgian, easily excited to emulation and gallantry by the presence of a woman, he put himself at my disposal for any trips I wished to make. I therefore accompanied him several times through the country where he was stationed; he was sagacious in the difficult handling of the Beks, and in every village we were most hospitably received. Vadjadzé spoke French correctly enough to make our conversations instructive – he had a quick eye, a caustic speech, took the very varied incidents of his work with humour and courage, and at all times of the day had a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth. I believe he smoked even in his sleep, but then Adjaran tobacco is one of the very

few things that would reconcile even a cynic with life. He was infinitely more expansive than Tariel, far more ready to consort with the queer people we encountered, and had a vein of mischievous alacrity in him that impelled him to meet trouble half-way, much to my delight. He dragged me off one day into the depths of Adjara to wheedle an extremely dignified and very-much-offended Bek into offering allegiance to the Tiflis Government again; we left even our revolvers behind us, to show the more irrefutably on what a pacific mission we had come, and the worries such misplaced renunciation caused us, the extraordinary hunt we had, set me laughing again as I write. It was pure farce, with just this very sharp flavour to it: that it might at any moment have turned into drama. Djaki, in the meantime, followed me assiduously, watching over my honour and my comfort with a pertinacity that testified to the vigorous way in which Prince Tariel had coached him in his manifold duties.

It was on one of these excursions that I met, in the Satleli Valley, at the house of the kindest and most munificent of Shavshetian Beks, one of the oddest figures that the Gods of the Road ever conjured up for my amusement. What the activities of Kemoul Effendi, a Georgian Mussulman, exactly were in the district I have never been able to unravel. That plump, oily, dapper little man, with an eternal smile on his comfortable face and gimlet-like brown eyes, was a Doctor of Philo-

sophy, had passed his thesis on Kant at the Sorbonne some six years before the war, and then had apparently abandoned the summits of metaphysical speculation for the sewer of politics; but in spite of his loudly voiced declarations of fervid patriotism, I rapidly acquired a notion that he had cheerfully and brilliantly put his very shrewd brain, his eloquent tongue, and his Oriental genius for intrigue at the service of many – and contradictory – masters. Just now he happened to be pro-Georgian, and several times a day harangued the peasants on behalf of the Tiflis authorities, harping ardently on the theme that blood should be at least as thick as religion, and that they were not to forget the fact that they were Georgians in their highly estimable love for the only true Faith. His knowledge, however, of events and personages – Russians, Turks, Georgians and Britishers – was of such an intimate character that it really could not be admitted he had only approached them in the capacity of a spectator. But he was of so excessively elastic a texture that he bounced away from every direct question, and contrived to discomfit, not himself, but the rash interlocutor who had put it. It was a most edifying lesson in diplomatical dialectics to watch him playing with indiscreet queries, as successfully as a juggler does with balls. When he learned that I, too, was the holder of a University degree, he hailed me as a sister, worthy of being instructed by him in the intricacies of current history, and he gave me a

summary of the situation in Adjara which was, as I had occasion to verify later, true on every point.

How it all comes up again as I write . . .! We used to sit in the banqueting-hall at Satleli, round the long table, eating countless Turkish dishes – Vadjadzé and his ten militians, I, relatives, guests, the most important retainers, all mixed up in the democratic familiarity dear to the East: not a trace there of the rigid ceremonial of Abhazetia. Our host had two wives: the mate of his youth, whom he loved most, had had no children, so for the honour of the house he had taken unto himself four years ago, with the consent of the first Princess, an exquisite girl who even now was hardly nineteen – and she had borne him a son, a frail, sad-faced little fellow with a red fez and a poniard at his belt, pathetically adored by the two women and the old Bek, who sat at the table on a high stool and listened in serious silence to things he could not understand. When we began to dine three musicians invariably entered, bowed deeply, took off their shoes, settled cross-legged on the floor, in orange and white stockings, great turbans, long brown coats, and played on mauve flutes airs charged with a monotonous, an unendurable nostalgia: '*Guel, guel, yavroum guel; mini, mini, yavroum guel!*' 'Look at him, he's *melting*!' Vadjadzé would whisper, and I stared at Kemoul Effendi, whose moon-faced visage puckered up at the opening notes of the melancholy songs, while

fat tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. . . . But indeed I was not far off from sobs myself – such sorrowful magic there was in those fragile complaints, yearning like prayers, piercing like cries, insistent like an obstinate pain eternally renewed, homeless, flitting, like a hunted spirit, the chants of a different humanity, so strange in their charm and their sadness that one cannot comprehend them, yet quivers as they pass over the wondering soul. Sometimes they swelled into an Arab music, a hard voluptuousness, an ineffable pride – and the Desert came back to me then, with its eternal enigma, the metallic rustle of palm-trees above running water, the closed, harsh, tyrannical faces of the nomads, their cruel fits of iron will and their unfathomable apathies, the desperate, savage rapture of the dances, where the body is obscene and the lips retain their mystical smile; and such dreams and memories stirred within me that at such times I left the room, unable to bear the strain. . . .

After the musicians had retired, night after night Kemoul related his fierce stories, and more surely than ever before did I learn that men's hearts are crueller than the wolves'. Of all the provinces in Georgia, those which had gone through the most tragical upheavals since the Great War were certainly Adjara, Shavshetia and Imerkhevia, cross-roads of antagonistic political interests. They had been islamized in the seventeenth century by Turkey, and when the Russians annexed Georgia,

they remained most stubbornly faithful to their Moslem customs and creed. In their houses, their dress, their faces, their very gestures, the people bore the ineffaceable imprint of the East, and Turkish was far more widely spoken than Georgian among them.

In 1914, when the Russian grip began to relax, the Turks, who had ever continued sighing for Batoum, sent their terrible *tchetniks*, half soldiers, half political agents, to foment an insurrection in the provinces; but the Cossacks swooped down upon the country and inaugurated an era of reprisals worthy of Genghis Khan. The Adjarans were taken prisoners by hundreds, assembled at certain spots, asked one after the other if they persisted in maintaining their Mohammedan faith, and on their affirmative answer – there was no single instance of a case where one of them turned renegade – they were literally sawn to pieces with the Cossack sabres, first the legs, then the trunk, then the head. One can imagine the nature of the guerillas that followed, in a country where the old Georgian traditions of vendetta were intensified by religious hatred – the Armenians also butting in in these conjunctures, attempting to wipe off old scores, and in some places getting exterminated in return. The history of those times is purely Asiatic, such plots and conspiracies, such marches and counter-marches, such wholesale executions and monstrous torments; Ardanoush burnt, Artvinne picked to its bones, standing like a white

spectre on its high hill, Ardagan ravaged – I saw the town, a skeleton with its gaping houses and the dogs howling day and night among the ghastly ruins; the district of Akhaltsic desolated with fire and sword, men torn limb from limb by twenty torturers, women ripped open, children cut in two; the plateau of Akhalkalaki deserted by the terrified villagers who died by thousands in their tramp through the implacable snows. But one will never know all, never even conceive all, never shriek out all that unthinkable pain so forcibly to the awe-stricken world that a Redeemer will rise at last to truthfully say: 'This shall never be again.' Even if I had power enough in my pen, I should paint nothing. What is the use? To whom make an appeal? Sanctity is not in the high places, either on earth or in heaven, so it is better to be silent, and, if one can, to forget.

Immediately after the Armistice, the British brought themselves into the field with aims of their own, and concentrated their very powerful energies on detaching Adjara from the national Georgian Government just founded in Tiflis. By the creation of an independent Adjaran republic on which, necessarily, they would establish a protectorate, they would have a first-rate foothold in the Caucasus, from which they could direct operations against Kemalist Turkey or Bolshevik Russia, as politicians or events demanded. As time went on, and the Kemalists grew into a serious danger, the British became keenly alive

to the advantages of a barter : they would yield Adjara to the Turks if the latter repulsed the extremely annoying advances Moscow insisted on making to Kemal, and which, rendered effective, might gravely threaten Constantinople. But to succeed, they had first definitely to raise the provinces – it is true they occupied Batoum, but they had the strenuous Tiflis opposition with which to contend, and also the slippery temperament of the Adjaran Beks themselves. The people went for nothing: they were utterly docile to their feudal lords, like wax in their hands, ready to revolt or to submit at the merest sign; they were promised money, and especially flour, a commodity which the very poor district completely lacked; they were given munitions and provisions; but the Beks were harder to catch, for Tiflis put pressure on them too. All the efforts of British propaganda were naturally levelled at them; when these efforts were defeated in isolated cases, the Beks were crudely shown the mailed first under the velvet glove.

One day I rode with Kemoul to Skhalta and then to Khoulo, two villages occupied by the British for over a year, and as, most unreasonably, I feel responsible for the spirit and the doings of my civilization, I wilted with shame when I saw with my own eyes the results of European interference in that part of the Caucasus. The Beks in those places had resisted the British overtures, and in exchange for their mulishness, their great

houses had been pillaged with a thoroughness that the Allies could only have learnt from the Germans in the north of France. Every window had been broken, every door wrenched off, every piece of furniture spoilt – empty drawers lay split to bits on the floor, the mirrors were shattered, the paintings slashed, the leather torn from the writing-tables, the mattresses hacked, bicycles irremediably twisted, the silk lining of the closed carriages cut to strips, even the wheels, for sheer pleasure of destroying, taken off and hammered to pieces. Not a carpet, not a curtain, had been left. There was a burlesque note, though, underlying the whole unsavoury affair, for the detestation roused by the reprisals of the officers and soldiers was mild in comparison with the horror their colonial uniform had created in the breasts of the grave formal Moslems. I went faint with laughter at last, listening to the comments made on the indecency of exhibiting bare knees and thin naked thighs and shanks to the unspeakably shocked gaze of honourable married women and unwedded girls. So strong is atavism that even Kemoul Effendi, that expounder of the doctrines of Kant, lost his happy oily smile, and, unable to contain his abhorrence, turned aside to spit with invincible disgust on the morals and habits of our Western races. 'May their eyes become stone!' he solemnly said. Well, what is the use of wailing? Armies are armies all the world over. The fault is not in them, poor devils, but in those thrice-accursed

rulers of ours who still solve questions, still adjust differences by means of the fatally savage muscles of men. Good God! I have worn out, before their time, my flesh and my brain with grief and horror – how long will I mourn because, in some lewd hour, we were conceived by apes, and shall bear in ourselves the impress of bestiality till this our earth, and all its glory, will pass into merciful nothingness again?

Between whiles, however, I went on travelling, and saw something of the very poignant land. Spring had not touched it yet; it was still wearing its winter vestments – not snow, but hues that were unreal, like those of Japanese scenery. The great Tchorokhi River moved down with majesty, ardently pink beneath the grey sky, and under its roseate surface its benches and triangles of sand glittered like furbished silver. It was navigable to some extent, with a powerful current and tumultuous eddies: the heavy black caiques that trod the red water leaped round the turnings – the slightest mistake in manœuvring would have dashed them full against the projecting cliffs – and the trees that threw themselves into the spaces looked like twisted serpents petrified in a horrific embrace. The woods were an animated fur of orange, yellow and crimson – some fantastic Oriental decoration of Bakst's – unreal, *unreal*, one could not get away from the impression; that scheme of colouring was pure imagination, sprung out of a visionary's brain. There

were no ledges of bare rocks, no definite contours, no solution of continuity in the varied pressed torrent of extravagant tones; mile on mile flowed the burning russet ferns; in the deep black of the firs, clusters of golden trees blazed like the chandeliers of a basilica; scarlet bushes clung to the green heart of the pines, and mauve branches bore orange coins. It was the mantle of Joseph made alive, bathed in such pure light air that its vividness did not startle, but appeased. The hills, when they were bare, stood in the distance like gigantic figures clothed with rich Pompadour stuffs of brown, on which were strewn a multitude of little nosegays, soft purple and flushed pink; the roads were variegated carpets of moss and flaming dead leaves; even the mud was violet; the faded maize stalks, faint green, were piled round the tops of grenat-painted boughs; between the grey trunks the tawny hives showed their thatched roofs, and far away the peaks shone like icicled rainbows.

The earth seemed to have exhausted all its vitality in producing those colours, for it was not clement to man. The villages were poor in cattle, poor in harvests – only fruits grew in abundance in that land. The houses were tall and empty, save for the benches covered by sombre *caramanis* and tapestried cushions; when we entered, fires were lit, hot water was brought in ewers to the threshold, and all the stores in the dwelling set out before us on round metal trays: cheese, maize,

figs, and apples, but never meat, wine, or milk. Accepting nothing in return, how heroically they gave out of their little, those melancholy saturnine peasants, slow-moving, chary of speech, austere of gesture, modest in their comportment – very few traces of the Georgian effervescence here. . . . The East had marked them to the core. The women hid themselves behind the wooden partitions, clad in short red or black jackets and broad pleated trousers, while the flimsy muslin *fakiols* shrouded their mouth, and necklaces of beads or filigrane silver encircled their neck. Whenever they first saw me, arrayed as I was in breeches and leggings, they ran from my presence with a cry. The little girls, though ragged, had long dresses with ample sweeping trains, and the little boys wore brilliant red caps. The whole race was more dignified, more solemn, than any other tribe I had known in Georgia – one felt the deep harmony there was between those serious, limited minds and the ardent sadness of the muezzin's call to prayer in the evenings – that immaterial modulation, so tenacious, so laden with longing, that flew out like a bird from the tall slender minaret of every village mosque.

