

GEVORG MARZPETUNI

A Historical Novel By MURATSAN

Translated from the Armenian by James Mandalian, serialized in *The Armenian Review*, 1952-55

About our new book feature

Muratsan, baptismal name Grigor Ter Hovhannesian, was born in 1854 in the City of Shushi, Karabagh. After his graduation from the Nersessian College of Tiflis (Tbilisi), beginning in 1880 he launched on his literary career at first by collaborating with a number of Armenian periodicals and newspapers, and later, as the author of numerous short stories and novelettes foremost among which is his *Noah's Crow* and *The Apostle* — a story which made a great stir in Armenian literary circles at the time. He is more noted for his historical drama play called *Ruzanne*. However, the present story — *Gevorg Marzpetuni* — is generally accepted as his masterpiece. Like all Armenian writers he made writing a hobby, depending on his profession as a public accountant for his livelihood. He died in 1908, at the age of 54, as a result of an acute nervous ailment, and was given a stately funeral in Tiflis. For the customary floral wreaths his compatriots of Nor Jugha (New Julfa) decided to take up a collection the proceeds of which was to be dedicated to the publication of the famous author's works and the foundation of a library in his name. Years later the Communists desecrated his memory by razing the Cemetery of Tiflis which preserved the remains of the elite of Eastern Armenian writers.

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PART I

Chapter 1 The Fort of Garni

Built by Haykaz, the ancestor of the Armenians, and later rebuilt and made more formidable by Trdat the Great, the Fort of Garni known both in times of war for its service to the state as an impregnable fortress, and in times of peace for sheltering the royal treasures, as well as serving as an asylum for the princely families fleeing from the danger, or as a safe winter quarters for Armenian soldiers — despite the ravages of vile Vasak in the days of Vartan — still stood erect and prosperous in those days in which our story begins.

It was situated on one of the peaks of Mount Gegha which separated the provinces of Mazaz and Vostan of the Plain of Ayrarat, and which, having been the repository of the holy Geghard — the lance which pierced the side of Jesus — was called Geghardasar, which means the Peak of the Lance.

The high towering flat on which the fort was built was surrounded by the majestic and awesome panorama of nature. Giant cliffs, gigantic and grotesque rock formations, dizzying gulches and abysmal ravines, and farther still, beautiful majestic mountains with their towering proud peaks, formed a protective cordon concealing it from the naked eye.

Before the Fort, foaming cascades precipitating from the towering heights poured into a tributary of the River Azat which, meandering through the valley which surrounded the high plateau, merged into a second tributary, and after many serpentine undulations, emerged into the vast open plain to administer water and coolness to the vineyards of the Province of Vostan.

The ancient fortress, which with its five churches, countless buildings and barracks, rested on a height of stem cliffs and forbidding natural ramparts, was protected on all sides by natural and artificial fortifications. On the north it was protected not only by the semicircular walls and the turrets, but by the cliffs of Geghardasar which, slowly rising, formed a junction with Mount Gegha. On the east and west sides it was surrounded by gigantic walls and mighty turrets which were forged and polished from molten rock, fastened with lead and iron. As to the south, and partly to the east, it was protected by high, sky-piercing cliffs which, rising from the abyss, like gigantic pyramids, encircled this side of the fortress, rendering it formidable and inaccessible.

On the southeast of this elevation, almost at the tip of the Fort, like twin gigantic custodians, stood first the Royal Castle with its somber structures and serrated turrets, and second, the magnificent canopy of Trdat with its twenty four tall Ionic pillars, with its still intact statues and sculpted dome which sheltered countless other treasures of royal creation and the product of Roman art. From its colonnaded and spacious salon, as if in the palm of his hand, one could command a sweeping view of the entire fortress with its mansions and barracks, as well as the surrounding mountains and valleys

with their ravishing grotesque panorama. Thus the royal perch, aside from being a delightful pleasure resort, served as a beautiful observatory both in times of danger and peace.

It was the autumn of 923 A.D. Geghardasar already was stripped of the meager vegetation which in the spring scarcely dared to cover its rocky slopes. It was wholly transformed now into a rugged cluster of bare ridges and rocky embankments in sharp contrast with the beauty of the edifices inside Garni.

The day was waning. There was no sight of a solitary living being on the winding trails through the gorges. The toilers in the fields of Dvin had long since returned to their homes or ceased to appear in the gulches of Ayrivank where the holy fathers provided food and shelter for belated wayfarers, forbidding them to travel in the dark through the defiles of Karin lest they fell prey to the bandits.

For this reason an awesome silence reigned over the surrounding ravines and canyons, interrupted intermittently by the howling autumn winds or the distant rumblings of Azat catapulting from the mountains.

There was not a stir even in crowded Garni. The autumnal dampness and the mountain cold had driven the inhabitants on the fort to the shelter of their homes. Only a few guards, with iron helmets, their heavy swords hanging from their belts, holding in their hand brass-plated shields and long lances, could be seen making their rounds, some in front of the gates of the fort or in front of the barracks, and some circling around the castle where at the time lived Queen Sahakanush, the wife of King Ashot *Yerkat* (Iron).

Although the King had just been reconciled with his cousin Ashot the Usurper and together with him, having conquered back the capital city of Dvin, had cleared it of its foreign elements, nevertheless, due to the deterioration of the times, it was impossible to keep the royal family in Dvin since the Arab invaders were likely to attack that city at any time. Dvin in those days was an apple of contention between the conflicting forces. And since the King was constantly busy suppressing the rebellions which popped up in various parts of his domain, it was very risky to keep the royal family in the capital when the enemies arrived. It was for this reason that Queen Sahakanush was at the Fort of Karin at this time together with many ladies of the nobility.

Although the season was cold and it was late in the day, nevertheless the Queen had not yet left the canopy of Trdat. For the past few days she had spent long hours here, almost alone, at times pacing the floor of the spacious colonnaded salon, and more often sitting on the veranda which overlooked the precipice. From this vantage point, silent and pensive, she watched now the roaring billows of Azat in the valley which flowed on endlessly, as it kept lashing the willows on either side, and now on the trail which zigzagged the slopes of Mount Gegha where each mounted wayfarer attracted her attention. She fixed her gaze on each passer to ascertain who he was, and his nationality, as soon as

possible, until the latter reached the river, then deflecting his path toward the artery of Karin disappeared from view.

For two weeks the Queen had been anxiously waiting for someone but that someone had not appeared as yet. This made her very unhappy and intensified the anguish which had been gnawing at her heart for a long time.

There were times when she secluded herself in order to see no one, to speak to no one, and to surrender herself to her stormy meditations. At such times she even got angry if one dared to disturb her lonely meditations or the suffering of her inner agitation. But now? She was tired now, weary of her perpetual sorrow. Now she was looking for anyone to whom she could open her heart and explain her grief. It seemed to her that confiding in someone would allay her pain. But, alas, there was no one in the whole castle, neither in the circle of the women or the young girls in whom she could trust her secret. What was worse, even if such a person could be found, she again would not trust her because she had no faith in the sincerity of any woman, especially if that woman was of a princely family, and consequently her equal by virtue of birth. She believed that such women would sympathize with her only outwardly, while inwardly they would gloat over her misery, because everyone of them had their own reason for such a behavior. She had laid her hope only in one man who, she thought, not only would sympathize with her with complete sincerity, but would be able to alleviate her pain as well. It was this man whom the Queen was waiting anxiously, who, however, in spite of his promise, and the word which the courier had brought, still failed to appear.

Just then a woman approached the Queen. She was an old woman of medium stature, a benign face with innocent eyes. There was a smile on her lips as she approached the Queen hesitantly, lest she provoked her anger.

This woman was well acquainted with the anguish which was torturing the Queen. She had seen everything from the very beginning, had scrutinized and verified it. She had been sincerely grieved and had wept for her Grand Lady even then when the Lady herself, unaware of her misfortune, had surrendered herself to her royal pleasures now at the Syunik, now in the mountains of Gugark. That woman was Seda, the Queen's affectionate foster mother and governess, the most kind and noble-hearted woman among all the women in the castle. All this was known to her, yes, long since, and yet she had never mentioned a word of it to the Queen to this day for the simple reason that, if a person cannot forestall a misfortune (which still is unknown to him), it is better that he never learned about it and thereby embitter his life. But now, when the Queen already was advised about everything, Seda was free to speak with her, commiserate with her and comfort her. And why not? Had she not been the Queen's foster mother and had she not brought her up in her own arms?

Thus meditated Seda, but immediately afterwards she reflected that Sahakanush, the daughter of the Prince of Gardman, no longer was a baby, that she was a Queen today whose feet she could only kiss now, but to sit with her as an equal in rank and share her grief, that of course was something which

she could not dare even think. From the day when Seda learned that the Queen was already aware of her misfortune, the poor woman had no rest. It is true that she could help her Queen in nothing except the personal care which she could offer, was duty-bound to offer, and which she already was offering. That was, to follow her Grand Lady like a shadow everywhere and try to dispel her worries as much as possible, whereby, she thought, she could preserve her health.

“Is that you, Seda?” said the Queen, turning to her somewhat ill at ease.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I came to tell you...”

“Have you been here very long?” the Queen interrupted with a suspicious air, fearing, as it were, that her Governess might have overheard some word or sigh which might have betrayed her grief.

“I came in just when the sun swung behind the mountain.”

“But I have given strict orders that no one shall disturb my solitude.”

“Yes, My Lady, I could never dare to ignore your command; but the day is late and the wind is high, you might catch a cold, I came to remind you that it is time to return to the castle.”

“To remind me? What is the meaning of this, Seda?” asked the Queen, half surprised and half angry.

The good Governess was confused. She had no right to say all this to the Queen, what she thought was the truth. She felt her error, was depressed, and her Idly eyes became hidden in their already cramped hollows; a light crimson lit her pale cheeks like the pale dawn of winter which shines on the snow-clad mountain cliffs. But she soon managed to conceal the external reflection of her inner emotions with her maternal tenderness. It seemed, the Queen’s serious and unwavering gaze which demanded an explanation was slowly softened by the old woman’s kind smile. And indeed, was it not true that she loved her Queen, that she did not follow her in order to learn her secrets, but to take care of her precious health over which she trembled like a tender mother? How could she consider this manifestation of sincere love as an offense? Of course not, therefore, she answered in a firm voice:

“I came to remind you that it is cold, that the Queen might be cold.”