One day I heard about Bek Rouffett from the omniscient Kemoul. We were riding through Tibeti, which possesses an exceedingly old and celebrated sanctuary, disaffected now, of course, but of such fame that even the Moslems revere it, and repair to its shrine to beg for rain in the

worst seasons of drought. The legend ran that whoever tried to carry away the slightest fragment lost his reason, so it remains unspoiled, except for the damages of Time. A church indescribably grave, giving a magnificent effect of calm power, all massive grey stone, overlaid with pink and pale purple, and pierced with long black windows which had, worked deep in the rock, a tracery of orange and violet lace. Rarely have I seen blocks assembled so strongly, planted so firmly; the sheer simplicity of that tremendous mass of inorganic matter made it grandiose, and at the same time informed it with an incomparable intensity. Exact and absolute, I cannot tell the sensation of *weight*, permanent, eternal, which emanated from that serenely inflexible pile – yet its redoubtable beauty refrained from crushing, for the hosts of arcades and columns carved in its surface bore all that rigidity upwards, marvellously changed it from the dominant fatal mass of substance it was in its essence, into a mystical offering, passionate as a prayer. . . . The mysterious sadness of Nature, too, was wrapped round it, giving it softer breath – in the solitude of its site, the murmur of water, the frail whisper of the trees, in the silver river where the sun, by some witchery, had thrown a single great disk of glowing gold, without another ray – such exquisite life quivered about it that its gravity no longer oppressed. . . . High above the church rose a big red-brown house among lilac woods. I was tired, and it

looked tempting, as I knew what hospitality we would receive if we went to its portals. 'Can we go there?' I asked.

'It's closed,' answered Kemoul Effendi in a repressed tone. 'The Bek who owns it has gone away to the district of Ardagan. He's been disgraced.'

'By whom?' I inquired idly. One never really knew what cause the Beks had determined to espouse.

'Hush!' said Kemoul, rather hastily. We were surrounded by villagers. 'I'll tell you later. We mustn't appear to be talking about him – he's got a very wide following here.' But when we left Tibeti, he expanded.

'It's Bek Rouffett Gortashvili – a very powerful lord. Ah, you know him? Well, all these peasants are more or less his serfs still, and this is his family place – but the Georgian Government won't let him remain in this homestead of his. Oh, don't worry: he's got plenty more. But Tibeti is too near Batoum, and the Bek is suspected of very strong leanings towards the British. Where he is now, he can't come to as rapid an understanding with them as they'd like.'

'I thought the understanding was already an accomplished fact,' I said.

'*Chère Madame*, there are a lot of undercurrents in all such transactions. . . . Bek Rouffett execrates our Government, but he doesn't get on with Cook-Collis, the British general, who put his

back up somehow or other – so just now he's sulking. As it's very difficult to negotiate with him in the wilds of Ardagan, where we have posts of Georgian militia all round him, the sulks are still lasting – an extremely good thing for us, as it gives Tiflis time to look about. If the British contrived to placate him again, he might plunge the whole of Adjara in a revolt. But he's a very awkward customer to handle – very, *very* awkward – as much so for friends as for foes; so thanks be to Allah that Cook-Collis is a fool.'

I remembered that Viguières had made practically the same remarks in Tiflis, and thereupon I reflected with gratification that Major Cassel, who certainly did not resemble Cook-Collis in the matter of foolishness, was safely caged in Tiflis, and could by no means try his diplomatic wiles on Bek Rouffett. But very shortly after, the incident was driven from my mind by other and more important information. We were so lost in Satleli that for some time we had heard no news from the outside world, but when we reached Khoulo, we learned that grave happenings were afoot. The Georgian Government, already exasperated beyond endurance by foreign policy in the Caucasus, discovered that a rebellion which had suddenly started in the Akhaltsic district was fomented by the English; the insurgents who were captured were equipped with British rifles and had British provisions, both in munitions and in food. Cook-Collis, however, denied all responsibility, and

pushed to such extremes the haughtiness of his attitude that one fine day, to the stupefaction of everybody, Georgian troops were ordered out and dispatched to Kobuleti, the most important junction of the Batoum railway-line.

Here was a pretty kettle of fish for Georgians and British alike! Georgia was in no position to fight long against the English if reinforcements were called up from Constantinople – but on the other hand it was exceedingly bad for a country that maintained it was only safeguarding order in Georgia to be publicly arraigned as a conspirator against the peace of that same land! Mutual concessions were hurriedly made; Major Cassel, I was told later, journeyed with unimpeachable celerity to and fro, explaining Cook-Collis's newborn sincerity of heart to President Jordania; many fair promises were given, and the 'regrettable misunderstanding' was finally patched up. The Georgian divisions returned to their barracks, and Cook-Collis, that innocent, settled down to conduct more discreetly his little affairs. But now that a precedent had been created, no one could tell if things would not come to a head again. I had absolutely no desire, if a clash occurred, to be shut off from Tiflis in the wildernesses of Adjara, so I quickly took leave of Kemoul and Vadjadzé, and from Khoulo returned to Tchakvi once more.

During all this time I had seen none of my Tiflis acquaintances except that little Russian girl, Daria

Antonovna. Long before starting on the Satleli expedition, I had gone over to Batoum for two days' shopping, and while I rambled about the pretty, open town, all sun, space, palms, mimosas, and glimpses of sea – no mystery about it anywhere – I met Daria walking down the Marinski Prospect. Just at first I received the odd impression that she made a furtive movement to avoid me, but that seemed so ridiculously unwarrantable a supposition that I resolved I must have been mistaken, and I crossed the street to catch her up. She stood still and waited for me when she saw me coming. I was immediately struck by a change in her face, but it was so elusive that I took some moments to define it to myself. She had all her fresh grace, her pretty mouth, her delicate complexion, her eyes. . . . Then I knew. It was her eyes that had altered. Their greatest charm had been their absolute limpidity, that purity of look that made her seem angelic, as on the day when, radiating gladness, she had told me she was engaged. Now they were troubled, held sadness in their depths – a constant sadness that steadfastly belied the smile put on by the young lips. Why did she have that sorrowful, almost haunted gaze? The thought flashed through me that perhaps Mikliewicz had already done her some wrong, or had left her – my inveterate mistrust of the man rushed back upon me with redoubled force.

'You must come and have tea with me at my

hotel,' I said. 'I live quite near.' She fumbled with excuses, but I bore her off. 'Now,' I continued, when we were installed in my room, 'tell me something about yourself. You look a little tired.'

'The journey was fatiguing,' she replied nervously. 'I only arrived in Batoum this morning.'

'But why are you here at all?' I asked. 'Has your marriage been put off?'

'Just for a short time,' she answered. 'Felix has had some difficulties, so we agreed to wait a little longer. I've found a place, and I am going to work.'

'What at? And where?'

'Oh,' she said vaguely, 'in the vicinity – somewhere about here. . . . I shall take charge of a house: there are a lot of servants to be looked after. . . .'

Surely all was not well with the child. That wistfulness in her eyes was not normal; it never left her, whatever she said; it reached out, faint, secret, yet electric, as if the soul, perplexed and burdened, was trying to feel its way. 'What is the matter with you, Daria?' I asked abruptly. 'You are unhappy. Can I help you in anything?'

She flushed painfully as she denied. 'I am not unhappy. . . . Oh, no, don't accuse Felix! He is so wonderfully kind to me – just as he always was. But life is so much more complicated than one thinks. Perhaps it is I who am stupid, who do not understand rightly. It is not always easy to know

what is good and what is bad. But there is one thing that can never, never lead astray – if we act out of love, just, just out of love, the rest is of no importance. You believe too, don't you, that the motive is all? Sometimes a deed may seem so black, and yet be justified by its own light, in its own aim. . . . It must be that when love is at the root, all we do is ennobled, transformed. . . .'

She was evidently repeating words that had been drilled into her, that had not quite convinced her, that she was struggling to endow with a stable strength. I shall never forgive myself for my consummate imbecility, but I imagined that she disliked the job she had accepted – menial work probably – and that Mikliewicz had urged her to take it, against her tastes or her judgment, by his subtle arguments and that insidious, nauseating tenderness he could employ when he chose. But since she was determined to face it, had come down to Batoum for that single purpose, it was better that she should be heartened, not further discouraged. Vladimir, of course, had put a singular interpretation on Mikliewicz's interest in Daria, but then his suggestions were always so obscene, he saw people in such a maniacal light, that I had grown accustomed to let his explanations drop till they proved to be true. I made a vigorous effort to remember what mystics and poets and novelists had taught me about love in the years of my own credulity, and, most disastrously, some of their twaddle came back.

'Of course,' I said emphatically. 'There are no things that are small or degrading in love. . . . They are always a gain, an enrichment; done with devotion, they are invariably beautiful, if only we could pierce beyond the surface, and see the intention, the hidden core.'

She bowed her head in her hands and began to cry. She cried mutely, but so long, so profoundly, that it seemed as though all her reserve of vitality was pouring out of her with her tears. I strove earnestly to make her speak, to make her confide in me completely at last – but I received no answer, only those endless, those inexplicably tragical tears. When she had wept so much that there was no moisture left in her body, she looked at me with moving lips that still remained dumb, and eyes that were still unbearably stricken and oppressed – and, silent, she went away. When I next saw her, she was swamped, swamped: the little flame had been beaten down to the dust, the clear spirit had been foully quenched. There are beverages that, once drunk, cannot be spewed out – a trace of the poison always persists, and corrupts the whole system, slowly but infallibly, at the end. Exactly how Felix Mikliewicz had played upon that soft, passionate and grateful heart, that helpless will, that inexperienced brain, how he had twisted and perverted her undeniable Russian capacity for mystical excess, I was never to know. He used her successfully as a base decoy, but what strings he pulled are beyond my ken.

Patriotism, perhaps, self-sacrifice, some plausible political aim, an imaginary danger which he himself was running – who can tell the jumble he made, and the havoc he wrought in that bewildered soul by entreaties and evocations of a peril that threatened him too? He could not have definitely asked her to sell her body – she was still a maid, she would have revolted – but he placed her in a position where she was quickly netted and trapped; the man he sent her to deal with was a blast of impetuosity, an overbearing force, and on fire with physical desire; she could not escape. The situation itself would carry her on, bring her to the necessary surrender, as he very well knew. On one hand was the man she loved, in whom she believed, whom she wanted above everything else to serve, spurring her on with prayers and menaces to obtain the information he needed for his particular purpose; on the other was the vehement, ungovernable creature who held that information, and she could only elicit it from him by creating an intimacy, a confidence which involved sexual ties. She could not manœuvre among those eddies, the exactions of those fierce hunters; they ran her to earth at last, she was trampled and she succumbed. It was quite inevitable. Well, I suppose such things are of no real moment, since there is no one on the other side to keep account: one more life maimed, one more mind stained, some energies for good destroyed – what do they signify in the

general waste? There are no Eternities through which they will roll and continue to vibrate. I can call upon no god to avenge that little girl, so she, too, is best forgotten.

Next, I received a visit from Prince Tariel.

He came one evening on horseback to Tchakvi, after the Kobuleti alert, asking for a night's hospitality. I had no idea he was in the south, for Vala and I did not correspond regularly, though she had sent me, since I left Tiflis, two very graceful and entirely empty letters. She had an easy pen, and as she was eminently capable, when she chose, of writing well-turned nothings, I remained in an essential ignorance of what she did and felt. So Tariel's presence in Adjara caused me some surprise.

I had a room prepared for him, gave him dinner, and then we went out into the park. It was night when we started on our walk, but so clear that in the avenues every plant could be distinguished – the proudly beautiful magnolias, the drooping sadness of the eucalyptus trees, even the exquisite violets clustering round the feet of the tall cryptomerias. The vegetation of that huge domain was almost tropical; the sun and water gave birth to a riot of palms, cactuses, wild mimosas, the fragrant herbs of tea; the bamboos still glistened yellow in the starlight, and the scent of orange, lemon and mandarin trees made the darkness a pungent perfume that went to the head. I had much to

ask, and Tariel talked with what was, for him, very unusual readiness. When we touched upon the Kobuleti episode, he spoke more sternly of the Government than I had ever heard him do before. 'Child's play,' he said. 'Our statesmen seem only capable of games. The tragedy is that one day the people will bear the brunt of their futile policy – they themselves will take good care not to be compelled to answer for their mistakes. Look at their relations with Russia. They have admitted to Tiflis a Bolshevik delegation which is sapping the country and the National Guard with propaganda. They call their weakness tolerance, but when you want to defend an organism that is already threatened, you give it just the food that will build up its fibres again – not strong strange drink which acts like poison, and disintegrates the few healthy tissues it has left. As to the British, do our Ministers imagine that the fact of having mustered some regiments will frighten them out of a calculated, methodical plan? In such things you must go straight to the root – a clearance is needed: what is the good of lopping off a few branches that wave above ground, when the vital organs remain deeply embedded and untouched? That demonstration of ours was purely absurd: when you come to the point of calling out troops, you use them. You do not show a weapon merely for the silly pleasure of seeing the steel glint, and then tamely return it to its sheath again. Once we had decided the times

demanded action, once we had embarked on a gesture, we should have carried it to its fulfilment, marched down to Batoum, and engaged. Nothing is more laughable, gives more an impression of feebleness, than a movement that is wilfully started, and then checked without achieving its aim. The English were just warned that more circumspection was needed, but their purpose was not thwarted, nor has it changed. The agitation in Adjara is now better covered up, but more tremendous than ever. There is, moreover, an Englishman in Georgia who will never let go his grip. He has thought out a plan, made it his, worked into it his own interests and ambitions, and has become its directing brain. So long as we have him here, there is no possibility of stopping British propaganda – we may checkmate it more or less, and for a more or less definite period, but its source is in his will, and that can only be destroyed by destroying him too. His is not a case for politicians – a soldier himself, he should be dealt with by soldiers. We have proofs, should weigh them, and punish accordingly. He is no diplomat, no temporizer – he has declared war, and should be treated by the laws of war.'

I did not need to put a question. 'It is Cassel you have in mind,' I said.

'It is Cassel. Again and again we have urged, at our Ministry, that he must be removed – again and again the Foreign Affairs have vacillated, asked for time, pleaded delicate relations. . . .

He is very strongly supported by his Government, and as he is here as the respresentative of his country, in a mission, not in the army, they are afraid that a drastic action taken against him would mean an official break. So we are driven to counterplot against him and his unlimited resources, when the only remedy is his suppression.'

'You don't want to shoot him?' I inquired, laughing.

Tariel gave a little smile. 'Shooting would be the best solution,' he said, 'but I have only recommended an invigorating sea voyage from Poti to Constantinople. However, the Government have not seen fit to adopt even that guileless measure. They seem to me to stand in need of a short time of service in barracks, under military discipline again. The experience clarifies one's ideas, believe me – teaches that there are hours in life when one must charge forward, not trip and dance round every blade of grass. No, I can't shoot him, but I have come here to watch the tentacles he moves about so deftly, and chop them off if I can. I am reorganizing the militia in Adjara: its meshes are far too wide and generous at present – I hope to tighten the net.'

By this time we had left behind us the tea plantation, and had approached the house. The bright silver-spangled sea was crooning to itself quietly, and on the shore the water rustled like crumpled silk. We sat down on the gleaming sands; high above us, on the bank, the eucalyptus trees poured

out their shivering aromas, and behind, near the stables, Tariel's soldiers had begun to sing. They sang melodies, at first, like religious incantations, with the sadness of a call for mercy – *aman! aman!* – obstinate and imploring, at the end of every strophe. Then they changed and became martial, free and harsh like the cry of trumpets, with great clashes, almost discordant, transported, imperious, in the palpitating eagerness of the strains. There were the steady tramplings of horses in them, the threatening clatter of arms, the mighty noise of hosts of men stirring, a movement of rushing life and of fierce challenging zeal. Each man sang a different measure, on a different note, sustaining it with all his power, ardent and long, as if it welled from sources of inexhaustible yearning – yet the whole rang out with a tremendous, an overwhelming unity, carried one back through distances immeasurable, awakened nostalgias and instincts that were not now familiar, brought surging back another state, another soul, primitive things, animal things, of strife, of grief, of seeking, and, above all, of virility unleashed and full of desire. Tariel listened for some time in silence: I see him as if he was this moment before me – stretched on the sand, with one arm raised on its elbow, supporting his head, his other hand flung, immobile, far out by his side. His face was turned towards the sea, and the fixed eyes stared at visions I could not perceive. Suddenly he began to speak, low and

very slowly, as if his lips, impelled by some irresistible force, were against their will wording pictures his heart had conceived and had harboured, and that came to the surface deep, deep from within.

'These songs – my Georgian songs – listen . . .! They are the soul of my country passing now through the night. They are the songs I heard in my childhood; my mother sang them when I drew milk at her breast, in the mountains where I was born. They were sung in the forests and on the rivers, louder than the shriek of the winds in the trees and the roar of the waters; they taught us to fear nothing under the sky, for their spirit was stronger than all. . . .

'. . . All through my youth I heard them: a servant of my father sang them in the courtyard of our house, on the day when I was first put upon a horse. The horse was wild and wicked, but still the servant sang as he held me on the saddle. "Sing, too," he said, laughing – and when I chanted, the words and the music gave vigour to my knees and grip to my hands, and my mind was no longer loaded with alarm. Straight as an arrow from the bow the horse darted, and came back obedient to the touch of a child that those songs had made into a man. . . .

'. . . In hunt and in war, my heart, when I heard them, swelled and filled to overflowing with the love of my race, with its loyalty, its pride and its courage – and I knew it could never be

beaten. But to-night, though the same songs echo around me, I do not know, I do not know . . . .

'. . . For ages the bees made their honey in the ledges of rocks and of mountains; they thought they were safe from the bear that kills and that steals. But the bear came one day and laid his strong paw on the golden cakes in the holes of the mountains – and the bees were despoiled and were scattered. Ho . . .! They do not know, they do not know. . . .

'. . . For long the lion was his own master in the vast solitudes of stones and of torrents; but the hunters have come with arms and with wiles. Pits have been dug, and traps have been set – he does not know which way to turn in his own fastnesses now. He does not know, he does not know. . . .

'. . . Men from strange lands have come with new methods of warfare; valour is useless, and truth of no account. Ruse must be met by ruse, and lie must be answered by lie. We do not know. . . . We do not know. . . .

'. . . On our own soil we can no longer tread safely; it yields under the feet of its sons, and they stumble and fall. Walls have been built between Georgian and Georgian, that we have not raised with our own hands. . . .

'. . . Walls . . . Walls have sprung up between another heart and mine. It had come to my own one day with gladness, open and warm, sure of its rest – and my heart, to receive it, had grown so great that it encompassed the earth. Alone that

love filled it, alone it gave it glory, alone it lent meaning and worth to the life of every day. Nothing could tempt me; no wish was left in the world to be uttered or to be granted; I knew completion and touched infinity itself. But now I do not know, I do not know. . . .

'. . . That heart is closing, and I am in void and in darkness. I cannot see, I cannot understand. It makes no sign, and it gives no sound. A wall is growing which I feel and cannot overthrow. Behind it the heart I love is still moving and living, but the wall spreads round it slowly like a cell. Why has it come, why is it rising, why have my hands no power to break it down? I do not know, I do not know. . . .

'. . . I feared nothing from that heart – a great surety was in me, like the sun at midday in the cloudless skies. I gave it love, as a man gives to his mother; I gave it trust, as a Christian gives to his God. It is refusing its love and its trust in return, and I do not know. . . . Ho . . .! It would have been better for me if I had never been born!'

Near the house, the soldiers, tired, had ceased their singing, and at once, as at the stroke of an axe, Tariel stopped his slow reluctant words. The force that had ungovernably moved him died out with the music, and the brain, freed from its thraldom, acted independently again. He sat up, and passed his hand over his eyes, as if to clear them.

'I am afraid,' he said quietly, 'that I have said a good many things which are useless. I shall ask you to forget them, and to forgive me. I have kept you up far too long – and I myself have some work to finish before I leave to-morrow. Shall we go in?'

I replied with difficulty that I preferred to remain on the beach a little longer, and he bade me good night. When he had gone, I continued to sit, under the eucalyptus trees that shivered, before the sea that crooned, and as I struggled with my tears, like a bell, for hours, tolled in my mind the mournful refrain: 'I do not know. . . . I do not know. . . .'

That very night, I did what I believe to be the most impulsive and foolish action I have ever committed. That bane of my existence, my almost insane emotivity, surged up so tragically that it swept every shred of reason out of my system. I wrote to Major Cassel in Tiflis. I wrote as I would have spoken, soul to soul, passionately, without restrictions, to a man who only loved goodness, who was supremely generous, and whose life was directed solely by spiritual aims. If I had been battling against myself in a mystical conflict, I could not have laid siege otherwise to my own soul, nor pleaded with it in another way. I begged Major Cassel, desperately, to be kind. I mentioned no names, but I told him that he held, at that hour, the happiness and the fate of two people in his hands; and I asked him,

out of justice, out of humanity, in the name of the nobility we have gained at such cost to ourselves and our whole race, to keep away from one of them for some time and thus give her the chance of finding herself and the normal rhythm of her life again. There was not a word in those pages that even suggested an offence – it was simply an appeal to the wiser and the stronger, just to abstain from using his strength and his wisdom till things could be clearly discerned by a confused heart. A few days later, I received an answer. It was my own letter, enclosed in a note from Major Cassel himself. Between the 'Dear Madam' at the top, and the 'Yours sincerely' at the bottom, there were four lines of small writing, very firm, very close, with strange heavy flashes of the pen from word to word, and bars that split and curved downwards. His two initials were so mixed in a hard and illegible twist that they looked like some curious sneer. Major Cassel informed me that I had doubtless sent my letter to him through inadvertence, and he therefore returned it, so that it could be forwarded to the person to whom it was really destined.

. . . Of course.

I remembered. . . .

I remembered a room where a woman was tied to a pillar, crying out under the lash – and a still, handsome face smiling slowly, as if the soul in it was gloating over some secretly pleasing thing.

. . . Of course.

He had answered me according to his nature, and his nature was cruel.

§8

About three weeks later, I went up to Tiflis for a few days. The Government was celebrating the anniversary of a great national event, and the ceremonies were to be exceedingly numerous and solemn. I was sent an invitation to attend the official banquet given in honour of the commemoration at the *Constituante*, but such affairs, fearfully long and tedious, do not tempt me, and I would have refused had I not received another urgent summons. This emanated from the Poets' and Artists' Club, an active and patriotic institution to which I had been elected on account of my work on Georgia; and I was imperiously called upon, in my capacity of foreign member, to make a speech at the formal gathering the Club intended to hold on the auspicious day. I knew I should wound the Georgian susceptibilities so deeply if I did not consent that I ruefully made my preparations for departure, though I was anything but overjoyed at the prospect. I am a lamentable public speaker, disconcerted when my audience stare, turning to water when they show signs of inattention, and ever having to grapple with an irresistible tendency to meander down side paths when they happen to interest me, thus completely

forgetting the subject in hand. It is annoying to be so handicapped in a country where the simplest peasant is an orator from his cradle upwards – but the thing had to be gone through, so I took some notes, learned them by heart, invoked anathemas on the wretch who had first thought of me – I suspected it was Vladimir, because he knew how I loathed all such functions – and left my beautiful retreat.

There was not a divan to be rented in Tiflis; Viguières could not offer me hospitality, as he lived at his mission, so I went to Vladimir, who immediately evacuated his room. It was adjacent to the building where Princess Abhazi resided, and I took advantage of our close neighbourhood to pay her an informal evening call the day I arrived. Tariel had sent me some pieces of very rare tapestry he had picked up in Adjara, asking me to bring them to his wife when I was in the capital; he had added in his note that he hoped I would see her, and give him news of her myself. I did not relish the prospect of a visit, for if Major Cassel had shown her my letter, she might possibly consider me as an enemy now. Still, as I would certainly come across her at the Government banquet, an encounter was inevitable – and in any case, if I backed out, what excuse would I give Prince Tariel? I put the best face I could on the matter, and with some trepidation, rang at her flat. Shalva had, of course, accompanied Prince Tariel, and there was a smooth-speaking Russian

maid in his place. She seemed nonplussed when she first saw me, and informed me hesitatingly that her mistress was not free. I said I brought tidings of Captain Abhazi, and wished to see Vala if it was possible, as I was in Tiflis for only a very short time. Thereupon I was ushered into the drawing-room where, to my surprise, I found Vala alone.

She was a vision of loveliness that night, dressed in a pink silk peplum that left her arms and most of her sides bare – really moulded in grace, her face shining and soft. But she was as far away from me and all I told her as if I was talking an incomprehensible language. I felt her detachment like a bodily thing. There was no hostility in her – simply, she was utterly indifferent. She was so abstracted that she almost achieved stupidity; at the end of each item of information I gave her, whether it concerned her husband's work or my own roamings, she said, 'Really?' in a gentle mechanical voice, as if only the shallowest surface of her brain was working, and all her energies were absorbed in a closed and constant dream. One had the sensation that she was cased interiorly in a dominant thought, and that she did not even attempt to break through its blissful tyranny. For she was happy – most profoundly happy – there was no mistaking the deep light in the eyes, and the wonderful, abiding softness on the face. She inquired when I thought Tariel would be back, and the extraordinary glow of her expression did

not diminish in the least when I answered that there was no probability of his returning just yet. Neither, however, did that glow increase – it was quite steady and lasting, as if independent of every contingency, good or bad. She had asked me to excuse her if she did not detain me long, as she had accepted an invitation that night, and after twenty minutes I left her, stating that we would meet next day at the official banquet in the *Constituante*. I could not help hoping that, for her own sake, she made a rally in public, and did not show everybody how fascinated she was by some inner delight. But I did not have to ponder long on the cause of her secret brooding sweetness, for, just as I emerged from the hall of her building, I caught sight of Major Cassel sauntering down the corner of the street that led from the British mission to the Erivanski Place. I entered my own vestibule and waited till he had passed. Then I went to the door again and looked out. He had turned and gone in at Princess Abhazi's house.

On the fateful afternoon, I made my extremely ineffective speech at the Poets' Club, directly under Vladimir's chillingly ironical gaze, and in the evening I attended the Government banquet. Sobotine was only to come later, to the reception that followed the entertainment, but Viguières was a guest at the dinner, and though we did not sit near each other, his expressive smiles of sympathy

cheered me a little during the interminable discourses and toasts. Vala was there, too, clad in a silver prodigy of gleaming *lamé*, and Major Cassel also adorned the table, but happily his place was far removed from mine. We did not even have occasion to bow. When the missions were presented with the huge drinking-vessels sent round by the *tamada*, or president of the feast, Cassel's health was duly drunk by the courteous Georgians, and the compliment afforded me plenty of sardonic amusement. A queer life all these politicians led, every moment giving the lie to their knowledge and to their strongest, their best desires – the Ministers, if they wished Cassel anything, must have ardently hoped he would drown in a jar of their own wine. . . .