“I could have inferred as much myself,” the Queen observed.

“No, my Queen, when you plunge into your sad meditations, you no longer feel what is going on around you.”

“Seda, Mother Seda, you are raving idle talk,” interrupted the Queen, quite surprised.

“That’s right, my beloved Queen,” repeated Seda in a firmer voice. “The other day in the pelting rain when everyone had hurried to his home, when there was not even a single guard in front of the

castle, you were pacing the floor here, as if it was springtime and you were in the paradise lands of Gardman.”

The Queen made an uneasy gesture; it seemed to her the Governess was reproaching her for her useless secrecy, that she was doing it in order to win the favor of one of her antagonist princesses. It could mean that her misfortune already was known to all and that her jealous adversaries had started to scorn her, insulting her queenly pride through her own subordinates.

“These thoughts instantly perturbed the Queen's heart, but she hid her emotion and asked in a gentle voice:

“Seda, who told you that the Queen is deep in sad meditations and in such times she does not know what is going on about her?”

“No one, my beloved Lady. I have seen it with my own eyes. Seda must be blind not to see the perpetual grief which is stamped on her Lady's face or the sorrowful wrinkles on her forehead. For a long time I have known what it is that has been gnawing at your noble and kind heart, but I did not dare to tell you, because I knew that, by talking about your troubles I would only further grieve your tender heart, without being able to add anything to my Queens comfort.”

The Queen was moved. Her former suspicions suddenly gave way to a surge of confidence in her good Governess. She noted in her voice such a warmth of sincerity and tenderness that it seemed to her the one who was speaking to her was her own mother, and not the woman who had suckled her in her infancy.

Nevertheless she made no reply but rose from her throne, silent and pensive, and straightening herself to her full proud and imperious height, she looked at her Governess with affectionate kindly eyes. At that moment she wanted to hear from her everything, hear with a greater certainty, everything which she had known for a certainty long since. And yet, her queenly pride would not permit her to stoop to such weakness; up to that moment she had talked to no one about her troubles, therefore she was reluctant to start it now; still she heartily craved that her Governess would start the conversation without waiting for her command.

Seda did not comprehend the meaning of the Queen's silent and thoughtful gaze; it seemed to her the Queen was offended at her boldness, therefore, to avoid the Queen's gaze, she hastened to pick up the sable cape which had slipped to the floor when the Queen rose, and threw it over her shoulders.

“You are too old to wait on me, Mother Seda, where are my maids?” asked the Queen gently.

“Oh, let me only wait on you, my gentle, my peerless Queen. Is Seda so old that she can no longer be helpful in anything?” “Mother Seda, such a thought was farthest from my mind.”

“That my presence is no longer wanted by my Queen?”

“Seda, you are interrupting me.”

“Or perhaps I said something imprudent which offended my Queen.”

“No, no, my Seda; your presence is always pleasing to me; the proof lies in the fact that I let no one accompany me in my solitude, but you are always with me, whenever you want, you impose your presence on me whether the Queen wishes it or not.” “And that’s the way I will continue, My Lady. You may get angry at me if it pleases you, but to let you sink in deep sad meditation for long hours, that’s something I cannot allow, it is harmful to your precious health.”

“Precious? Yes, perhaps for you; my good Seda, only to you ...” the Queen murmured to herself, then turning to her Governess, she added, “You are right, Mother Seda, I am not angry at you.... I really have been too long in the open air. Where are my maids?”

“You have given strict orders that they make no appearance until they receive your summons.”

“Call them in, then. Let them bring my palanquin.”

The Queen strode to a corner of the canopy, and standing beside the colonnade, she began to watch the golden moon which was slowly rising from behind the distant mountains. Although the cold was piercing, and the wind still was howling, but the sky was clear and cloudless, the stars had begun to shine, and the disc of the moon, which seemed to be hanging like a magic lantern on top of the mountain, had begun to bathe the jagged mountains and the hill in a pool of limpid phosphorescence. The foaming torrents of River Azat, precipitating from the mountain heights, were shimmering like a silvery line.

The Queen was enthralled anew with the beauty of the evening moon and again sank into her meditations. A little more of this, and she again would have been tempted to return to the veranda, and sinking in her chair, would surrender herself to the flights of her torturous imagination. But the voices of the maids and the light of the torches borne by the servants of the Castle awakened her.

She turned back and looked. Lady Gohar, the Princess Marzpetuni, accompanied by the maids and the governess, was making her appearance. The Princess approached reverently, bowed low before the Queen, and very respectfully and gently reprimanded her for her inordinate love of solitude.

“I have been watching the road of Mount Gegha, so that I would be the first to inform you of the arrival of Prince Gevorg,” replied the Queen with a gracious smile.

“I shall be very thankful if he only will bring us good news,” added Princess Gohar, as she held out her hand to help the Queen come down the steps of the canopy.

“And if he doesn’t bring good news?” the Queen asked.

“Then I would wish that you wouldn't open the gates of the fort before him,” said the Princess jokingly.

The Queen smiled and said nothing more.

Four powerful servants stood before the canopy, supporting the Queen's gilded palanquin, draped with florid lustrous silk and clusters of golden tassel. The maids assisted the Queen to her seat in the palanquin while the torch-bearing servants illuminated the path to the castle which was scarcely a couple of dozen feet away. The Princess and the Queen's maids accompanied the palanquin as it proceeded to the castle. Before the broad arched gate of the castle likewise stood lit lamps under whose light a company of armed guards kept vigil. When the Queen's palanquin arrived at the gate, the guards instantly snapped to attention. They lowered their lances until the tips touched the ground. This was the customary salute to the Queen.

“Who is your captain? the Queen asked the guards.

“I am the captain, Your Majesty,” spoke a tall handsome youth, stepping forward. He was distinguished from the others by his shining armor and the crest of his helmet.

“Any news from the Lord Keeper of the castle?”

“The Lord Keeper commanded me to inform you that the bowmen and the lancers are guarding the bastions, the garrison is keeping watch over the ramparts, and the guards are in the turrets.”

“What about the keys of the Fort?”

“They await the Queen's command to lock the gates.”

“Why so late? It is already dark.”

“A courier from Ayrivank has brought news that His Holiness the Catholicos will arrive tonight. The Lord Keeper wishes to know if he shall keep the keys until His Holiness's arrival.”

“Tell the Lord Keeper to lock the gates and report to me immediately.”

The captain of the fifty bowed low and instantly headed for the street facing the main gate.

Having arrived at the gates of the castle, the Queen stepped out of the palanquin and entered the arched salon. This was a spacious circular hall built exclusively of stone. To its right and left opened four small concave doors each of which led to the various apartments and secret chambers of the castle. A broad marble stairway, rising from the center of each gate, led to the private chambers of the princely women and the young ladies, while another stairway led to the upper apartments where the Queen lived with her maid servants. The stairways were carpeted with costly rugs and were illuminated by bronze lamps which hung from the ceiling.

The Queen started to ascend the steps accompanied by her maids, and turning to the right, she arrived at the upper storey hall which was illuminated by double the number of candlesticks. This was a beautiful domed structure, ornamented with sculptured columns, hollow comers, sculptured ceilings, and a floor built of mosaic stones. Arched doors from all sides led to the various apartments of that storey.

Through the largest of these doors the Queen entered two small chambers whose walls were built of colorful brick reflecting the light which poured down from hanging silver lamps. These rooms, likewise equipped with costly rugs and luxurious soft couches, were for the use of the Queen's chambermaids.

From here the Queen crossed to a spacious gorgeous salon which was lit by four huge silver lamps. The walls of the hall were built wholly of polished white marble, ornamented with rich designs, and buttressed with arches and sculptured columns of red stone. The border of the floor was decorated with a mosaic of concave and convex colorful stones, while the center, which faced the windows, was dome-shaped, with arched circles, and likewise decorated with colorful inlaid mosaics. The entire floor was covered with priceless rugs, and the walls were lined with chairs and sofas with silken pillows and coverlets.

The Queen took a seat at the extreme end of the salon while one of her chambermaids, bowing low, placed an exquisite silken pillow under her feet.

Chapter 2 An Unpleasant Development

“I wonder if the Queen hasn’t guessed the reason for His Holiness’s visit to the Fort at this hour of the night?” Princess Marzpetuni ventured to ask, as if wishing to break the oppressive silence in the vast hall, as she took a seat near the Queen and fixed her with her gaze, waiting for her answer.

“No doubt the Holy Father has some news of extraordinary importance which he wants to communicate to us,” replied the Queen with a hesitant air.

“Or, could it be that he wants to pay a visit to the Queen?”

“There was no need of stepping out of the Monastery by night in order to do that,” the Queen countered. “Thank God, the Monastery of Ayrivank is not far from us.” “The news makes me very uneasy.” “And I am uneasy because of Prince Gevorg. It has been two weeks now since he left us. If the coming of the Catholicos is connected with some kind of ill fortune, the absence of the Prince puts us in double jeopardy.”

“Can it be, Your Majesty, that you doubt the King’s success?”

“To conquer the Governor of Utik is not a great task, yet it is God who is the dispenser of success. If the King had not suffered some setback, Prince Gevorg should have been here by now, or at least his courier would bring us the news that Tslik Amram has been defeated or taken captive.”

“Reverse? Oh, don’t say it, dear Queen. God forbid that the King should meet with reverse in his encounter with Tslik Amram. That would be too great an insult both for the King and his soldiers. “

“The insult will cling most of all to the princes who deserted the King and are busy with protecting their own castles,” observed the Queen bitterly.

“Of course they could have turned the defense of their forts over to the women,” added the Princess, trying to correct her error.

“Then we have no right to look for success.”

“But if it should please God.”

“Yes, if only it would please God,” the Queen interrupted with an ironic smile.

Just then one of the chambermaids came in to tell the Queen that the Lord Keeper of the castle wished permission to see her.

“Let him come in,” commanded the Queen.