The repast lasted for hours, regulated by the usual ceremonial: loving-cups, speeches, dances, and songs. The rites are invariable: the *tamada* is chosen for his high spirits, good head for drink – no race in the world can imbibe as much liquor, and with as much impunity, as the Georgians – and for his eloquence; he must keep order (in the provinces he collects, at the beginning of the meal, all the arms of the guests and leaves them weaponless, so that when it comes to fighting there should be no deaths); he proposes toasts to every important personage in turn, and the latter must rise and reply, under pain of giving serious offence; he checks or encourages speeches, and distributes the formidable *khantzebi*, curved horns inlaid with

silver, that are served full of wine, and since they cannot be laid down, must be emptied at a draught. This is a terrifying trial: no one can escape, the *tamada* is all-powerful, the traditions are granite, so that if a guest, at the end of his endurance, refuses to drink, he has no alternative but to leave, and is put down as the travesty of a man. Bards came – the *mestvirebi* – descendants of the minstrels that for centuries had charmed the feasts of the great feudal chiefs in their castles; they sang and improvised tales, seated on the ground with crossed legs, and under their arms they held the leather bag which, when inflated, brought forth shrill passionate music like the shriek of the Highland pipes. All war-chants, these deep ardent screams:

' "Suddenly they spurred their horses, their whips swished. . . . When they saw, they opened the gates, a tumult came forth from the city. Then the measureless wrath of God struck Kadgethi. Cronos, looking down in anger, removed the sweetness of the sun. The fields could not contain the corpses; the army of the dead was increasing. Avtandil and the lion Phridion met inside, they had wholly destroyed the enemy whose blood flowed in streams; they shouted and saw each other, they rejoiced greatly; they said: 'How goeth it with Tariel?' Their eyes roved round seeking him. None of them knew, they could hear nought of Tariel. They wended to the castle gate, no care had they for the foe; there they saw a bank of

armour, shattered chips of sword-blades, the ten thousand guards lifeless, like dust.

' "All the castle guard lay like sick men, every one wounded from head to foot, their armour rent in pieces, the castle gates open, the fragments of the gates flung aside. They recognized Tariel's handiwork, they said: 'This is his doing.' They found the roads prepared, they entered and crept up the passage; they saw; the moon was freed from the serpent to meet the sun; he raised his helmet; his reedy hair thrown back became him well; breast was glued to breast, neck was riveted to neck." '[1]

All the spirit of Georgia was in that vital music, every form of ecstasy entered there: savage enthusiasm, triumph, barbaric sadness, sacred piety; all the Georgian history, made of combat, murder, treason, violent death, heroic devotion, frenzied love, passionate religion; all the life of the primitive country, terrible in its mountains, tumultuous in its rivers, vehement in its towns, mysterious in its forests, insatiable in the vague depths of its sea; all the national soul, quick, proud and generous as a youthful god. The clashing songs filled the air with images that pressed upon me like the trees of an impenetrable wood, setting on fire the brain

[1] 'The Man in the Panther's Skin,' the national epic poem of Shota Roustaveli (twelfth century), as known in Georgia as Shakespeare in England. The episode described is the reunion, after battle, of the hero Tariel with Nestani. I have quoted the passage from Marjory Scott Wardrop's fine English version.

and veins. The visions grew fierce and tragic, like visions that come in a wild country desolated with war – a surging desire for glorious actions and desperate emotions, for a liberty that has no name and no limits, for solitude as infinite and fatal as that of the desert, for cruel physical joys, for the immensities and the unknown. What those songs evoked and awakened was more than I could bear – such a need for utter, savage self-expression overwhelmed me that my own insane longing bruised and beat me at last; maddening and then exhausting every sensation, the insupportable music plunged the soul into a gulf of deadly lethargy, into a mortal indifference and weariness, such as covered the earth in the shadowy chaos of creation; one knew one could never liberate the spirit, never burst all its bonds, never really reveal it, so not to die of the sheer pain of useless yearning, one bowed the head and accepted the Law.

It was not only I who was moved like that; the strains acted too on the Georgians who listened; impelled to rise, to *do*, abruptly they left the table, and one after the other began to dance. I have seen a thousand times the Georgian dance of the *lezguinka*, but it is always new, it ever delights the eyes. It calls for the warlike accompaniment of the *tcherkesska*, of weapons, of the high single-soled boots, for all the value of the figures lies in the rapid and vibrating steps. If dancing is really instinct exposed for a moment, how male, simple and ardent is this race! Nothing in it of the sen-

sual, convulsive cadences, the frantic delirium of the Orientals, nor of their sombre, orgiastic suggestions; nothing of the calculated, skilled voluptuousness of our European ballets, or of the superb bounding of the Russians. Here was only a spontaneous virile passion, the frank joy of a strong supple body, its muscles of steel, its limbs co-ordinated in disciplined harmony. I watched the dancers at the top of the hall: thin and elegant as flames, with one arm folded against their shoulder, and the other extended, while their eyes, as if lost in reverie, were fixed on the floor. They moved at first on tiptoe in one place, gathering impetus and rush; as the rhythm grew quicker, the faces became grimmer and prouder, concentrating on an aim; faster turned the lithe figures, more sensitive in their excitement, rapidly whirling, pressing on the ground with feverish motions of the knees, till they changed into an imperious, insistent stamping – something unspeakably spirited and impatient, as if they urged the very earth to give them vital force – then breaking into leaps, yet always restrained, always harmonious: a perfect example of magnificent nervousness which remained controlled. . . .

Half-way through the reception, when the dinner guests had dispersed and I was strolling through the Persian Room of Mirrors, admiring the play of lights in the thousand fragments of glass, I felt a touch on my arm. It was a Georgian friend of mine, Shakro Mdivani, the secretary of the library

of the *Constituante*, which contained many treasures. He was a gentle little man who lived alone with books and enthusiastic dreams of art, loving old things, and their spirit, above men and women and fame. 'I've been looking for you everywhere,' he said eagerly. 'I've got something to show you' – his fervour choked him – 'a miracle, the find of my life, a Georgian manuscript copy of the Bible, with miniatures, miniatures that make one lose one's reason with delight! It's in my room – will you come to see it now?'

He dwelt in the library itself, a wing of the palace which opened on the gardens and had separate doors. The place was kept closed, and could not be visited without special permission, but I knew it thoroughly, for we had worked there together for weeks. 'Of course,' I said, excited in my turn by the news, 'shall we go up at once?'

'I must find Captain Viguières,' he answered – Robert was a well-known collector, too – 'I promised to show him the book to-night. Just wait for me in the garden: I've left the door of the library open, and I'll join you immediately.'

'Immediately' is an elastic term in Georgia, and Shakro was not more punctual than the rest of his nation. The garden was exquisite in the moonlight, which streamed down in a violent torrent; the trees, in that stillness and brightness, looked like silhouettes edged with new metal, and between their domes the sky was blue and profound. But I felt cold at last in the keen night air, and decided

to wait in the library itself. I mounted the stairs slowly, the thin velvet shoes I wore making no sound on the carpets, and threaded my way to Shakro's locked apartment, right at the end of the long row of rooms, great doorless chambers full of arches. The moon illuminated every nook. In the second hall, against a bookshelf, two figures were standing, wanderers whom the open door had tempted, I supposed. Then for some moments I stopped breathing. In the sheet of silver light that poured through the window I saw Vala Abhazi in Cassel's arms. Her dress had fallen from her shoulders; one perfect breast was bare, and his hand enveloped it completely with the gesture of a master holding sovereign possession; her eyes were closed, and he was bending over her mouth. That white face of hers was transformed beyond belief, beyond conception; it smote one with unutterable sadness, as every absolutely beautiful thing; it was mystical in its rapture, in its bliss crowned to overflowing – the embodiment of offering, of an adoration which had attained to marvelling and sacrifice, far above the claims and bounds of self. Weird thing, the human heart, unaccountably weird! Prince Tariel had not had power to move this woman, and Lorrimer Cassel brought to her face this sacred look. How weird! As I thought of that, I wanted to laugh, but suddenly I put my hand on my mouth, for it seemed to me that blood had welled up in my breast, and was flowing out.

Major Cassel raised his head. Vala's dropped on

his shoulder, the eyes still shut, the lips still parted, the air still that of an ecstatical fulfilment. It hardly mattered that now he did not kiss her, so great was the felicity of expecting his kiss. Major Cassel looked at me steadily, as was his wont, without a sign of recognition – and after he had looked just as much as he pleased, he leaned again towards that blind, entranced figure, sought for the waiting lips, and drew his hand, in a light caress, over the naked breast. It was I who, out of respect for Prince Tariel, lowered my eyes and left the room.

Just at the foot of the stairs I met, about to ascend, Shakro Mdivani and Viguières. With them was Vladimir, who had also heard of the discovery of the manuscript, and who, himself an antiquarian of infallible taste, was extremely curious to examine the Bible. What followed was buffoonery, but – thank God! – it turned into activity my numbing pain. If Vladimir saw those two up there in the library, even in a commonplace attitude, all Tiflis would know next day that Vala Abhazi was Cassel's mistress. And if Cassel still held her – how could I tell to what lengths his cynicism would go? – and she was surprised in his embrace, the foulest details would ornament Vladimir's gleeful story. None of those men was to mount.

'What is the matter?' began Viguières teasingly. 'You look as though you were pursued by ghosts.'

'I was frightened,' I replied pantingly. 'There

was a rat. . . .' I had said the first thing that came into my head, but now I pounced upon my own invention. 'A rat dropped on me while I stood by the shelves.'

'I never heard of rats dropping on people from shelves,' ejaculated Vladimir with flat incredulity. 'You must have dreamt it.'

'I tell you it fell on my shoulders,' I said desperately. 'I've had a shock. I'm not going back.'

'What an extremely stupid rat it must have been,' persisted that infernal Vladimir in a scornful tone. 'Fancy even a rat imagining it could find something to gnaw on those bones! Come on – we three men will protect you from the attentions of that misguided rat.'

'I'm not going up! I'm not going up!' I cried. 'Mdivani, I'm not going up! I'll return to-morrow, in the morning. . . . And besides, we could not judge of the colours by lamplight. Let's go back to the hall.' I shuddered without the least pretence. 'I tell you I've had a shock.'

Viguières guessed there was some reason behind my passionate insistence, and he quietly interposed.

'There – there . . .' he said gently. 'No one means to haul you upstairs against your will. We'll all come back to-morrow, and indeed we'll see the miniatures better by day. Come – we'll go and look at the dances.'

Shakro Mdivani, like the kind soul he was, acquiesced at once, in spite of his fanatic's regret

at my unreasonable delay; and Vladimir was obliged to follow. And the last I heard of his grumblings, as we wended our way through the moonlit gardens, was:

'Perhaps you'd like us to bring our swords and revolvers to keep that rat off you to-morrow. A rat . . .! Calls herself an explorer, says she's travelled through the Caucasus, and dashes headlong into hysterics because she imagined she saw, whisking round a corner, the tip of the tail of a terrified rat. . . !'

§9

The end came all at once, in a swift and unexpected rush.

When I had finished all my business in Tiflis I returned to Tchakvi, and settled down to my writing. I had undergone an extraordinary modification, which I cannot explain. A feeling of immeasurable remoteness had come over me, as if that incident I had witnessed in the library of the palace had occurred in another age, too distant to move me now. Vala Abhazi was like a stranger whom I had known infinitely long ago, and whom I very dimly remembered. She ceased to interest me – I had no part in her fortunes at all.

So the spring wore on, in solitude and work for me, and summer approached. I did not see Prince

Tariel again, but I knew from his letters that though he had gone up twice to Tiflis on forty-eight hours' leave, his job of superintending the militia was not completed, and he was still attached to the Adjaran districts. Political conditions there continued to be very insecure, though no fresh outward conflict had taken place between the British and the Georgians. Vadjadzé told me as much; we met rarely, however, for he was now under Prince Tariel's orders, and had little time to spare for his father. An apparently insignificant item of news was given me by Viguières when, towards the end of May, he came to pay me a short visit at Tchakvi. He mentioned incidentally that he had travelled down to Batoum with Major Cassel, who intended to spend some days in that town. I did not pursue the subject, and Robert, sensing my indifference, told me nothing more about the man.

It was shortly after Viguières's departure that I received a letter from Princess Abhazi. I saw, to my astonishment, that it was addressed from Batoum, and I was even more surprised when I finished reading it, for it contained an invitation. Vala wrote that she had gone to Batoum to be nearer her husband, and that he was just starting on a tour through Imerkhevia in which she meant to accompany him. Would I join them? she asked. They were both very eager to have me, and Tariel charged her to add that the journey would be well worth the trouble, for the scenery of the province

was quite unlike anything I had seen in the other parts of Georgia. If I consented, she would pick me up at Tchakvi, and we would ride on to find Tariel, who was at present stationed in a village some way off. He had already made, she assured me, all the proper arrangements.