A few moments later the Lord Keeper came in. He was an old, tall man with a serious and imposing air, dressed tightly, his silver-sheathed sword hanging from his side, and his brass helmet in his hand. Approaching the Queen with firm steps he bowed low, then offered to turn over the keys of the castle which one of the servants who accompanied him carried on a silver platter.

The Queen picked up the keys and gave them to her Governess who was standing nearby. The latter took the keys and retired to the Queen's private chamber.

This was a ceremony which was carried out each evening in the same manner.

As long as Prince Marzpetuni, King Ashot's trusted friend, was in Garni he was Lord Keeper of the castle and personally responsible for the keys. But from the day that, at the Queen's command, he departed for Utik to gather information in regard to the King's expedition, and if necessary to come to his military aid, from that day the keeping of the Fort had been entrusted to an old soldier by the name of Mushegh. The latter was not of princely descent but an old and loyal servant of the royal house. Although the Queen could have entrusted him with the keeping of the keys for always, but because the times were perilous, and there were frequent news of the surrender of this or that fort as a result of betrayal or the laxity of the keepers, therefore the Queen, although she had great faith in Mushegh (whose proven loyalty had raised him to this high position), nevertheless, to sleep with an easy conscience at nights, had arranged it so each night the keys of the Fort should be brought in to her safe keeping.

"You wanted to keep the keys until the arrival of His Holiness the Catholicos?" the Queen asked the Keeper.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Why?"

"So that I would not be obliged to disturb the Queen's sleep when I needed the keys in the night."

"Don't you know that the Queen cannot be asleep whenever the gates of the castle are opened?"

"That is so, My Lady, forgive the innocence of your servant."

"Simple-mindedness is no fault, my dear Mushegh, but weakness. Whereas, we live in evil times and we must watch our step each moment. When will His Holiness arrive?"

"The messenger did not set the hour, he simply said he would come tonight, and asked me to be ready to open the gates when he comes."

"Can't you guess the reason for his coming?"

"He no doubt is coming to pay the Queen a visit."

“But why by night?”

“His Holiness is a very humble man. He shims stately receptions and popular demonstrations.”

At that moment the chambermaid again came in to announce that Prince Gor wished to see the Queen.

“Let him come in,” the Queen said, her face lit with a smile.

Princess Marzpetuni instantly turned her smiling face to the door, so did the chambermaids and the Queen’s governess. It seemed the visitor was beloved by all.

Presently in came a youth of twenty-five springs, tall, handsome, with fiery eyes, armed from head to foot, a gold-sheathed sword hanging from his side, and holding in his hand his shining helmet. He approached the Queen smiling and kissed her hand. Then he walked to his mother, the Princess Marzpetuni, likewise kissed her right hand and stood at attention beside the Lord Keeper.

“Whenever I see you, Gor, it seems to me you are going off to war, or returning from the battle. Why are you always armed like this?” the Queen asked, smiling.

“I do it in accordance with my father’s command, my Queen.”

“But at this unearthly hour, in a closed fort, in the Queen’s castle? Is there any need for such precaution?”

“I must be ready to meet the enemy at any hour. Who knows? Even now, in this very castle there lurks some traitor whom I may have to combat.”

“Oh, you are a dangerous man, Prince Gor,” the Queen said affectionately.

“Dangerous for the enemies of my Queen and King.”

“Whom you apparently do not know.”

“And whom I would never wish to see in this castle.”

Princess Marzpetuni, who was looking at her son with maternal tenderness, was thrilled at the last words, but the Queen chuckled heartily.

“But do you know, my dear, that such an enemy is in our midst right now, right in this castle?” the Queen said half seriously.

“And what is his name?” asked the young prince avidly.

“A traitor who is hidden in an inside cell, ready no doubt to strike at us at the right moment?”

“But who is he?” the youth asked impatiently.

“Lady Shahandukht.”

The Prince smiled at this, and blushed, but the Queen and the Princess Gohar burst into a chuckle.

“And now, where do you come from? Do you bring good tidings?” the Queen asked, becoming serious again.

“Yes, what I bring is no sad news,” replied the Prince. “A second messenger from His Holiness the Catholicos has come to announce that the Patriarch will not call at the castle tonight.”

“And the reason?”

“The messenger did not give the reason because the gate of the castle was closed and I spoke to him from a window of the tower.”

The news put an end to the Queen’s cheerful mood and once again she fell into her meditations. “I wonder what kind of extraordinary and perhaps sad development brings the Catholicos to Garni by night, and now compels him to abandon his intention,” she thought to herself. “Could it be that he received some bad news from Utik, that he heard something about the imminent attack of the enemy?”

“But why did you say that what you bring is not bad news? Could it be that the coming of the Catholicos displeases you?” the Queen asked.

“Yes, my Queen.”

“I am surprised at you,” said the Queen, fixing the youth with a doubtful look.

However the face of the Lord Keeper darkened at this, as if he was afraid the Prince might say something which would offend the sacred sentiment which he cherished toward the Catholicos, and begging the Queen’s permission to be excused, he saluted her and took his leave.

Princess Marzpetuni noticed it and regretting her son’s imprudent answer hastened to ask him:

“Why does the coming of the Catholicos displease you?”

“If the Queen would permit me to speak freely...”

“Speak freely, the least of your faults is your candidness,” the Queen said.

“I am sorry because he is coming to our Fort neither to call on the Queen nor to bless us...”

“Gor, be careful of what you say,” his mother interrupted, blushing from her sudden emotion.

“Princess Gohar, let him speak his mind freely,” observed the Queen earnestly.

“To speak candidly one cannot pay any attention to caution, Mother. I am speaking before the Queen and my mother. Yes, I repeat, the Catholicos is not coming to bless us but to find sanctuary in the fort.”

“Why does he seek sanctuary?” asked the Queen.

“Apparently he has heard that an attack is in the offing in our mountains so he seeks shelter in Garni.”

“If he has heard such a thing then he is doing the wise thing by coming to our fort,” replied the Princess.

“No, Mother, he must not abandon his monks in the Monastery and just look after himself.”

“Have you heard such a thing?” the Queen asked somewhat alarmed.

“No, my Queen, it is a mere supposition on my part.”

“But one must speak with facts and not suppositions,” the Princess observed seriously.

“With your permission, my Queen,” the Prince said, turning to the Queen.

“Speak,” commanded the latter.

“The proof is this, Mother, that the Catholicos, afraid of Yusuf’s lieutenant, a man named Nusr, has deserted the Catholicosate of Dvin and has taken refuge in the ravines of Ayrivank. However, Nusr will enter Dvin sooner or later and will take possession of the Catholicosate and its estates.”

“If the Arab captures the capital whose defender the King is absent, what is there to be wondered at if he occupies the Catholicosate whose defender is an unarmed clergyman?” spoke the Princess with emotion, without thinking she might offend the Queen by such words.

But the latter not only was deeply offended by the words of the Princess, but she paled from her inner perturbation. Yet, unwilling to expose her agitation, she slowly rose from her seat, and ignoring the Princess, said to her governess softly:

“Mother Seda, I am tired, is my bed ready?”

“Yes, my beloved Queen.”

After bidding the Princess and the Prince goodnight, the Queen left for her bedroom accompanied by her maids and the governess.

“What have you done, Mother?” Prince Gor exclaimed with emotion after the Queen had left. “You warned me against speaking freely, and yet you plunged a knife into the Queen’s heart.”

Princess Gohar, who had made her reply from her excitement over her son’s boldness, and not with the intention of hurting the Queen, once again remembered her words and was thunderstruck.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her, I did not think, the words just slipped from my lips,” she kept murmuring disconsolately.

The young Prince angrily paced the floor, then he suddenly stopped and asked his mother:

“Mother, are all women forgetful like you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Why?... Do you remember, Mother? My father at his departure asked you and the other women of the castle to try to keep the Queen cheerful, said she was carrying a heavy weight and that you should make her forget her grief. I do not know what the Queen’s trouble is because they won’t tell me, but surely you and your friends are familiar with it. You should not have sinned against the Queen’s comfort and my father’s command.”

“It was your fault, Gor, how could you say in the presence of the Queen that the Catholicos was running away from Ayrivank on sheer supposition?”

“It was not based on supposition, mother, it was based on facts,” retorted the Prince. “On facts? How?”

“Yes, I hid the truth from the Queen because I did not want to alarm her.”

“What truth?”

“The truth is that soon there will be an attack on our mountains.”

“What are you saying, Gor? And who are the ones who are attacking?”

“None other than Nusr himself. He has already come out of Nakhichevan and is marching on Dvin.”

“My God, what are you saying?” exclaimed the Princess.

“Yes, and this thing is happening just when the King and the troops are away from the capital.”

“What are we going to do now?”

“You will keep this new development to yourself. You will say nothing about it to the Queen. That will be all. We on our part will do what duty demands of us. I am going to see the Lord Keeper now.”

Saying it, the Prince saluted his mother and hurried out of the Salon, while Princess Gohar, bewildered and confused, headed for her apartments.

Chapter 3 The Queen with Her Governess

After leaving the salon the Queen entered her private chamber in a state of deep agitation. The pale light which sifted down from the solitary silver lamp hanging from the ceiling seemed altogether too weak to her eyes, although it was by her command that no more than a single light should illuminate her bed chamber. On other occasions she would not have noticed it, but now she could not reconcile herself with the dim light.

“Let me have more light, without it my heart already is too dark,” she exclaimed as she walked to the narrow arched window which looked on the heights of Mount Gegha now illuminated by the moonlight, and which ventilated the room.

Standing there, she began to breathe the fresh air deeply, voraciously, as if wishing to cool off the conflagration which was burning her heart.

A chambermaid came in with a gilt five-branched candelabra and placed it on a small round table of walnut and adorned with ivory and mother of pearl. “The brighter light set into bold relief the refined ornaments of ancient art with which Trdat, the patron of arts, centuries before had enriched the bedchamber of his lovely sister, the Crown Princess of the Armenians and perpetual virgin. Like many other chambers of the castle, this private room was built wholly of stone with the exception that the stones were the choicest and most colorful. Each wall was divided into four arched sections with five twin engaged columns which rested on beautiful ornate pedestals and whose Ionic capitals cemented four semi-circular arches. The rough and polished parts of the walls were made of white, and the pedestals and the capitals of fire-red porphyry. The panels of the walls between the engaged columns had intermittent arched niches whose inside was built of colorful porcelain while the borders were ornamented with crescent-shaped bands of porphyry. The rough space between each two niches was decorated with sculptured festoons and floral designs.

The ceiling of the room was dome-shaped and decorated with floral designs of black and red stone, while the comers which united the walls with the ceiling were adorned with gilded mosaics. Two of the walls had twin narrow but tall arched windows, bordered with crescent bands of porphyry.

In beautiful contrast with this chamber of solid stone stood the Queen’s bedroom which was situated in the right corner, walled by purple silken curtains embellished with golden tassels and clusters.

Approaching the Queen’s bedstead, the Governess threw open the heavy curtains, revealing the luxurious bed made of costly fabrics and finely-spun muslin, snuggled by flowery pillows of rich Persian velvet. She then turned to the Queen and asked in a soft voice:

“Do you wish to retire now, your Majesty?”

“Yes, right now, I am very tired,” the Queen replied, and turning to the window she ordered her maids to undress her.

Yet, at that moment it was not the tiredness which was stamped on her face but an inner, spiritual agitation, which, nevertheless, lent an attractive luster to that beautiful face, those shining eyes, her graceful stature and her proud imperious movements.

The two maids approached the Queen and took off her customary adornments — her priceless Byzantine bracelets and earrings, her golden necklace which snuggled around her ivory neck, her bejeweled girdle which encased her thin waist in a fine silken robe, and the sapphire clasp on her left shoulder buttoning the gilt cape which covered her luxurious bosom. They also took off her diamond tiara which held together her rich, rebellious hair done after the Greek coiffeur. The crowding braids of her luxurious hair, relieved of their golden bands, rippled and spread over her half-naked shoulders and breast.

Half undressed, the Queen sat on her bed and asked for her psalm book. One of the maids walked to the head of the sleeping room, pulled open a small drawer, took out a small book bound in gold and decorated with precious jewels, and kissing it, handed it to the Queen. At the same time she brought a candlestick and set it on a table beside the Queen’s bed.

“That will be all,” the Queen said. “You may go now and rest. Seda will stay with me tonight.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have a snack before retiring?” Seda asked the Queen with maternal tenderness.

“To eat something? No.”

“Or to drink a glass of sweet drink?”

“Very well, bring some refreshing drink,” the Queen finally yielded, as if trying to do a favor to her governess.

The maids left the room to bring the refreshments.

There was a profound silence in the Queen’s private chamber. She opened her Psalter as if to read but her eyes merely went over the writing mechanically; she was not reading, she was merely trying to keep her eyes away from her governess so she would not start a conversation until the maids returned. But she was breathing heavily, her breast was heaving like billows which are about to break into a storm, constantly rising and falling.

Finally the maids returned with the refreshments — a silver platter carrying a golden pitcher of cool confectionery drink made of the juice of fruits and diluted honey, accompanied with choice fruits

from the vineyards of the Valley of Ararat. “You may leave now,” the Queen said to the maids. The latter curtsied and wishing the Queen a good night’s rest left the room.

The Queen took a deep breath as if she had been relieved of a great burden. Then she put the book aside and turning to Seda who was standing beside her bed, her hands crossed, she asked:

“Seda, did you hear what Princess Gohar said?”

“Yes, My Lady, I heard it.”

“Did you catch her reference to the King?”

“Yes, she said the King was not in Dvin.”

“And that he is constantly roving in Utik?”

“No, my Queen; she said nothing about Utik.”

“How come she did not mention Utik?”

“I can repeat her words, word by word, she did not mention Utik.”

“What are you saying, woman? Then I ... But it’s impossible ... I distinctly remember she referred to Utik too. Didn’t you notice how I changed color?”

“Yes, dear Queen, I noticed that it was her reference to the “King’s absence” which upset you. But there was no mention of Utik. It seems you drew the conclusion that she meant the King was absent from Dvin because he wanted to be in Utik. That is how you think you heard the word Utik, but I remember very well that she never mentioned the word.”

The governess’ explanation cleared the Queen’s mind, her memory returned, she sensed her error and was chagrined, seeing how far she had surrendered herself to her imagination.

Besides, she suddenly reflected that as yet she had said nothing to Seda about her troubles, why then was she speaking so freely about Utik, as if she had nothing to hide from her? The realization of this fact distressed her. But on second thought, seeing her cup already was full and that she had nothing to gain by suffering secretly, she suddenly asked her:

“Seda, what do you know about Utik?”

Seda fixed the Queen’s eyes with a probing look, and seeing in them not surprise but lack of confidence, she said nothing.

“Seda, the Queen is asking you. Why are you silent?”

“In regard to Utik, my dear Queen, I know many things, I know everything.”

“Yes, I remember now, a couple of hours ago you said the same thing in the canopy... You said you had known long since what was gnawing at my heart, but that you dared not speak to me about it for fear of opening my old wounds without really helping me. Wasn't that what you said, Seda?”

“All right then, speak freely now, you can no longer revive my old wounds, but perhaps you might allay them.”

“But if...”

“No, I tell you I need a trusted friend now very badly, a companion to whom I may open my heart. You shall be that friend, Mother Seda. I am too tired, too weak to carry my burden longer.”

“But isn't everything known to you already? Why do you wish to hear the story of your affliction from me?”

“Don't ask me why, Mother Seda. I want to hear the whole thing from you all over again, not only what I know but what has been hidden from me to date.”

“But, my Queen, I hardly know where to begin.”

“Start from the beginning, the very beginning. The night is long and I have lost my sleep.

“But, what shall I say? ... This whole story may be told in a few words.”

“The King is in love with Tslík Amram's wife. Isn't this the gist of the whole thing?”

The Queen instantly was staggered at these words, a secret emotion coursed through her heart like the stroke of a lightning and her spirit was agitated like the waters of the sea shore as by a sudden avalanche crashing down the mountainside. A light rosy red suffused her cheeks and her forehead became moist with a scarcely visible soft dew. Apparently she was not expecting such a short answer, devastatingly candid and all-inclusive. She wanted to hear it all, yes, but not so soon, not so stark naked. Suddenly a governess blurts indiscreet words in the presence of the Queen! How utterly impossible! How inconceivable! How could the Queen hear such audacious candor?

“Stop it, Seda, say no more,” she exclaimed furiously, herself not knowing why she was silencing the poor woman.

The governess was stunned. She kept staring at the Queen fearfully, without comprehending the cause of her anger.

But the Queen was silent. She dropped her gaze and kept staring at the floor. After a few moments her emotion gave way to her sound judgment. She raised her eyes and looked at Seda. Her tender heart was distressed at sight of her governess' fright.

"Is it worth hurting this poor woman because of her? Why keep on this stubborn dissimulation?" She thought to herself, and holding out her hand to the governess, she said in an affectionate voice:

"Come close, Seda, give me your hand."

Seda came near with forced steps but did not dare to hold out her hand to the Queen.

"Come close, I say, give me your hand."

Seda came close and held out her right hand. The Queen held it and looking the governess in the eye said affectionately:

"Mother Seda, I have hurt you, please forgive me." Saying it she kissed the hand warmly, but the action was so swift that the governess could not prevent it "my Queen, My Majestic Lady, what are you doing?" Seda exclaimed and fell to her knees, seized the Queen's knees and began to weep from her intense emotion.

"Mother Seda, don't get excited, I kissed the hand which I have kissed many times in my childhood, the hand which has caressed me, embraced me, and kept me; I kissed the hand of the woman who has suckled me, who has been my second mother. Rise to your feet, Seda, embrace your Sahakanush. Do you remember how you used to say Sahakanush is too long a name and that you would call me Sahanush? Oh, how those sweet childhood days are gone! How those trivial happy moments have vanished never to return! Of all them you alone are left to me, my good Seda. Rise and kiss me."

Seda rose and threw her arms around the Queen. She showered the Queen's lovely head with her kisses, her itty forehead and her marble white shoulder which were half covered with her luxurious hair.

"Ah, how sweet are those maternal kisses!" murmured the Queen, clinging tightly to her governess. "I have no mother, Seda, you be my mother."

"Don't cry, my priceless Sahanush, I am your mother, your maidservant, your slave; don't cry my peerless Queen."

They stood there for long moments in a tearful embrace. Finally, freeing herself, the governess filled a glass with the cool drink and offered it to the Queen.

"Drink this, it will ease your agitation," she said to the Queen.

But the Queen, as if she had heard nothing, started to blabber in self forgetfulness:

“Listen, Seda, don’t you think I would have been more lucky if I had been a shepherd’s wife?”

“What are you saying, my Queen?” Seda asked, somewhat bewildered.

“Yes, then our princes would make fun of Sahak Sevada; they would say the mighty prince of Gardman has given his daughter to a shepherd in marriage, is it not so? Yes, then I, the Queen of the Armenians, would not be the wife of Ashot *Yerkat*; then I would not wear these jewels, these dresses embroidered with gold, I would not have this furniture of ivory and silver ... yes, these regiments would not lower their banners and their lances in my presence... But in a shepherd’s shack my soul would be tranquil and my spirit at ease ... My father and my beloved brother would not be deprived of the light of their eyes, and I would not be obliged constantly to mourn the hoary hair of the one and the youth of the other with secret sighs and hidden tears. And all this for the sake of an unconscionable low-born woman ... Oh, I go mad when I think of it.”

“My Queen, you are getting excited again, drink this cup, I beg of you, it will refresh you and quiet your agitation,” Seda begged, offering her the drink.

The Queen raised the glass to her lips and drank the contents in one draught. The cooling liquid refreshed her heart. She fell silent for a moment. Taking advantage of the situation, Seda picked from among the fruits which the maids had brought a lovely bunch of red grapes and offered it to the Queen.

“This too will ease your heart,” she said, “taste some of it.”

“Very well, but you sit here in front of me and tell me all, all you know,” the Queen commanded.

Seda obeyed, she dragged up a small tripod chair beside the Queen’s bed and sat on it, “Good, begin now.”