The whole thing perplexed me. In the first place, it was evident that Major Cassel had kept her in ignorance of our encounter in the *Constituante* library, for she would never have written to me in such cordial terms if she suspected what I knew. In the second place, how could she have submitted, enthralled as she was, to be separated from her lover? Suddenly I remembered what Robert had told me: that Cassel himself was at present in Batoum. Naturally! . . . Vala had left Tiflis, not because of Tariel, but because of Cassel. She had wanted to be with him, and had seized the pretext afforded her by her husband's work in Adjara to give colour to her change of residence. But what was at the bottom of this new resolve to meet Tariel and live with him again? And why was I invited? I felt instinctively that the idea could not have originated with Captain Abhazi – in spite of his friendship for me, he would have preferred, after a long absence, to have his wife to himself. It was certainly she who had suggested my coming. But for what reason? A third person was fatally an encumberer in the intimacy of such a journey. The question itself opened up a fresh train of thought and gave me my answer. It was just that

third person whom she desired, and just for the purpose of breaking that intimacy as much as possible. Of course. Something had compelled her to rejoin Tariel, and she was seeking the means to avoid being alone with him – she shunned the inevitable *tête-à-tête*, and was attempting to alter its conditions. My presence would help her, and even, in certain circumstances, be a protection.

All this was surmise, but though I never definitely knew the undercurrents, events themselves tended to prove I was right. Vala came to Tchakvi literally on the heels of her letter, bent on not giving me the slightest chance to refuse. I had not even had time to reply to her note! She arrived with her saddle-bags packed, and all the necessary provisions, and would not entertain for a moment the notion that I would remain behind. She harped continually, too, on the fact that Tariel was expecting me, and had taken great pains to make the trip easy and agreeable. Nor had her foresight ended there, for that very same evening Vadjadzé appeared, dispatched by Prince Tariel to escort us to his post. Vala had manifestly taken all her precautions long before she had advised me of the voyage. I was hemmed in, and could find no reasonable excuse for withdrawing. They all knew how fervently ready I always was to explore new sites, and indeed the prospect of riding through Imerkhevia attracted me immensely in itself. My only real objection was my dull antipathy for Vala, but when I saw her before me, that

uncanny sensation of detachment from her, which I had already experienced, grew even more distinct. For the life of me, I could not react, could not force myself, in my inner consciousness, to look upon her as a reality. It was not that I bore her any keen animosity – simply, she was dead to me, dead. She produced no impression upon me – a mummy would have conveyed, just then, a far more intense suggestion of existence. I could not help it. I noticed that she was much less vivacious than usual, but that perception was the natural play of my habit of observation; the fact did not stimulate my interest in the least.

As there was no practical issue to the situation – and, because of that queer feeling of mine, no insuperable obstacle in myself – I agreed to her proposals. As luck would have it, Vadjadzé gave me unwittingly what I thought was the clue to the whole affair. Vala went to her room immediately after dinner, to prepare for the next morning's ride, but the lieutenant, his father and I, remained in the dining-hall, smoking and talking. In the course of the conversation, Vadjadzé casually said that they had just had an *alerte*.

'Why?' I inquired.

'One of the officers of the British mission in Tiflis, Major Cassel, came to Batoum,' he answered – 'and we know by experience that he's the precursor of storms. So we were on the lookout for trouble. But happily he has left for Armenia. I wish the Armenians would strap him down on the

Ararat, like some new Prometheus-thief, and keep him there for good!'

So that was why Vala had decided to go to Prince Tariel! Batoum was empty for her without her lover; once he had departed, and she was no longer upheld by his presence, she had not succeeded in evading her husband's request to have her by his side. Something stirred in me then – some sentiment of heavy disgust. I seemed to see her plunged to her neck in a pit of filth. Dirty thing, adultery, dirty, dirty – pah! fancy settling down to live in a lie! But the real truth of the entire manœuvre, as it was revealed to me later, was dirtier still.

Next day we left for Imerkhevia, and pushed on rapidly till we met Tariel in the turquoise valley of Capparia. He was so happy to see his wife that he showed almost boyishly high spirits – it made me admire once more, by contrast, the extraordinary force with which he usually governed and restrained his tremendous animal vitality. He was on very cordial terms with Vadjadzé – military relations, in the militia, were extremely informal – and so the latter could give full vent to his own buoyancy. It was as well, for Vala grew quieter and quieter. She was quite passive in her attitude towards Tariel – did not interfere in his decisions, sustained no conversations, expressed no specific desires; she acquiesced, and let herself be moved about. He was not analytic, but her supineness

struck him too, for once or twice I heard him asking her if she had anything on her mind; she sank so quickly into reverie, and remained silent so long. Yet her calm was an effect of will rather than a natural disposition, for little things irritated her, unexpectedly and illogically, and when she relaxed her hold for an instant, one caught a glimpse of seething nervousness beneath her apparent apathy. She could not bear to hear Tariel and Vadjadzé converse in Georgian; she went away when the talk became political; I remember one evening when she came up to me, her face disfigured by tears of exasperation, and begged me, for pity's sake, to find a pretext for stopping the songs of the soldiers: they sawed her nerves. I reflected that, whatever else it may have done, her liaison with Major Cassel had certainly not brought her serenity. . . . Still, on the whole, she made a valiant effort to conceal what she felt.

The journey was a lively one, what with the rats that devoured our clothes and provisions, the bugs, as big as nuts, that poured steadily on us from ceilings and walls, the myriads of fleas that hungrily rose from every crevice in the floors, and the watch-dogs that manifested a deathless craving to rend us limb from limb. When we went out for our obligatory tours in the gardens, Tariel and Vadjadzé had to flank us with drawn swords – no king was ever accompanied in such state on such humiliating errands; but I do not advise a man and a woman who are imaginatively in love with each

other to spend their honeymoon in the Caucasus. Affection must be triple-cased in unselfishness to survive the trial of everyday intimacy there – or then the body should be flawless, like Tariel's, and fear nothing from the light of the sun or the acerbity of the human eye. My thirty years weighed on me heavily, and drove me to lice-peopled wrappings when the only physical comfort would have been the divine shamelessness of Eve in Eden, naked in the water and the air. One day Vadjadzé inveigled us to a village, swearing its Bek had enchanted wine and European beds; but the Bek had ridden off to Artvinne on business, had locked up all the rooms and taken all the keys; so we slept outside on heaps of maize stalks where all the ants of the world and all the little beasts of the fields nibbled us shred by shred, while the dogs bayed so hideously that in sheer terror I invented a god again and called on his protection – and every ten minutes the guard fired volleys at random into the howling night. . . .

Most of the other incidents of the road were as humorous and as comfortable. The scenery, however, made me forget all the rest. We journeyed through valleys of pure orange rock, one bursting invariable flame of colour, without a tree, without a shrub, without a blade of grass on those smooth, ardent, quite unbelievable carmine hills – and on their sides lay, petrified in their rush downward, cascades of stones, glistening, faint-green, the thickly scattered gems of a Titan's necklace of

slowly dying emeralds or of jade. I never knew with precision whether I was walking in a reality or a hallucination, so passionate was the hue, so enormous the silence, so rigid and changeless the lines, rock and sky one terrific brasier – and when I returned to France and tried to evoke them, I was compassionately told that my many tragical adventures had left a trace of fever in my system still. . . .

Then the grim Weavers above us, looking at their loom, saw that their design was done, and tied the knots of fate.

We had halted at noon at a very small militia post surrounded by woods, far from any village, almost on the confines of the province. Whenever he could, Prince Tariel avoided taking meals at the peasants' houses, for they would accept no remuneration, and he knew how miserable the resources of the district were. Involuntarily we bled the inhabitants, and then, because of their traditions of generosity towards wayfarers, could give them nothing in return. So we stopped in the hamlets only at nightfall, and merely asked for the hospitality of a room. In the militia posts, on the contrary, we could use our own provisions, or buy what we needed, so we were not tormented by scruples. We were in the midst of our frugal repast when Prince Tariel was precipitately called out of the chamber by the officer in charge of the post. He did not return, and after some minutes

Lieutenant Vadjadzé was also summoned outside. Vala and I waited alone for what seemed a very long time, but at last I grew impatient and instructed Djaki, whom I had of course taken with me, to go and inquire discreetly if anything had happened. He was like a magnet, making no visible effort, and yet attracting information from every person he came across.

Djaki glided out and then glided back to tell me that a strange soldier had arrived in great haste, bearing a message for Prince Tariel. He had been sent from head-quarters, and had followed our track. Tariel, who was on an inspection tour, had naturally communicated his itinerary to his colleagues before starting. After reading the dispatch, he had held a conference with Vadjadzé and the militia commander. Now . . .

'Well?' I asked.

'The militia have been ordered out,' answered Djaki mysteriously, 'but they are all riding different ways. Moreover, the Prince and Lieutenant Vadjadzé are preparing to leave.'

We had hardly digested the news when Prince Tariel entered. He was, as Djaki had stated, fully equipped with his arms, and ready to mount.

'I am obliged to leave you,' he said. 'There is something in the neighbourhood to which I must see myself. I am sorry I cannot take you with me immediately, but if you will be kind enough to wait here, I shall send to fetch you as soon as I possibly can.'

Both Vala and I knew it would be useless to ask what it was he had to do, so we abstained from superfluous questions. But his wife showed great dismay.

'All alone here, in this awful little place! What can we do . . .? You'll be quick?'

'As quick as I can,' he repeated as he kissed her. 'Don't be afraid, you shan't remain here to-night.' He departed instantly with Vadjadzé, and I noticed he had no soldiers with him. Yet the post was deserted – just two militiamen and the officer remained behind.

We waited for hours. We tried to lie down on the benches, but the vermin quickly made such repose a torture, and chased us into the woods. Vala, however, grew as quickly weary of looking at the trees and the hills, and we repaired to the house again. We spoke little, and then of quite indifferent subjects – I cudgelled my brains to find interesting topics, but could discover nothing: my mind froze when it entered into contact with hers. Once Tariel was gone, it seemed as though the constraint she had imposed upon herself in his presence had broken down; the enforced waiting brought out her hidden element of uncontrollable restlessness. She could not keep still, roaming about with sharp ejaculations: 'But what is Tariel doing?' – as if I could reply. As night drew on, she became more and more impatient, and at last, from open peevishness, passed into a violent indictment of her husband.

Childishly and unjustly, she put all the blame on him.

'But what *is* he doing?' she continued to say. 'He must have gone to the house of some Bek; they're at one of their endless banquets, and God knows when they'll finish with their songs and their speeches! How abominably thoughtless he is!'

She fastened on the idea and worked herself up: she was persuaded, as firmly as if she saw him, that Tariel was at table, amusing himself, and had forgotten all about us. I judged the notion to be ridiculous, and said so, but she paid no heed.

Eight o'clock – and no messenger of any sort put in an appearance. Nine. . . . I began to contemplate the necessity of spending the night in the post, and sent Djaki to investigate the resources of the place. The militia officer was a young man, evidently flurried, and at his wits' end to know what to do with us in that abandoned spot. The soldiers in the mountains are not used to comfort, and the house was horribly bare. We were taken to look at the only spare room, and on the threshold even I shrank back with horror – a black floor, smoke-begrimed walls, a tiny window, a stained and torn pallet on the ground. What legions of bugs and fleas had accumulated in all that dirty wood I did not dare to imagine. To crown all, a mouse suddenly rushed across the room and disappeared in one of the holes that honeycombed the walls. Vala, who knew by now

the invincible audacity of rats in Imerkhevia, turned on me with frantic resolution.

'I'm not going to sleep here. Tariel must be mad. Djaki, call the officer. . . . I want to know where my husband is – we're going to join him.'

Up came the officer, fearfully bothered. No, there was no other room. He and his soldiers slept all together downstairs – we would be worse off there than here. No, he did not know where Prince Tariel was. No, he could not take it upon himself to send us to him. . . .

Vala had lost every atom of self-control in a desperate exasperation. She acted like a child, but like a child whom it was impossible to check. Arguments were unavailing – she was irritated beyond reason with Tariel, and had one exclusive idea in her head: to go against his wishes. It was mania, no room was left for any other consideration. She was extremely impolite and extremely determined.

'Very well, then, I shall start alone. Where . . .? How do I know? I suppose I shall strike a village eventually – any peasant's house would be better than this sty. Please don't come if you don't want to, but I am going.'

The officer could not catch her by the arms and tie her to a chair; nor could I leave her to wander through an unknown province in the night. She only understood a few words of Russian, and the villagers only spoke Turkish or Georgian. What on earth would happen to her? I took the officer aside.

'Please give us some directions. You see the Princess has quite made up her mind. Where can we find Prince Tariel?'

He gave up the hopeless and undignified struggle. '*Apa!*' he said. 'I cannot be held responsible. The Princess is not one of my soldiers. Captain Abhazi has gone to Demirjankeuy, a village on the road to Ardagan, some four hours from here. I shall give you one of my men to escort you, but promise, at least, to follow my instructions.' He ordered up Djaki. 'When you reach the village, you will wait *outside* it, and send the soldier to the house of Bek Rouffett Gortashvili, to ask the Captain, whom he will find there, what you are to do. You must not go to the house itself till he tells you. Do you understand?'

The house of Bek Rouffett! What was Prince Tariel doing there? Was it a visit? If so, why had he not taken us with him? Whether he was friendly or not, the Bek would have accorded us every hospitality: politics did not interfere with the customs of the country in Georgia. On the other hand, could the measure have been hostile? But Prince Tariel had not marshalled the militia; as Djaki had said, they had ridden away in different directions, and Tariel and Vadjadzé had gone off alone. I felt reassured – I would make a bad strategist. . . . We could extract no more information from the officer; Vala had already packed; so we took the soldier and set out.