“You are excited, my beloved Queen; it would be better if we did not speak about your troubles,” the governess begged.

“I am determined to know all, how much the others know about my troubles; that is imperative; it may help me combat my trials and for that reason you will tell me not only what you know but what you have heard.” “If my telling will help I am willing.” “Yes of course, it will help.” There was a note of finality in the Queen's words.

Seda bowed her head and started to think. Apparently she was returning to the past, trying to recall the old memories. To do that she did not of course need time, what she was about to relate had taken place in the course of about four or five years, therefore, there was hardly an incident which Seda might have forgotten. But she was wondering if she should tell the Queen everything which she knew, or that alone which might satisfy her curiosity, without further upsetting her.

“I know, my good Seda, why you are hesitating. Yes, you do not wish to excite me, is it not so? But hidden wounds cause greater pain than those which are apparent. Speak freely and candidly. By doing so you will bring greater lightness to my heart and I promise to listen to you patiently.”

“Yes. My gracious Lady, I fear that what I shall tell you will further aggravate the agitation of your heart. Now that you have surmised it and have promised to listen to me with cool fortitude I will tell you all I know, without hiding a single thing, especially when you say what I tell you will be of help.”

Saying this, Seda straightened herself in her seat, covered her knees with the hem of her blue robe, lowered her eyes for a few moments, then meeting the Queen’s anxious gaze, she started to recite her story in a soft, easy voice.

Chapter 4 When the Queen's Fate Was Decided

“What I shall relate, dear Queen, is not very old; most of it you will perhaps remember,” continued Seda, “although there is no profit in reviving the past, nevertheless the root of your troubles lies in the past; therefore, if we want to stop your pain we must go back to the past.”

“Yes, Seda, you must start from the past because my present has been lulled by that past. Perhaps I shall find some proof in your story which might justify him. Oh, how I wish he were right!”

“You mean the King, don’t you?”

“Continue your story, Seda. We will speak about that later.”

“Yes, at that time you were a young girl living in your father’s mansion, carefree and gay like a newly-budding butterfly in a spring morning. You were the idol of your late mother while the Prince of Gardman lavished his tender caresses on none but you. You were the object of your brothers’ delight. What all did they not lavish to amuse you. The mansion of Sahak Sevada had only one ornament, the whole of Albania had only one shining star, and that was the beautiful Sahanush, the Lady of Gardman.

“Do you remember those banquets and parties which were staged at your father’s mansion, those horse races and tournaments which were held in front of the great castle? All those were held for you.”

“Why for me, Mother Seda? Wasn't my father a lover of sports?”

“No, my dear, it was the others who thought so. Even the neighboring princes talked about your father’s inordinate love of sports. But the Lord of Gardman was neither a spendthrift nor a lover of sports. On the contrary, he was the only prince in Armenia who, in addition to his consummate

prudence, moderation, and bravery, was a lover of learning, who founded a school in his home, who appointed teachers, and who promoted learning in the Monastery of Gardman. All these are well known to you.”

“Of course.”

“At the same time he was a man of great hospitality, as well as a man of state. He often received calls from the princes of Artsakh, Syunik, Vaspurakan, and other places, as well as the royalty of Vostan. The Lord of Gardman could not receive them without the splendor which befitted his name and fame, especially since many of them visited Gardman in the hope of winning the hand of his beautiful daughter. Your parents and I said nothing to you about this; those parties, tournaments and races were staged for you, so that you would select from among those competing princes the man of your heart, the one who was worthy of your love.

“Your father could not very well make any discrimination among the youth who sought your hand because they all were brave, handsome, rich and famous princes. Favoring one, and rejecting the other might have aroused the envy and the hostility of those warriors, and consequently, endanger the peace of their countries and his. He clearly perceived that most of the disturbances which ruined our land were engendered by just such trivial causes. For this reason he made it a condition clearly understood that ‘my Sahakanush will be the bride of the prince whom she loves.’ This was a prerequisite which every prince accepted beforehand without complaint.”

“But, do you remember? You did not love Prince Smbat of Syunik, nor the King’s brother Gurgen Artsruni, nor Atom the Warrior of Andzev nor the Lord Grigor of Mok, nor any of the princes of Albania.”

“I remember, yes, I loved none of them. At that time I was proud as the oak on the mountainside which scorns the whipping wind but which finally was toppled by the hurricane. Oh, how I have been punished for my pride.”

“If my story disturbs you, my Queen, just give me the order and I will say no more.”

“No, Seda, keep on, but don’t go that far back.”

“I must, dear Queen, it is better that I tell the story in its order and forget nothing, rather than to hurry and omit the essentials.”

“It seems you want me to go to sleep before I have heard the things I want to hear most. Is it not so?” the Queen asked, smiling.

“Not at all. I want to tell you the whole story,” Seda replied reluctantly, likewise smiling.

“I understand your mind. Kind woman, how much you care for me! But it’s all the same, I am not going to sleep tonight anyway. So, go on, tell me what you know. I am waiting.”

“Thus, dear Queen, you rejected all the candidates leaving us dumbfounded. Your mother was sore that the Prince had made you the sole arbiter. And I, why should I hide my sin? Agreed with the great Princess. But your father shook his head and said: “My Sahakanush will find her worthy mate; it seems her husband must have a little higher title than a prince.”

“Poor man! He verily prophesied it. If he only could have foreseen the grief which his future son-in-law would bring on his head.”

“Let us drop the story then, dear Queen. I see that, no matter how careful I am, I shall keep on distressing you. You cannot listen to me cool. Do you wish me to tell you the story of the Gnuni princes, the lamented David, the martyrdom of Gurgen? Ah, how touching, and how exciting that story is! It took place eight years ago in Dvin, by the hand of the infernal beast Yusuf.”

“Seda, go on with your story, I have no hankering for the story of martyrdoms. Go on, I am all right now.”

“Very well, we shall see,” Seda said smiling, and continued her story.

“Thus, the prophecy of the great Prince came true. I remember it as if it took place today. Yes, those were happy days but they are gone. Everything in this world is transitory. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, Solomon has said.”

The Queen smiled. Seda paused and looked at her. She wanted to know why the Queen smiled. The latter surmised the governess’s thought and said laughingly.

“How slow you are, Seda.”

“At once, at once, my dear Queen, I will tell it faster,” Seda said likewise smiling, “please, don’t be tired if I start it somewhat earlier. I cannot ignore those memorable incidents, after all.”

“Keep on speaking, I won’t tire.”

“Ah yes, when they crucified King Smbat in front of Dvin. Oh, what tragic days! I shudder as I recall it. At that time Ashot the hero was still in Utik.”

“Again in Utik? Akh Seda, don’t mention that name. I cannot stand it.”

“My Queen.”

“Yes, demolished be Utik so that I shall never again hear the name,” the Queen exclaimed, deeply shaken and paling from the inner emotion. She was so agitated that Seda shrank and was crushed like

one who was guilty. She was silently watching the Queen, terrified. The latter, however, was not looking at her Governess. Her beautiful, grief-stricken eyes were fixed on the window whose long narrow pane was illuminated by the milky rays of the soft moon. It seemed she was watching the picture of the ornate arch which the rays had painted on the window wall or the black outline of the mountains dimly visible in the distance. But actually she was seeing nothing and even thinking nothing; her heart was troubled, and consequently, her mind was soaring through the black empty void where she intermittently met shining strips on which were painted the various images of her affliction; but she would not stop before them and kept flying far, far into the darkness, into the infinite space where the unpleasant images slowly diminished, and where reigned solitude, silence, and oblivion.

For a long time the Queen was in this reverie. Finally she heaved a deep sigh. Tired, as it were, from a long arduous labor, she turned her languid eyes toward Seda and nodded to her. Still silent, her hands crossed on her breast, the Governess was looking at the Queen. A little while before it had seemed to her that her lovely Sahakanush, crushed under the weight of her grief, had gone mad. Had she not attended her in her father's home, nurtured her growth so delicate and tender like the lovely lily of the King's garden which only the spring breezes could caress, only the morning dew could gently weigh down, but never the crude hands of a peasant? And now, this flower of the garden, this snow white lily, was bending its head under the weight of the bleak wind, under the blows of her affliction. Would she be able to stand it? These were the thoughts which worried Seda.

But when she saw the Queen looking at her so composed and tranquil she was vastly relieved. She drew a deep breath and released her crossed hands.

"Continue your story," the Queen said in a gentle, easy voice.

"Shall I continue? ... But ... I don't know where I left it. Your excitement has completely confused me."

"You were telling about King Smbat whom they crucified in front of Dvin."

"Yes, I remember now, but what shall I say, my Queen? My angel? You get troubled. You get angry with me. Your Seda is doting, she doesn't know how to tell a story which will please you. What shall I do?"

"No, Seda, it is better this way. I can see that your story is helping me; I am slowly getting used to your remarks which remind me of my grief. That is good. It seems only now I am learning how to reconcile myself to my position. Keep on with your story."

"Of course, of course. You must not torture yourself always. God has created no one without troubles. Here, my angel, have another glass of the sweet drink. It will refresh you," Seda said, and taking heart of the Queen's words she rose up and offered her the drink.

Although the Queen did not relish the drink nevertheless, to please her Governess she made no complaints. Returning the glass to Seda she reclined on the soft pillows and started to listen to her story.

“Yes, as I said, thanks to the indiscretion of wicked princes, this terrible calamity befell us. They crucified the holy and virtuous King in the public square of his own capital.

“But that beastly act of revenge would never have taken place if the Armenian princes had united, had supported their brave king, and had resisted the enemy with a united front. It would not have happened if traitor Gagik Artsruni, blinded by his ambition to reign in Vaspurakan, had not joined Yusuf the Emir, his country’s inveterate enemy, had not doubled his destructive power, and had not opened all the roads before him, the result of which was the massacre of many Armenian soldiers, the capture of the fortresses and the castles, and the decimation of the population. The brave King who shut himself up in the Kapuyt Fortress (The Blue Castle), and whom the enemy naturally could not harm, saw all this but could not stand it, could not endure the sight of countless victims, and the blood which incessantly flowed, and he said to himself: “The enemy is after my person, why should I let the fatherland be ravaged because of me? Is it not better that I redeem it with my blood since the traitor princes have broken our power, have weakened our arm, and we are unable to resist the enemy by armed force? And lo, he came out of the Castle and surrendered himself to the enemy, just as Jesus, the teacher of love and peace, gave himself up to the Jewish bloodthirsty mob to face the ignominy of crucifixion on Mount Golgotha.