We avoided the road, and kept most strictly to

the woods, a maze of narrow paths between black, intricate and rigid shapes. It was a gloomy ride in that whispering obscurity. Vala was silent, and I was not disposed to casual conversation; I was angry at finding myself in a false position, and wondered how Tariel would receive us at the end. We met no one on the way, and reached Demirjankeuy, an important-looking agglomeration, long after midnight. On the outskirts of the place, but still in the forest, Djaki halted. 'The soldier says the Bek's house is at the beginning of the village,' he reported. 'Fifteen minutes from here. . . . He will go up and inquire of the Prince what we are to do.'

Djaki seemed quite resolved to follow to the letter the orders he had received from the militia officer, and Vala, whose insane obstinacy had had time to relax a little, raised no objection. The soldier went off, while we dismounted, and lay down under the trees.

Half an hour later we heard the galloping of horses, and a group of militia, led by our soldier, cantered up. We were to go at once to the Bek's house. 'Did he see the Prince?' I asked Djaki, as he put me in the saddle.

It appeared, on inquiry, that the Prince was not there at all. Lieutenant Vadjadzé had sent us the escort. I was so tired that I did not try to puzzle out the information – all was fluctuating like in a dreary dream ; my sole aspiration was to reach the house as promptly as possible, and

stretch myself on a bed. I was obliged to notice, nevertheless, that the Bek's imposing dwelling was guarded – there were a good many soldiers on sentry duty at the entrance, and we stopped short and had to parley with them before we could go up the drive. Round the house itself militiamen stood at arms in a wide circle. Vadjadzé was waiting for us in the porch, and looked preternaturally serious.

'You should not have come,' he began hastily. 'I do not know what Tariel will say. . . . I sent a soldier to tell you to spend the night in the post, and that we would fetch you in the morning. Did he not give you the message?'

'We must have crossed each other on the way,' I replied. 'We came through the woods, so it was easy to miss him. However, we'll do penance later – for the love of God, ask Bek Rouffett to lend us a bed now. Where is Prince Tariel?'

'Tariel will return soon,' said Vadjadzé; 'and as for Bek Rouffett, he was unfortunately hustled into undertaking a little trip earlier than he had foreseen. But I've done what I can. The servants have already prepared a room for you, and supper is ready in the hall. You must be famished.'

It was all so mysterious that in spite of my weariness I felt intrigued – and as soon as I had eaten a little my imperishable curiosity came into its own once more. Vala, too, revived, and showed symptoms of interest.

'Now, then, Vadjadzé,' I said dictatorially, 'since we're here, what's the good of being so enigmatical? Make the best of a bad bargain, and tell us the truth. What has happened?'

He could not keep up long his abnormal solemnity, and besides, we were on the spot, and the affair was mostly over by now. His eyes twinkled. 'Well,' he said, 'if you must know – but you're bullying me – Prince Tariel received a sudden order from Tiflis to arrest Bek Rouffett the moment he got the dispatch. So he mustered at a certain rallying-point the militia of all the locality – yes, yes, it was all done from that little post you've abandoned, but we're such remarkable tacticians, you didn't even suspect! – and we swept down here in battle array. Why we didn't confide in you . . .? But we never even dreamed anything of the kind would crop up during this journey! And if we had told you at the post, you'd have deplored our demise before it took place. Also, we surmised the Bek would fight, and d'you see Tariel depositing you right in the middle of a fusillade?'

He burst into irrepressible laughter. 'Such a joke . . .! The Bek was at dinner: you never saw such a demon! He heard the noise of our advent, dashed to the window, seized a gun, and peppered us for all he was worth. We've got two of our men wounded. . . . Tariel rushed into the hall, and Rouffett fired at him too – but Tariel jumped on the old sinner. Did you ever see

Tariel jump? I nearly cried *vasha*! – it was so splendid! They rolled over and over, wrestling, but Tariel disarmed the Bek at last. Then he said he would not bind him if he gave his word he would submit – and the Bek got up, glared at us like a fiend – I thought he'd die there and then of apoplexy – and screaming with rage because he could not shoot, he hurled on the floor every single plate and glass and dish in the room. He threw the knives and forks at the wooden walls: they stuck there all round us like arrows, and he smashed every pane of glass there was in the house. Look at the chairs – he's shattered their legs to pieces. I do believe he's left nothing whole but the lamp in this hall; it is fixed so high up in the ceiling that he couldn't get at it, though he leaped and leaped. What did we do? We stood still and watched – he had given his word, you know, so we could not intervene. After all, it was his property. And he cursed – Lord! how he cursed! I wrote some of the curses down afterwards: they were so beautiful, I couldn't bear to think I would forget them. . . . But Tariel went up to him at length and saluted him gravely. "My lord," he said, "if this goes on much longer I shall not be able to prevent my men from laughing." So he quieted down.'

Vadjadzé's mirth was so infectious that I too laughed myself weak. Well, it was the last paroxysm of amusement I was to have for a very long time, so I trust Bek Rouffett will

forgive me. 'But where is Tariel?' asked Vala then.

Vadjadzé became sober. 'We had reason to fear,' he said, 'that if the news of the arrest spread too quickly, there might be an immediate uprising in the neighbourhood. That is why, *entre parenthèses*, we did not want you to travel tonight. The Bek has too many partisans here to make our sojourn safe. So Prince Tariel would not keep him in the village a moment more than was necessary – and as soon as the house had been searched, your husband bore Rouffett off to the strongest post we have in the district, near the town of Ardagan. Once there, he cannot be rescued – and he will be sent up to Tiflis without delay through the fortified Pass of Sakharia. It was really indispensable to get him out of the way at once – don't imagine we neglected you lightheartedly.'

The Pass of Sakharia led to the plateaux north of Armenia, away from Adjara, and in a diametrically opposite direction to Batoum. 'Is there any danger for Tariel?' questioned Vala again, with a sudden expression of anxiety on her face.

Vadjadzé swore on his honour there was not – Tariel had a strong force with him, and had done everything so swiftly that the alarm had not been generally sounded yet. 'I could have taken Bek Rouffett to the post myself; but you know how your husband is – never passing on responsibilities to anybody else. You'll see him in the morning –

there are things that must be cleared up still, and he means to return without drawing rein.'

It struck me that as he said this, Vadjadzé grew glum, and in any case he urged us most pressingly to retire. 'You mustn't sit up for Tariel – on any account whatever – believe me, he'd be *fearfully* displeased; and you'll have all the day before you for talking.' I was of the same opinion, and when we finished our supper he conducted us to our room and wished us good night.

The chamber allotted to us was a sort of bridge joining the hall on one side to the apartments of the women on the other. Bek Rouffett was a Mohammedan, and the divisions prescribed by the Prophet were observed in his house. We had already unpacked, and were half undressed, when someone knocked softly at the door that led to the *haremlik*, and, without waiting for an answer, turned the handle. To my utter stupefaction, Daria Antonovna stepped in. I could hardly credit my sight.

'You here!' I exclaimed, astounded. 'How on earth . . .'

'Thank God you have come,' she said quietly. She crossed the room and locked the door that gave on the hall. 'Lieutenant Vadjadzé must not know I am with you. I was relegated upstairs, but I escaped when I heard you had arrived. Speak low.'

She was quite composed, and uttered her words slowly, but she looked deadly white in the light

of our two candles. My first thought was that she had grown much older; her face was set like a mask – a woman's face, not a child's. 'Thank God you have come,' she repeated. 'No, please don't kiss me – please don't ask me any questions. There is very little time.'

She addressed herself directly to Vala. 'Madame, I beg you in God's name to plead with your husband when he returns to this house. He has condemned to death a man whom he found here, and he will shoot him the minute he comes back. I know, I *know* he will have no mercy. He would have executed this man already but that he had to leave immediately with Bek Rouffett. When he returns . . . When he returns . . .' Her unnatural calm broke; she began to tremble, and fell on her knees. 'In God's name . . .! I cannot bear this . . . His blood will be on my head . . . I am responsible. . . . I shall kill myself if it happens – I could not live and remember. In God's name, speak to Prince Tariel – he loves you so much!' She had caught Vala's hands and was kissing them in a transport of entreaty. 'Oh, in God's name!'

'But tell me something more,' said Vala, as bewildered as I. 'Who is this man? Why will Tariel shoot him?'

The girl made a tremendous effort to recover herself, but her sentences were cut up by her panting. 'He came here under a disguise – to see Bek Rouffett. It was a political combination:

they were to declare Adjara independent. The Georgian Government heard of it, and sent Prince Tariel to arrest the Bek. He recognized the other man in spite of his clothes and his beard – he made him prisoner . . . he called him up . . . said he considered him to be a spy . . . sentenced him. . . . He will shoot him, he will shoot him, though he knows, though he knows. . . . He knows he is Major Cassel!' she cried wildly. 'Oh, God, what shall I do?'

Not a sound from Princess Abhazi. Her hand went to her heart, and she remained staring at the kneeling figure. All at once she began to sway. I moved forwards mechanically.

'Sit down,' I said, pushing her on a chair. Still she did not speak. I felt as if a hammer had crashed down on my head, and that it was void. We were all silent for a few moments.

'Are you sure?' I said at last to Daria.

'As sure as that you stand before me,' she answered with passionate intensity. 'I knew it all before he came – don't ask me how, don't ask me how! Only he was not expected so soon – he arrived suddenly; it was a coincidence that Prince Tariel should have discovered him here. And as Prince Tariel knows his aim – as he was caught under that disguise – don't you see, don't you see what Prince Tariel will do? Oh, in God's name . . .' She turned to Vala again.

'Where is he?' asked Vala slowly. Her voice had no expression at all.

'Here . . . Waiting . . . Prince Tariel must command the execution himself. No one could do such a thing without him . . . Vadjadzé would not dare. . . . How do I know? I was informed . . . a retainer . . . No, the household was not aware of who he really is – only one or two people and I. What will you do? What will you do?'

'I must think,' said Vala, still in that slow tone. 'I shall do everything I can. But I must think. . . .' She went on gazing mutely. 'Did you see my husband?' she asked dully at last.

'I saw him,' Daria replied painfully. 'We were all sent to our rooms when the Bek was arrested, but Prince Tariel had something to ask me, so he came up. I tried to persuade him . . . I did my best. . . .'

'What did he say?' asked Vala after a long pause.

'He did not answer me,' said Daria very low. 'He does not like me now. He was like a stone. He gave me the order not to leave my room, and went away.' She bent again, and again kissed Vala's hands. 'But you may succeed – he loves you so! You will save me from hell if Major Cassel is not destroyed. May God help you!' She rose from her knees, and once more her face set like a mask. 'May God help you!' she reiterated, and slipped noiselessly out from the side on which she had entered. We sank into total silence when she vanished.

At length Vala left her chair and came to my bed. Every vestige of youth had disappeared

from her face; it was livid, the mouth ashen and quivering, the eyes had receded in orbits as hollow as a skull's, and their look was utter despair. But if Prince Tariel had felt like a stone towards Daria, I felt like ice, like *ice* towards this woman, and towards that malefactor, her lover, who had finally met with his deserts.

'What shall we do?' she said.

'I can do nothing,' I answered sullenly.

She pressed her fingers on her lips, as if to remove their trembling. 'You must . . . You must . . .' she stammered. 'You must tell Tariel that Major Cassel cannot be killed. Think of what the British mission will do to Tariel when they will know. The British Government will interfere – the Georgians will be forced to act, to disavow him. His career will be ruined. You are his friend; you have his fortunes at heart; you do not want his future to be wrecked. . . . Think . . . Tariel . . .' She could not continue.

I could not look at her: she was so frightful, trying to lie, trying to invoke her husband's interests when her one shattering fear was for the man she loved. I sickened.

'You know quite well,' I said sharply, 'that none of these considerations will have weight with Prince Tariel. He has to do with a man whom he judges to be a dangerous enemy of his country, and if he has taken it into his head that it is his duty to suppress him, he will not care for himself at all.'

'Of course,' she murmured. 'You are quite right. Of course. . . .' Swiftly, like Daria Antonovna, she too fell on her knees. 'Help me! Help me! You are a woman like me, you have a heart that has known pain like mine! You say in your books how much you have loved, how much you have suffered – remember, and help me now! Remember! You said your lover left you, you said you wished to die. . . . Remember your own agony, and help me in mine! If you loved still, if you knew you would lose what you loved more than your life, what would your heart feel? I am feeling that now. . . . Help me! In the name of what you went through, in the name of that great love that marked you, in the name of our common womanhood, our common lot of pain – remember and help me, help me to-night!'

Yes, it was true, what she was saying – it was true that I had loved as she was loving, that I had suffered as she was suffering, that I had lost as she was about to lose, that I had never recovered, never, from that loss. I forgot her; I forgot what she had done; I forgot Cassel – what I remembered was my own pain, how I had cried, how I had prayed, how I had longed, how I had called on death, how I had had to endure; the blackness of the days, the horror of the nights, life like ashes on my lips for years and years. . . . How could I allow, if it was in my power to prevent it, how could I allow another soul and another body to taste the anguish I had tasted myself? It was not for her I would

act; no, not for her – it was because of that old pain that had burned my youth out of me; it had been so hideous, no human being ought to be tortured as I had been. My tears fell on the crucified face pressed against mine.

'Let me think,' I said, just as she had said some time ago to Daria. 'Let me think what we can do.' My brain was so empty, it turned and turned on itself, finding no way out. But she had no tears – she only held me, as if afraid I would escape. I rose at last.

'There's just Vadjadzé who might be of use,' I said. 'He may give me some clue. . . . No, let me go alone; he'll speak more freely then – we are good friends.'

I put on my riding-suit again, and left her. She remained on her knees, her face in her hands, without another word.

I dispatched the invaluable Djaki to Vadjadzé, and the latter came at once, fully dressed. 'Still up!' he exclaimed. 'Are you ill? What is the matter?'

It was abundantly proved to me then that in the extremity of distress human beings have only one gesture. My arms were round that amazed youngster before he knew where he was. 'You must do something for me,' I said. 'Kotcha, help me, help me! What steps can we take to prevent Tariel from shooting Major Cassel?'

He was dumbfounded. 'Who told you?' he cried.

This was no hour for fencing. 'Daria Antonovna,' I answered.

'The little spy!' he said wrathfully. 'Wherever she goes she makes mischief. I shall have her locked up.'

'It is too late,' I replied. 'Princess Abhazi was informed as well as I. She is half insane with despair because of what may happen to her husband if he carries out his resolution. How did all this occur, and what is to be done now?'

Seeing that I knew so much already, and pitying me, so evidently distraught, he told me the whole story. What he could not guess, I filled in for myself. Daria Antonovna had come down to Demirjankeuy presumably to take charge of Bek Rouffett's establishment – he was a widower, had many servants, and kept open house. There was much disorder in his expenses, and he needed someone to govern the place. He had fallen madly in love with Daria, said Vadjadzé, and she became his mistress. He confided to her all his ambitions and plans, namely, that Cassel was coming to see him. Cassel wished to clinch the affair of the Adjaran revolt, which was dragging on indefinitely, and he had to persuade the Bek, by precise promises, to rise against the Georgian Government at once. A personal interview was absolutely necessary, but the Bek, who was very closely watched, could not go to Batoum. On the other hand, as he was on bad terms with the heads of the British army, no mere officer could hope to

convince him. Cassel alone had influence over him, so Cassel decided to tackle him himself. It was impossible to go to Demirjankeuy openly – his mere presence in the village would have disclosed to the Georgians the hatching of some conspiracy – so the British officer put on a false beard, disguised himself as a Russian horse-dealer, and arrived one day at Bek Rouffett's house, ostensibly to sell him some beasts. I reflected that the extremely bold measure Cassel had taken was in perfect conformity, not only with his tenaciousness, but with that strange streak of temerity in his composition which I myself had witnessed again and again. Viguières also had insisted on it when we had discussed Cassel's temperament one afternoon in Tiflis. 'He has audacity in him; he likes to dash in where there is peril,' Robert had remarked. Cassel had covered up his tracks most carefully, for before he started for Demirjankeuy he had publicly announced that he was leaving Batoum to make an inspection in Armenia. He had shown even crueller foresight. Aware that Prince Tariel, a redoubtable antagonist, was in Imerkhevia, he had prevailed upon Tariel's wife – his own mistress! – who was in complete ignorance of his designs and his real destination, to rejoin her husband, knowing well that she would inevitably hamper him in his movements, and keep him safely in Imerkhevia for a time. No, Cassel had neglected no detail; he had pressed everything

into his service, even the body of the woman who loved him. Queer – the ways of men. . . .

But here someone else interposed. Daria Antonovna was nothing but an agent, continued Vadjadzé; she was acting for a man in Tiflis, who was a Bolshevik spy. She kept up a regular correspondence with him, and duly transmitted the news of Cassel's expected visit, which she had learnt from the incautious Bek. The Tiflis spy informed the Bolshevik mission, and in its turn the mission warned the Georgian Government. Cassel's plan, had it succeeded, would have struck a shattering blow at Russian interests, for if the British gave Adjara to the Turks, the latter would certainly make no alliance with Moscow – and that alliance was extremely necessary to Moscow just then. The whole immediate policy of Russia would suffer. So the Bolshevik mission, by informing the Georgians, nipped the project in the bud. The Tiflis Cabinet took instant steps to prevent Bek Rouffett's treachery, and sent Prince Tariel to arrest him before he had time to carry into effect the pact he was about to conclude with the British. Cassel, by the merest chance, happened to be still in the house when Prince Tariel arrived; the Georgian officer, already put on his guard by the suggestions of the dispatch he had received, recognized him at once – 'he has most unforgettable eyes,' observed Vadjadzé – and I knew the rest.

I thought of Daria Antonovna – of what she

must have suffered before she became the Bek's mistress; of the long misery of her stay under the roof of a man she was betraying; of what she must have felt when she saw him arrested. No wonder that Cassel's possible execution had driven her to maddened remorse. She had been the instrument of it all. . . . But I pulled myself up, and returned to the subject in hand. I recapitulated Vala's arguments with all the vehemence my own anxiety lent me.

'Do you realize,' I said to Vadjadzé, 'that this is a most serious affair for Prince Tariel? If he shoots Cassel, as he may, being in absolute command here, the British will not accept the thing tamely. They will put such pressure on the Georgian Government that the latter will be forced to take sanctions. I know that war cannot be declared between England and Georgia on this account – Cassel was caught in a disguise, with false papers and a false name, on the errand of a spy – but think of all it may lead up to, of all the secret consequences it will have. . . . Think – *think!*'

'I've thought till I'm tired,' replied Vadjadzé. 'I told Tariel all you say. He answered that he alone was responsible; that the Government cannot possibly be held to answer for an action he committed on his own authority, without consulting them; and that if it came to occult reprisals, he was willing to sacrifice his career, and if need be his life, to rid Georgia of Cassel. He considers him to be the most implacable and active enemy

we have at present – and quite invincible because of his official position. He has at last the opportunity to suppress him; he looks upon that opportunity from a patriot's and a soldier's point of view, and you may be entirely sure that he will never let it go.'

'Can't you try again . . .?' I began.

'No, I can't,' said Vadjadzé, flatly. 'He has reminded me very sharply that I am his subordinate, and asked me to keep my opinions to myself. Do you imagine that Tariel is a child?' His Georgian fatalism, so indestructibly light-hearted, flickered up for a moment in spite of his dismay. 'It's no good wailing. . . . *Après tout*. . . . Ten million men were killed in the war, and the world goes merrily round as before. The earth won't cease to rotate on its axis because there's one Englishman more or less.'

'What have you done with him?' I asked, a desperate idea coming into my head.

Vadjadzé looked at me and laughed grimly. 'Not the ghost of a chance,' he said, as if he guessed. 'Barred and bolted in, and four men to guard him. I have to answer for him on my life. I'll do a great deal for you, but I can't turn traitor. He's a brave man, though. . . . He was sitting with the Bek at table – Tariel spotted him as soon as he had done with Rouffett; had him seized; and when he was brought up, alone, later, looked him full in the eyes and told him that he had reason to think, in spite of his papers, that he was a

spy, and so he should have a spy's death. The other just gazed at us in silence, and then gave a little smile. "Quite so," he said, and walked out.'

'Why didn't he reveal himself?' I cried.

'What was the use? He saw Tariel knew and was quite determined. And what about the obligations of his profession? And British pride? Why, not even an Armenian would stoop to ask for a grace that would be refused . . .! So he put on the best face he could – and, by God! it wasn't a bad one. . . .'

I beat myself against Vadjadzé till I was exhausted, but though he was full of good will, he was blocked by Tariel's orders, and found no issue. 'Let Princess Abhazi try,' he suggested helplessly. 'I see nothing else. . . . I don't know Tariel in his conjugal capacity. Perhaps he's more supple as a husband than as a soldier. . . .' He made an unconscious grimace, and I drew my own deductions as to the value of the scheme. At last I returned to Vala with my bleak news. She had dressed during my absence.

'I knew you could not succeed,' she said. 'We must wait for Tariel. Come.' We went back into the hall, still lighted by the powerful lamp in the ceiling, and sat down on a divan near a window, from where we could hear the horses coming up the drive outside. For greater security, I posted Djaki in the garden, with instructions to warn us when Prince Tariel arrived. We spoke

very little – there was nothing to say, we knew by heart all the arguments we were to use. I did not even go over them – all through those atrocious hours I was employed in fighting down the absolute conviction of my brain: that nothing would move Tariel. Vala cowered in a corner, so slim in her costume and her high boots that she looked like a child – till one glanced at her face. It was the face of Medea staring at doom.

After four in the morning, Tariel returned.

We heard the steady tramplings of a great number of horses – then his own voice raised in answer to Vadjadzé's hail. Bek Rouffett was safely on the road to Tiflis, he said. Djaki flew in with the news, but we were already on our feet. Almost immediately, Prince Tariel entered the hall, his cap in his hand. His face seemed stern, marked with deep lines, and very displeased.

'Vadjadzé says you are waiting for me,' he began. 'What folly . . .!' He gave a shocked exclamation. 'Vala – my darling! – how ill you look!'

Those awful eyes of hers fixed themselves on him. They were *shrieking* out their fear and their pain – how did he not understand! She attempted to speak, but no words came. She closed her two hands round her throat, as if to pass power into her body, and a whisper fluttered at length out of her grey lips. 'Tell him . . .' she murmured.

I spoke at once. He turned towards me, his level eyes on mine, never looking away. I said what we knew, and how we knew it. He neither assented nor denied: he listened. I begged him to have mercy, to spare the worthless life he had in his hands, to show magnanimity. . . . I prayed for Cassel as I could never have prayed for myself. His answer was quite passionless.

'I am extremely sorry you should be mixed up with this affair,' he said. 'I would not give you pain willingly – believe me, I am deeply grieved I cannot spare you. But it is useless to plead. You seem to think I have a motive of personal vengeance. I have not. There is a duty to be performed, and I shall do it.'

I began once more, this time on another tack. I rehearsed all my talk with Vadjadzé, showed him the fatal consequences of his action, political and private. I left no single consideration untouched. When I stopped, it was because there was not a syllable more to be added.

'Useless,' he said again. 'Please understand it is useless, and do not oblige me to be harsher than I must in my reply. It is all thought out, and I am ready to bear the results.'

Then I lost my calm, and spoke more wildly – all implorations, incoherent, passionate, a personal appeal in Vala's name and mine. 'For our sake. . . . If you have any affection for us. . . . Think of what this means to us – a man killed with our knowledge, and we powerless. . . . We should

always remember, always suffer. . . . Out of pity for us, do not do this thing. For our sake. . . . You would not bring such horror upon us. . . .' His face, under its serried brows, became like a rock.

'Useless,' he said. 'If my mother herself knelt before me, I should have to refuse. My own feelings have nothing to do with this. You are giving me unnecessary pain. It is not the business of women: it is not fit that you should insist. Now, I ask you – go back to your room. You will not compel me, I hope, to put a guard at your door.'

Nothing made me realize how outraged he felt at my interference, nor how totally hopeless that interference was, as that quiet menace. His wife realized it too, for as I fell back, she advanced. But he did not give her time to speak.

'Useless,' he repeated in a louder voice. 'Vala, I tell you it is useless. I know what you will say, and this is my answer. I have obligations that are not greater than my love for you, but that are different. The two must not be confused, and I shall not confuse them. You must accept that. Do as I beg you, and go back to your room.'

He bowed to us both, and made a movement towards the door. One more second's silence, while he turned, and while she grew more ghastly than before. Then she flung herself on him, slipping down to her knees the better to hold him, her

arms clasped round his legs, her head pressed on his thigh, and the truth at last rang out.

'Tariel! He is my lover! Tariel! I love him, I love him! Kill me too, kill me too!'

For one moment he remained motionless – till he understood. Then the terrible Georgian fury rushed to his head, suffused the face with the darkest blood, lit up with frantic fire the eyes. He lost his human semblance – only the shape of a man was left to him, so monstrous was the black colouring of that contorted visage, so savage the glare, so fierce the expression. 'Now, now,' he gasped. 'Shot now!' He bent wildly, wrenching at her arms to free his body. 'Now, now – he will be shot now!' He was one of the strongest men I have ever known, but in that minute she became stronger than he, clinging to his legs, pressing her body right across his feet, crying uninterruptedly: 'Kill me too, kill me too!' He beat her with his fists on her shoulders and arms, on her breast, on her bent head, tearing at her hands to make her let him go – like a maniac repeating those two words: 'Shot now; now, now – shot now.' He could not pull her off. He started with a rush towards the door, but though she could not stop him, even then she retained her grasp, and he dragged her full length after him over the floor, moaning as she was dragged, till again he stooped and frenziedly rained blows on the crouching figure. 'Kill me, kill me,' she groaned, and the dull thud of his striking answered. I had been

paralysed at the first instant, all sense swept out of me with horror, but the very frightfulness of the scene galvanized me to act, and I threw myself on him too, pushing him back, trying to clutch at his mad murderous hands. He smote me again and again, sending me reeling to the divan, and again and again I recovered and sprang forwards while he warded me off and never ceased hitting with his free arm the woman wound round him. He did not know us, he did not know where his blows fell – all he knew was that an obstacle kept him from Cassel, and that the obstacle had to be crushed. 'What are you doing?' I cried incessantly. 'Your wife, your wife . . . You are killing your wife! Tariel, you are killing your wife!' Instinct made me repeat the words like an automaton. 'It is your wife, your wife, your wife – it is your wife! You are killing your wife!' A Name came to my lips – I do not believe in it, but I was so helpless, and it had stood so long for the greatest things of the spirit – perhaps it still carried force. '*Au nom du Christ!*' I shrieked. 'Tariel, for Christ's sake! You are killing your wife!' With sobs, chest against chest, I went on calling on his love and his God.