“Gagik Artsruni, the Judas of the Armenians, was on the spot then. But no, it would be unjust to call him a Judas; Judas had a conscience, a heart; when he saw that he had betrayed his good and innocent Master for thirty pieces of silver, he abhorred himself and hanged himself. But Gagik Artsruni, when he saw that thanks to his treachery the brave and self-sacrificing King, the defender of the fatherland, was betrayed to the enemy, his first concern was about his safety. He mounted his horse and hastened to his land so he could enjoy in safety the glory of the crown which he received from Yusuf and which was cursed by the nation. And to think that that monster is still alive, and is staging stately parties in Vaspurakan, and they say building a church in Aghtamar. Why? Is it because he wants to hoodwink the Eternal God or to avoid the curse of future generations? Why, O God, dost Thou not bring down the arches of that church upon his head? Art Thou going to receive those prayers and the Mass which will rise to heaven in the very church which was built by a traitor?”

Seda was deeply moved by the memory of these sacrileges. In pronouncing the last words her lips trembled and her eyes shone with extraordinary passion.

“Don’t get excited, Mother Seda,” the Queen said soothingly. “The Artsruni family is full of traitors; it is impossible to expect any good from them. Meruzhan Artsruni joined King Shapuh of Persia in his effort to eradicate Christianity in Armenia in return for the throne of the Arshakunis, but at that time the nation was strong and punished the traitor. Vache Artsruni together with his satellites went over

to King Vram, betrayed the Armenian King Artashir, and destroyed the kingdom of the Arshakunis. Gagik Artsruni went over to the Arabs in the hope of destroying the Bagratuni Dynasty for no reason at all except that King Smbat had refused to grant his illegal demand, namely the surrender of the province of Nakhichevan which was the hereditary estate of Prince Smbat of Syunik. One must be neither surprised nor disturbed because you cannot gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles.”

“But how can you keep from being concerned when you see that, after committing all those crimes, he is building monuments to perpetuate the deception of future generations?”

“That church won’t last forever, Seda,” interrupted the Queen, “but the traitor’s name shall never be forgotten.”

“Gagik has provided for that too. They say a certain *Vardapet* named Tovma Artsruni, one of his kinsmen, is now busy writing the history of the Artsrunis. There can be no question that the *Vardapet* will classify his kinsmen among the heroes of Armenia.”

“There will be others who will write the history, Seda; you cannot hide the truth. But you have deviated from the topic of our conversation.”

“Oh yes, as I was saying, when your heroic husband heard about the martyrdom of King Smbat his father, the capture of Yernjak, the Lady of Syunik, and other women of the nobility by Yusuf the Emir, like lightning he descended upon Bagrevand. He was fired with the flame of revenge.”

“You should have seen him then as he was marching through Gardman. At that time you were the guest of the Great Lady in Khachen. He swept through our fields like a mighty mountain storm. The number of his troops was not great, altogether six hundred, but each of them was the equal of one hundred Arabs. They all were powerful men, armored from head to foot, and armed with iron shields, powerful lances, and heavy swords; fire and lightning shot out from their eyes; one who saw them would either be terrified or thrilled. As to himself, the Crown Prince, how shall I describe him to you? A veritable Achilles or a Jason. When the trumpets announced his coming, and as he, mounted on his Syunik steed, approached the gates of the fortress, it seemed the whole of Gardman shook from its foundations. All the people were following him with breathless rapture. How many lips blessed him and showered him with their good wishes!

“When he reached the gate of the castle he dismounted from his horse. It was at this moment that the real hero in him came to the fore. Tall, powerful, hard-bitten, but handsome, with lively eyes which shone goodness as he spoke to us, but flashing fire when he commanded his troops. He was still dressed in black, in token of mourning of his father. He wore no medals of gold or silver. Even his helmet was made of black steel, while his face bore the stamp of sweet sadness. All this, however, detracted nothing from his manly beauty.”

“He embraced Prince Sahak at the gate of the castle, they kissed each other and wept, remembering no doubt the hapless death of the King. The King’s son stayed with us for only a few hours. The Prince’s effort to keep him with us for at least one day was in vain. ‘This is not the time to play the host or to be the guest, Prince’ he said to your father, ‘the country is being trampled underfoot, we must hasten to the rescue.’”

“I will lend you a regiment of my warriors provided, after you have saved the country, you will return to Gardman and be my guest for at least one week,” the Prince said.

“I promise to return after I have saved my country,” said the King’s son, “as to your help, I am grateful to you, because I can trust the bravery of Gardman soldiers.”

“And the Prince turned over to the Crown Prince his army of five hundred warriors which guarded the entrance of Gardman. In the evening the Crown Prince took his departure, heading his reinforced army. I can never forget the moment when he and the Prince embraced and kissed and he mounted his steed. He charmed hundreds of daughters of Gardman as he brandished his shining sword in the air and shouted, ‘Forward, my warriors.’ The valleys of Gardman echoed his voice as if a hundred men were shouting in unison. The voice of the hero was that powerful.”

“‘Long live the Crown Prince,’ shouted the troops in unison and started their march.”

“The Prince accompanied the King’s son as far as the bridge of Gardman and when he returned he said to me privately: ‘Seda, I am very glad that Sahanush was not here today; it was providential.’ ‘Why?’ I asked him. The Crown Prince is more handsome than all the princes who have sought my daughter’s hand,’ he said. ‘If Sahanush were here she could not help falling in love with him.’”

“All the better, I said, ‘Would you have refused your daughter’s hand to the future king of the Armenians?’”

“No, Seda, I would not have refused it, but it is still a question whether he will inherit his father’s throne. Do you know how many obstacles he must surmount? He must repel the external enemies, he must suppress the internal enemies; and to do that he needs gigantic forces, hard work, and great experience. We shall see if the Crown Prince can succeed in this.”

“‘If he should fail?’ I asked.”

“Then he will be defeated and will lose his throne. In such a case my daughter would be unhappy if she loved the Crown Prince. But now she is free of fear. If Ashot should succeed in saving his father’s throne I can still make him my son-in-law.”

“If he should succeed he might not care for the Lady of Gardman,” I observed.

“But the military aid of Sahak Sevada will swing it,” replied the Prince confidently. The company of warriors which I lent him is the pledge of their betrothal. He told me he would be indebted to me for my help. We understood each other and he will keep his promise, especially since he will need my help in the future.”

“Then the matter is settled and my Sahanush will be the future Queen?” I asked your father.”

“Yes, that was the way I decided the minute the Crown Prince entered Gardman,” said the Prince in a firm voice. And lo, that day, my Sahanush, your future fate was decided.”

Chapter 5 Threatening Obstacles

“Before their arrival at Gardman,” continued Seda, “the Crown Prince’s troops had clashed with an Arab force which they had put to the sword and scattered. In this battle, however, one of his companions in arms had been wounded and was obliged to remain in our fortress until his wounds healed. That man was Prince Gevorg Marzpetuni. At the orders of Sevada and my own request I took charge of the patient who was under the care of a veteran surgeon of the army. It was a light wound on the right arm but needed time for healing. To pass the time, I often sat with him for hours and we conversed. Prince Gevorg was a charming good man and before long we struck up an intimate friendship. In addition to countless episodes of his adventures in war he also told me a good deal about the Crown Prince which enhanced my sympathy and admiration for our future king.”

“One day, during the conversation, I said to Prince Gevorg: ‘I think the Lady of Gardman will be the wife of the future king’.”

“Why do you think so?’ he asked.”

“Prince Sevada has expressed such a wish,’ I said, but our Prince would never say such a thing unless he is perfectly sure.”

“That wish will never be realized,’ Marzpetuni observed mysteriously.”

“Why?’ I asked, surprised.”

“The reason is a secret which I cannot divulge to you,’ he replied.”

“To tell the truth, I was very sad. Prince Gevorg was an intimate friend of the Crown Prince, and as far as I could judge: he was a serious, sensible man, incapable of expressing an opinion very lightly. This revelation worried me. ‘What could prevent such a union?’ I said to myself, and yet I could think of no cause. After long thinking and worrying I finally decided to discover the secret from the prince no matter what it was.”

“One day as I was bandaging his wound he said to me, smiling, ‘I don’t know how I shall ever repay you for what you have done for me, Sister Seda.’”

“‘You owe me nothing, Prince,’ I said, ‘if the Armenian soldier is wounded on the battlefield it is the duty of the Armenian woman to tend to his wounds. That is one duty which we shall fulfill even at the front. To do it in our home is no trouble at all.’”

“‘No, Sister Seda, I am indebted to you and I would be very happy if you would tell me how I can repay you for your kindness.’”

“I smiled at him.”

“‘Then you will tell me, is it not so, Sister Seda?’ persisted the Prince.”

“‘I see nothing in what I have done which is worthy of a reward,’ I said, but if you want to oblige me I will tell you how you can do so.’”

“‘Say it, Sister Seda, say it, I beg of you,’” begged the Prince.

“‘Tell me the secret which prevents the Crown Prince from marrying the daughter of Prince Sevada,’ I said.”

“The Prince smiled but said nothing.”

“‘I guess what I have asked is not too much to grant, is it?’ I asked.’

“‘Oh, it is heavy, too heavy a request, Sister Seda, I would be doubly obliged if you would take back your request.’”

“‘No, either that or nothing,’ I insisted. ‘I cannot tell that secret even to my wife, Princess Gohar. Forgive me, Sister Seda, you are an honorable woman, but I say I am usually afraid of divulging secrets to women.’”

“‘Ah, Prince, that is an old superstition which has been transmitted from father to son,’ I said, ‘women really can keep a secret better than men.’”

“The Prince laughed.”

“‘Don’t you think so?’” I asked.

“‘We are such good friends, sister Seda, that I can talk freely with you,’ the Prince said smiling.’ The only thing women keep a secret is their love affairs; as to the rest, there is no lock on their lips.’”

“I chuckled because I agreed with the Prince, but at the same time I added: ‘I will prove to you, Prince, that I am unlike any woman you have known to date.’”

“All the women who have talked to me have said the same thing,' observed the Prince laughingly. 'None of them condescended to be like her sisters; still in all my life I have never met a woman who differed in anything from the other woman. The only difference, as far as I was able to note, was that the best of them was the most loose-mouthed.’”

“You are deliberately being tough so that I shall be offended and will rescind my request,' I said, 'but I am not offended, on the contrary I give you the right to tell the truth. At the same time I insist that I shall prove by my example that there are women in the world who can be trusted.’”

“I was waiting for just that promise from you, sister Seda, so that I could fulfill your wish and repay you my debt,' the Prince said seriously. 'And now I will tell you the secret which is known to me alone, as the Crown Prince's close friend and his companion-in-arms, and I trust the secret will die in your heart.’”

“Of course,' I assured him.”

“The Crown Prince cannot marry the daughter of Prince Sevada because he is in love with another woman,' whispered the Prince.”

“With whom, Mother Seda, with whom? With the wife of Tslík Amram, is it not so? Say it, quick! Isn't that what the Prince said?” exclaimed the Queen breathless with excitement, jumping from her seat.

“I will, I will at once, my dear, don't be in a hurry, don't be excited. You can change nothing by getting excited except to torture yourself.”

“Ah, Seda, you are exhausting my patience. Just tell me. Why do you torture me?”

“I will, I am telling you.”

“Then it is the wife of Tslík Amram, is it not so?”

“No.”

“Who then?”

“At that time Tslík Amram was not even married.”

“Who was he in love with then?”

“The daughter of Prince Gevorg, the Patriarch of the Sevordis.”

“Prince Gevorg? The same man who with his brother Arves was murdered by the Eunuch of Afshin in Paytakaran?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Well, it’s all the same person. The daughter of Patriarch Gevorg, who was the betrothed of the Crown Prince and today is the wife of Tslík Amram.”

“That’s right.”

“And the paramour of my husband King.”

“Speak softly, dear Queen, they may hear us. The maids often spy on us.”

“Ah, Seda, what is the sense of caution after this? My grief is known to everybody now.”

“Not yet, my Queen.”

“Very well, tell me, what did the Prince say?”

“The Prince said the King’s son was in love with the girl.”

“I heard that. Didn’t you ask him how that ill-fated love started?”

“How not? I certainly asked him and this is what he told me:

“Before the death of Patriarch Gevorg, the King’s son Ashot was still a hostage in Afshin. The same Chief of Eunuchs who murdered the Patriarch of Sevordik, was an intimate friend of King Smbat. The latter, upon hearing the news of the Patriarch’s death, wrote to the Eunuch censuring him for the death of an innocent man. To allay him, upon his return to Albania (Caucasian Albania), unknown to Afshin, the Eunuch released the King’s son and a number of princely women and sent them to Smbat. The King naturally was grateful to the Eunuch. He instantly sent the King’s son to Utik to comfort the mournful Princess of Sevordik. It was here that young Ashot saw the beautiful daughter of Sevordik and fell in love with her.”

“Was he really in love with her?”

“Yes, and as proof Prince Marzpetuni relates an incident which is worthy of note.”

“What is it?”

“When at the order of Yusuf, Gagik Artsruni the tyrant, with his Arab soldiers attacked King Smbat to seize him or kill him, King Smbat turned his troops over to his sons Mushegh and Ashot and sent them against Gagik. The two brothers met the tyrant and at first dealt him a serious defeat. But later, the regiment of Sevordik which was headed by Ashot betrayed their commander and deserted the field. Their desertion brought about the defeat of the Armenian army, while Mushegh who fought like a lion, was captured by the enemy? Prince Marzpetuni said Ashot’s treason did not alienate him

from Sevordik who with him returned to Utik, despite the fact that his brother had been carried to Dvin as captive.”

“It means then that my misfortunes began that early.”

“Did I not tell you that the roots of your ills were hidden in the past?”

“What about afterwards? How come Ashot left the Lady of Sevordik and married miserable me?”

“The interests of the State, my dear, the interests of the State demanded it. Ashot was alone against his powerful enemies, whereas Prince Sevada could strengthen the King’s army with his troops.”

“And therefore the daughter of Sevada was to be sacrificed to those interests of the State.”

“It was the providence of God.”

“Providence of God, nonsense. Mother Seda, you are the cause of my misfortunes.”

“I, the cause of your misfortunes? What are you saying, my Queen? Seda, the cause of her Sahakanush’s misfortunes. Oh, don’t say it. That is a curse,” Seda burst with emotion.

“Yes, Mother Seda, you are the cause, but don’t feel bad over it. If you had at once told my father what you heard from Prince Marzpetuni, he would not have sacrificed me to the State interests of King Ashot.”

“Isn’t that true, Seda?”

Seda was silent.

“Why don’t you answer me?” the Queen asked.

“I wish it were true, my Queen, I wish it were my fault.”

“What else have you done then?”

“Unfortunately I did not keep my promise. I told your father about it the very same day Prince Marzpetuni left the fort. What else could I do? The matter had to do with your future fate. I could not keep silent.”

“What did my father say?”

“He laughed at me, especially when I told him that Sahakanush would be unhappy if that marriage took place.”

“Why did he laugh?”

“He said that all the youths until their marriage have a thousand and one love affairs which vanish the moment they are legally married under the power of holy matrimony. That the Crown Prince’s love is the result of a transitory impression, no doubt engendered by his pity for the Lady of Sevordik who appeared before him in her mourning clothes. Love, he said, is often born where there is pity. And lastly, he was sure the Crown Prince would soon forget the girl once he plunged himself into his state affairs. Until then he would set the stage, he said, as it pleased him.”

“What did he do afterwards?”

“He immediately proceeded to Utik, the province of Sevordik, and convinced the wife of Patriarch Gevorg to marry her daughter to a brave prince to take care of her estate because she was the sole heir of her father’s wealth.”

“And then?”

“The Princess of Sevordik accepted his counsel with gratitude. At the same time she asked our Prince to take charge of the matter. Prince Sevada, on the other hand, lost no time. He convinced Tslik Amram, the Commander (*Sepuh*) of Tashir, to marry the Princess.”

“And that girl, what kind of a creature was she to exchange her love of a hero like the King’s son for the love of Tslik Amram? I begin to lose my respect for my husband king when I think he loves this woman.”

“You must not judge it that way, my Queen. In the first place, it is not every princely daughter who is brought up as freely as the daughter of Gardman, one who even has the right to choose her husband. Secondly, *Sepuh* Amram is not an ordinary man, he will not take a back seat to any prince, in bravery, handsomeness, and in wealth. Thirdly, even if the Lady of Sevordik was madly in love with the King’s son, it was a difficult thing to freeze her love as long as there was a Prince Sevada with his clever and convincing tongue.”

“They could not have frozen her love. One who loves Ashot once, she can never cease loving him. It seems they discouraged that poor girl, by making her believe that it was impossible for her to marry the King’s son.”

“It seems that way.”

“That is certain. And the proof is that the love still persists, in spite of the fact that both Ashot and the Patriarch's daughter are married.”

“That is the way it seems to me.”

“So that was it. Sahak Sevada ruined his own home with his own hand. As the prophet has said, he who digs a pit, shall fall into it himself.”

“Yes, unfortunately that’s the way it turned out. But who could have thought it?”

“Ah, Seda, if you only had told me about that secret.”

“My Queen, what about my promise? How could I have broken it?”

“Ah, woman. Didn’t you break your promise when you told my father?”

“Your father? That’s an entirely different thing, my Queen. Your Father was a man. He was farsighted.”

“And is this his farsightedness? You see the result with your own eyes.”

“We women are very forgetful. The little bitterness of the present makes us forget the countless blessings of the past. The Prince of Sevada prepared a great glory for his daughter. my Queen enjoyed that glory.”

“Yes, but the present has made me forget the past.”

“It seems to me we would do better if we softened the trivial unpleasantness of the present with the sweet memories of the past.”

“What are they, Seda? I don’t remember them. I have seen no delight in my married life.”

Seda smiled knowingly.

“You are laughing at me, Mother Seda. Think well, tell me those delights. Perhaps I shall forget my present pain by thinking of them.”

“Oh, it would take a long time to tell it all, my Queen. You need some rest.”

“No, tell me, I find my rest in your stories. I shall have no sleep tonight. Tell me, I am listening.”

Saying this, the Queen stretched herself on her bed, relaxing her bare arm on the pillow and resting her chin on her hand. Seda rose up and covered her body with a light, finely-woven coverlet.

“So then, you have forgotten it all, my dear Queen. I will refresh your memory.”

“Go on.”

“Do you remember the day you and the great Prince returned from Khachen?”

“I remember. It was some two days after Prince Marzpetuni had departed from our fortress.”

“And I told you everything, everything which had taken place in Gardman.”

“Yes, and I was very sorry that I had not seen the Crown Prince.”

“And how you were thrilled by my description of him!”

“I remember.”

“The same day a post from Bagrevand brought us the good news. Having heard that Ashot was marching against him, Yusuf had taken flight to Albania leaving behind a garrison to defend the fort. The Crown Prince had put to the sword this force in Bagrevand and had hung their commanders from the castle towers. This was his first act of revenge upon the murderers of his father. The news struck terror among the Arabs.”

“I remember how we all were thrilled by it. I myself gave a nice present to the messenger who brought the good news.” “Thereafter the news kept pouring in. The Crown Prince enters Shirak, then Gugark, that he is carrying the fight to the Arabs, putting them to the sword everywhere, annihilating them, recapturing the cities and the fortresses, freeing the captives and the prisoners, repairing the ruined fortresses, stationing garrisons everywhere, and pressing the invasion.”

“I remember. They used to say Yusuf was terrified by the exploits of the Crown Prince and was afraid he might turn his sword against him in his lair of Albania.”