And the words acted at last. . . . What depths they touched, what consciousness they roused in that lost, frenetic mind, how exactly the tremendous love he bore Vala, submerged at first by his instincts, his outraged manhood, the revolted

claims of self, surged up again and conquered, I do not know. But they brought him back to the perception of reality. Suddenly he stopped striking, and his hands fell down to his sides. He turned on me a face which, before my eyes, shrank and collapsed – gone corpse-like, aged, unfamiliar, more awful in its stoniness than in its demented rage a moment ago. 'My wife . . .' he said blankly. 'What am I doing to my wife?'

She moaned and moaned, never unlocking her arms. Her tunic had been torn from her shoulders, the battered flesh was stamped with red, the eyes were closed, the tumefied lips could hardly open, but still the difficult words came through: 'Kill me too. . . . If you kill him, kill me too. . . .' Only that groan broke the silence – then again Tariel's stupefied mutter: 'What am I doing to my wife?' For a few anguished minutes, nothing else took place.

At length he bent over her, and spoke in an utterly lifeless tone. 'Get up,' he said. 'Get up. He will not die. Get up.' She raised her head then, with the tears streaming down her cheeks. 'Promise me, promise . . . Have pity. . . .' She kissed his knees, his feet, still holding him desperately. 'Have pity. Promise me, promise . . .' 'I promise,' he said in the same voice; 'he will not die' – and then, mercifully, she fainted, slipping completely to the ground, her hair loose over his boots, tragically limp and collapsed. He did not touch her; he took a step backwards, out of

the circle of the outstretched, immobile arms, and again he turned that fearful face on me: so pale, old, *unknown*. . . .

'Look after her,' he said. 'Tell her once more he will not die. I promise. I shall send a servant to you with water.' He went out of the room, and I knelt by Vala, chafing her hands till Djaki came in with a pitcher and a glass.

We carried her together to the other chamber, and laid her on the bed – but the swoon was a very long one, and I became extremely alarmed, alone as I was, with no proper help and no strong remedies. At length, however, she opened her eyes. She did not seem to remember anything, and looked at me gently, with a vague smile; but all at once memory returned, and she raised herself on her elbow with a dreadful cry.

'Lorrimer?'

'Quite safe,' I said, stooping over her. 'Quite safe. Nothing will happen to him. Tariel told me to tell you he promised.'

The eyelids descended, and again she fainted. This time I really thought the syncope would pass into death – I could not even hear the heart beat. I called in the women of the household: Daria came too; but no stimulants were of any avail. Finally I found myself at the end of my resources, and felt I could no longer assume any responsibilities. I summoned Djaki to my side.

'Fetch the Prince,' I said.

He came some minutes later. He looked at his

wife as she lay there, and the white loveliness of her face was inexpressible – so perfectly pure and sad. I told him outright what I feared. He did not answer; he sat down by her and took her in his arms, putting her head on his breast and clasping her tightly, his eyes on her closed eyes. I watched them in silence. Explain it who will, for I cannot, though I assert it is true – at the end of a few moments she stirred slightly, and then revived. What intensity of will had he concentrated on her, what order had penetrated from his brain to hers? What was the principle in her body – or her soul – that he had moved again mysteriously, and that responded to the power of his own volition, recalling her to life? I do not know. When her glance became stronger – conscious – he said:

'You must not faint again. I promised you that no harm will be done to him in any way. You know I have never told you a lie. Be tranquil. Now you must go to sleep.'

She murmured piteous thanks, trying to kiss his hands, but he put them at once behind her, supporting only her back. She did go to sleep almost immediately after, leaning against him, and when he was sure that she slumbered, he laid her quietly on her pillow. I went with him to the door, and as he left me, he added:

'I shall see you in the morning. I have some work to do now. Please try to rest.' He was so haggard himself that he appalled me, but the

words that came to me seemed so futile that I abstained from speaking. He was too strong, even in his torture – he had to confront his destiny alone.

I kept vigil for a long time, but at last I was overwhelmed by a sensation of choking in that drab room, not able to breathe, hemmed in by memories. I asked Daria to remain on guard for a little, and by the back door I went out of the house into the garden, and pushed straight on into the woods. It was dawn, and waves of faint pink palpitated against a sky of light blue enamel: some white clouds edged with silver drifted slowly, touching the mighty heads of the still black trees. The wood gathered its shadows like a cavern under that trembling felicity of the beginning day. Far from the house, to the right of the path which I mechanically followed, among the thick dark trunks, I suddenly heard a violent sound. I stopped short and sought round with my eyes. I distinguished a figure pressed against one of the pines – the tall figure of a man stooping, with his face sunk in his hands, gasping out with terrible sobs his heart into the morning. It was Prince Tariel who was weeping aloud. I retraced my steps softly, and struck off into another track, for by nature the human soul is a very lonely thing, and it is seemly that, when it mourns, it should do so unattended and unseen.

§ 10

I was still in a heavy sleep when, towards ten o'clock, Djaki tiptoed into my room and woke me. 'The Prince asks for you,' he said. Vala was not roused; I hastily donned my riding-boots and a coat, and went out. Tariel was standing in the hall. He informed me that he was leaving the village, as he was required elsewhere to consolidate certain points in case of trouble, but Vadjadzé remained in charge, and as soon as we were able to travel would give us an escort to Tchakvi. He was silent for a short time, then he said with great calmness:

'Major Cassel has been delivered, and is on his way back to Batoum. He will be accompanied as far as Khoulo, but there he will be quite free. Tell her so.' From first to last, he did not pronounce his wife's name. 'Tell her also that I give her back her liberty, and shall take immediate measures to make it effective. Whether she decides to return to France or to remain in Georgia, she will be released from her marriage as soon as I can contrive. Such things are not difficult under the new legislation, and she will be spared as much as possible. Now, good-bye.' He took my hands in his own, and lifted them to his lips. 'You have been a faithful friend. May God bless you and reward you, for I cannot pay you back.' So stern and sad was the voice, so austere and immovable the face, that the bene-

diction weighed upon me like a death sentence. My eyes filled with tears. This was a final separation – he was cutting himself off from me as from a part of his past life; my heart felt it. Such intolerable pain gripped me that I made a movement forwards, with an incoherent appeal. He retreated in the same instant. 'God bless you,' he repeated, with a deeper and more sorrowful severity, and letting my hands drop gently, he was gone.

I gave Vala part of her husband's message at once – the part that concerned Cassel – and waited till she was stronger before I told her the rest. She made no comment. She slept most of the time, as if her organism had been vitally exhausted – and when she did not sleep, she was silent. After four days, however, she declared that she could travel. But my own plans had changed. Kemoul had put in an appearance, fat and complacent as usual, his face set towards Ardagan, and he invited me to join him, holding out as a bait a Malakan village on the road. I did not feel inclined just then to return and brood in my Tchakvi hermitage, so I accepted. Daria had left – slipped away one afternoon, without any farewells – and Vadjadzé, having sealed up the rooms of the house and dismissed the servants, was ready to depart. I could remit Vala to his care with a clear conscience, and I did not hesitate at all over the matter. I had to leave before they did, and on my last morning, while I was occupied with my

packing, Vala came to my room. She thanked me simply, but with sincerity, for all I had done. She seemed to me more dignified than I had known her, for the right words were not easy to find. Yet she chose them well. I did not reply directly, but gave her my hand, merely expressing the hope that her journey would not tire her. She looked me straight in the face.

'You do not forgive me,' she said abruptly. 'You condemn me.'

That was exactly what I did, but I was annoyed at her statement, for I had striven my best not to show my feelings. 'I am not aware,' I said coldly, 'that I set myself up as a judge.'

'You cannot help it,' she replied with a faint irony. 'It is not your fault – your nature wants things to be balanced. So I shall give it the satisfaction it needs, and you will thus continue to believe in an immanent justice. I owe you that much. Listen: my lover does not really love me. That I knew already when I was in Batoum, and he sent me back to Tariel. Neither will he make his life with me after I am divorced. That I am sure of now. So you see that even in this world, the wicked are sometimes chastised. . . . Good-bye.'

I found nothing to say. I stood there looking at her – she had a strange little smile on her pale mouth, and in her hollow eyes such *truth* that I knew she really foretold the future. 'Good-bye,' she repeated.

'Good-bye,' I echoed, heavily.

The door shut on Princess Abhazi. I never saw her again.

§ II

I know very little more – and that little, only by patches, mainly through Captain Viguières. Major Cassel reached Batoum safely, according to the word Prince Tariel had given his wife; he assumed his most imperturbable expression, and returned to Tiflis. No explanations were asked for officially, but some three weeks later he was notified that his special aptitudes were urgently needed in Constantinople. He took ceremonious leave of the Georgian Ministry – who, however, departing from custom, did not offer him a farewell banquet – and removed himself to Turkey. Since then, his name belongs to contemporary history, but as I do not wish this tale to become a *roman à clé*, I shall not relate the deeds which conferred upon him an infamous notoriety in his new functions.

One thing, however, Lorrimer Cassel did not do. He did not marry Vala Abhazi. On the contrary, he had, in Constantinople, a public liaison with a Russian woman. He began the relationship as soon as he left Georgia, and continued it after Princess Abhazi's divorce, so that her predictions regarding his conduct towards her were fulfilled

with the utmost exactitude. She herself went up to Tiflis on leaving Demirjankeuy, and once in the capital an opportune telegram apprised her that her father had fallen dangerously ill, and that her presence was immediately required in France. No breath of scandal attended her departure. But she never came back to her husband's country, and in the autumn of that year society learned with unspeakable amazement that she had been granted a divorce during her absence. I heard of her last through Viguières, whom I went to join in the south of France, a few months before he died of consumption. He told me she was living in Paris, and that he had met her once at a friend's house. That occurred in 1922. 'I am sorry for her,' he said gently – so near his own end, his natural compassion had acquired an almost mystical quality. 'She seemed to me changed.' 'How?' I asked after a pause in which many things revived. But my tone must have been hard, for Robert took my hand.

'I found her quieter and sadder,' he said. 'She has come to her maturity now. Dear – if we believe, as I think it is wisest to do, that nothing is irrevocable in a spiritual sense, she – and others because of her – may reap one day a richer harvest than you imagine from the seeds that cause you such grief still.' Perhaps. . . . Souls have mysterious laws, which are known only to themselves, but I should not care to live, as she must, with the memory of a great wrong done, and impossible to

retrieve. And it still seems to me curious, and a bitter comment, not on her only, but on the human soul in general, that after such an experience, after rising to such heights of tragedy and feeling – even of self-sacrifice, for she, too, in her way, had faced death for the man she loved – and after such losses, she should have been able to lapse into the ordinary routine of existence, and visit 'friends' again. Who knows . . .? She may yet marry. . . . Well, life has falls after its leaps. In its capacity for forgetfulness lies its strength. The race could not carry on, I suppose, if we all took things as hard as Prince Tariel.

Tariel and I did not meet again. My intuition had not played me false: he remained inaccessible to me after that morning interview in Demirjankeuy, and to render him the only service in my power, I respected his obvious wishes. When the British yielded Batoum to the Georgians, his work was finished in Adjara, and he was sent to Angora with a military mission. He stayed in Asia Minor for some six months, and arrived in Georgia just in time to participate in the hopeless stand made against the Bolsheviks, early in the spring of 1921. He was given command of a regiment of cavalry, which he hurled on the Russians during the Tiflis attacks. Othar was killed under him, and his arm was broken – but he escaped, and took refuge in Outer-Kakhetia, where the Khevsoures gathered round him, and where he began an indomitable guerrilla warfare against the Reds. A

price was put on his head, he was proclaimed an outlaw, and the decree went on to declare that when he was captured, he would meet with a brigand's deserts and be hanged, not shot as a soldier. It is reported that when Prince Tariel was informed of this threat, he rose and said:

'Only to-day do I feel that I am worthy to stand before the altar of my country, so I dare to lay down upon it the offering of my life.'

His sacrifice was accomplished soon afterwards. In 1923 the Bolsheviks arrested over three hundred Georgians, members of the aristocracy and officers of the old Menshevik army; they were accused of a military conspiracy against the Communist regime; many of them were shot, and Russian troops were dispatched to Kakhetia to wipe out the rest of the rebels. Prince Tariel was killed there in May of the same year, during a desperate fight. He could not have had a more fitting end.

I, too, have now completed my tribute. Poor as it is, I am content that I made it. For in my eyes Tariel Abhazi has the grandeur of a symbol – the thought of that doomed romantic land of Georgia and my memories of him are inseparably interwoven. His fortune was taken from him, his wife betrayed him, he went long in peril of death, he was compelled to assist at the convulsions of his country, still in the throes of a foreign oppression that is becoming more and more tyrannical – and finally he was destroyed in his prime. Yet I do not pity

him, nor did I ever ask the indifferent gods to help him. Many men and women have I known; I have watched them act, and heard them speak. From them, I have gathered something of the motives and passions that rule our race. . . . But, among all that grievous company, for me Tariel alone stands erect as an immortal reminder that nobility of spirit is not merely a visionary's dream.

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