“That’s true, but the Crown Prince was more concerned with purging the land of those Arab monsters. After conquering Gugark he turned it over to his lieutenants, Princes Vasak and Ashot Gntuni, and himself crossed over to Georgia to rescue Tpkhis (Tiflis/Tbilisi) where the Arabs maintained a huge force. The Georgians had been groaning under the barbaric yoke. Like a raging storm our hero struck Tiflis and the Arab might was unable to resist his army which had steadily been growing. The Armenians put them to the sword, scattered them, put the Arab princes in chains, and having rescued Tiflis they returned to Utik. Here too, as you know, the natives were in rebellion but the Crown Prince exerted no special effort to subdue them. After having scattered a few companies of rowdies the land quieted down specially when the formidable Movses was appointed governor over them. He won a glorious victory in the Valley of Aghstev where he destroyed the remaining Arab power with a picked company of 600 warriors. They said not one of them escaped to carry the news to Yusuf.”

“I know all that, Seda. Why do you repeat it?” asked the Queen.

“To show you the logical way the misfortune of the Lady of Gardman developed,” Seda replied with a solemn air.

Chapter 6 Sweet Memories of Coronation and Engagement (Arak29 translation)

“Keep on,” said the Queen.

Seda pushed forward the little chair, straightened herself, and continued her story.

“You were thrilled by the successes of the King's son. Without having seen him you were enthralled by that hero. How many times you made me repeat what I had heard from Prince Marzpetuni! It seemed a secret power was constantly attracting your heart toward him. Your soul was filled with joy with each success of his ventures. Do you remember? You rewarded the Gardman general who brought the news of Aghstev with one hectare of land.

“Of course all this could not escape the eagle eye of Prince Sevada. Seeing his joy in the fulfillment of your wishes, he naturally would not ignore your feelings, especially when your sentiments served his ambitious aims. It was for this reason, it seems, that he hastened to remove the only obstacle which threatened his aim. Yes, he married the Lady of Sevordis to Tslik Amram. To tell the truth, this was a most patriotic act. Having freed the Crown Prince from the chains of this girl, he threw himself into his work with all the more zealous energy. The chains of love are often heavy shackles which prevent the advancement of a youth in the field of glory.”

“But more often they lend him wings,” interrupted the Queen.

“Yes, only for those who are weak, those in whom the natural fire is extinguished and who need an artificial stimulus to drive them into action, as wine lends courage to a cowardly general. Yes, my Queen, that marriage did not hurt the Crown Prince. He kept on with his victorious expeditions until he shook all of their stupor. His example infected those princes who, terrified by the Arab sword, had sought refuge in their fortresses. Gagik the Tyrant, the Lords of Syunik came out of their fastnesses and started to pursue the enemy. There was universal animation in the land of Armenia, the sun of peace shone once again, and the people took a deep breath. Those were happy days. Yes, especially when, after these victories, the Crown Prince inherited his father's scepter.”

“Ah, why did you remind me of all this, Seda? Why did you recall those happy hours which I spent there?”

“In Dvin. Right?”

“Oh, how lucky I was then. Why, Seda, why does God bestow his happiness upon men only to snatch it away from them later?”

“The will of God is inscrutable, His thoughts unfathomable.”

“I remember when my father first told me that the Armenian princes, the King of Georgia, and Gurgen of Abkhaz would assemble to crown Prince Ashot King, and we, representing the house of Gardman, would attend the ceremony. I pretty near lost my head for joy. Oh, if only they would return to me a few of those hours, nay, a few moments. You cannot imagine how feverishly at work I was, getting ready for the King's coronation. And they brought to me those jewels and golden

ornaments which my father had especially ordered for me. I was thrilled like the little child who is suddenly showered with beautiful toys. I ran to my father, threw my arms around his neck and covered his face with my kisses. I did not need those ornaments, you know, they did not count much with me as jewels, but I was happy because I knew they would make me look more beautiful and more glamorous in a party which would be attended by the Armenian princes and their families, and where the families of Georgian and Abkhaz royalties would shine with all the glory and the splendor of their wealth.

“Oh, how I wished I would be the most distinguished among all those women, how I would be the cynosure of all eyes, and that Ashot *Yerkat* would notice me!”

“And your father had foreseen all that, and that was the reason he was trying to make the House of Gardman look superior to all other princely families at Dvin, in wealth and power. That was why he brought the mighty army of Gardman to Vostan with him. Only the garrison stayed in Gardman.”

“And really, Seda, they gave us a royal reception at Dvin. My parents would tell me nothing but it seemed to me those who were close to the King were surely aware of a secret plan for our future union. People could not help noticing that of all the princely families we alone were given special quarters at the royal palace. Even King Atrnerseh of Abkhaz was the guest of Abas, the King’s brother.”

“It seems this was the beginning of the friendship between the Catholicos and King Atrnerseh.”

“Yes, just like the friendship of Abas my brother-in-law and Prince Gurgen of Abkhaz. But the friendship of the first two at least did not harm us whereas the second two had serious consequences.”

“Once again the real reason was a girl. If Abas had not married Prince Gurgen’s daughter, all this would not have happened.”

“Of course not. An Armenian girl would not have broken the unity of brothers, but what did the peace of the land matter to an Abkhaz girl? But enough of this. What was I saying?”

“You were saying they gave you a royal reception at the King’s palace.”

“Yes. They were cordial to us. I cannot describe how anxious I was to see the young King, the hero who in a short time had shattered the might of the enemy, had purged the land of its tyrants, had saved the people from its slavery, had captured the heart of the princes, had made them forget their quarrels, and had rallied them to his coronation. The first time we were to meet my heart was pounding from both joy and fear. I was happy that at long last I would meet the hero of my dreams; fearful lest he received me with indifference. Oh, Seda, you don’t know how proud I was then. I could have died from confusion.”

“And why, my Queen? Do you think the King’s son would have denied his princely guests their fitting homage?”

“But I, Seda, was unwilling to be classified as a common guest. I expected a different kind of reception from him. Why? I don’t know. I was sure that I would be his future wife. It was a proud, daring thought, was it not? But my dreams came true. He received us at the main entrance of the royal hall. And suddenly, do you know what happened to me? When I saw the King’s son, I stopped a few feet from the entrance. He embraced my father while I waited for him to come to me. What kind of feeling it was, Seda, can you explain it to me?”

“It seems to me it was a sense of pride, the pride of the Gardman dynasty, nothing else.”

“No, you are wrong. I instinctively knew that his heart, which I was bent on capturing, belonged to another. That is why meeting this tall, handsome and brave youth did not oppress me. At first, it’s true, my eyes were attracted by him for a few moments I watched him in ecstasy, because he was even more handsome and peerless than you had described to me. But once he fixed me with his gaze I assumed my former proud attitude. He approached me with a gracious smile, greeted me respectfully, and I immediately was disarmed. And we women, Mother Seda, dare to speak of pride. What? Can a woman be proud? Can she rise to heroic heights by sheer dint of her self-dignity? An engaging look, a sweet smile from a young man whom the woman loves deep in her heart, and behold all is over. She becomes his prisoner, his slave. Is it not so, Seda?”

“Unfortunately that is the truth, my Queen,” Seda replied with a deep sigh. It seemed the poor woman was recalling her own old memories.

“The King’s son led us into the hall where the Queen Mother was seated. What a good, wonderful woman she was! While the martyrdom of her husband king had left its premature impression, nevertheless one could still notice the traces of the former beauty or her regal proud face.”

“Come, my proud young lady, for a long time I have wanted to see you, the girl who stubbornly rejected the hand of all our princes,’ she said smiling, and embracing me, kissed me warmly.”

“To this day my most precious jewel is the gold necklace which she presented to me in token of our betrothal. Let me have that necklace, Seda, I want to look at it once again,” ordered the Queen.

Seda rose up and brought the necklace which the Queen’s maids had released from her neck two hours before.

“See? It is small, but it’s pretty, and lovely. I shall never part with it, and when I die, Seda, be sure that I am buried with it.”

“What a horrible thought, dear Queen! Let your enemies perish. Let those die who are a burden on the world.”

“But no. What am I saying? It does not belong to me. Yes, the moment that necklace encircled my neck, that was the happiest moment of my life. Oh, I shall never forget that moment.”

“Did the Queen Mother give it to you on your first meeting?” Seda asked with curiosity.

“No, I am not through yet. Two days later the coronation ceremony took place. The St. Gregory Cathedral was filled from end to end. Present were Catholicos Hovhannes, all the high ranking bishops, the royalty, the nobles, the princes, the aristocratic women, the princesses and princely young ladies. But in all that multitude the most handsome and the most distinguished person was Ashot the hero.

“All eyes were fixed on him, all smiles directed to him, all minds busy with him. From the beginning of the program to the end the eyes of the beautiful princesses never left him. I did not yet know what claim I had upon him and yet I was jealous. Only the sublime prayers of blessing tempered somewhat our ecstatic zeal, forcing us to join the holy fathers in their prayers for the life and the prosperity of the newly-crowned King. Oh, how sublime, how warm, and how inspiring were those prayers!”

“Blessed be your eyes, my Queen, for seeing the ceremony, and blessed by your ears for hearing those blessings. Before I die, I pray God I would be worthy of ... But what am I saying? God grant my King a long life.”

“Yes, Seda, it was a sublime and touching ceremony. I cannot understand how a king who was annotated with such sublimity could deviate from the true path, and how the princes who swore allegiance in that ceremony could turn around and conspire against their King. “When, after the anointing, the Catholicos turned to the congregation and asked: ‘Do you swear to submit to the rule of this man who has promised to defend and keep you, and obey his command in righteous faith?, the Cathedral rang with the shouts of the congregation: “We do, we do! Our King is our Lord.’ And yet, how many of them are obedient today? Where is the prince who has not rebelled against him?”

“Ah, my dear Queen, tell me please, how did they crown him? How many of the prayers do you still remember?” “They are too long, Seda, it's impossible to relate everything. One should see and hear it. First, they gave him his sword.”

“The sword?”

“Yes, first the sword and then the royal ring, then the crown.”

“And the prayers?”

“For each investiture there was a separate prayer.”

“For example, what did they say when they invested him with the sword? That's very interesting. They gave him the right to break it, did they not?”

“Of course. But... I wanted to remember something ... Wait ... Oh yes, his look, that’s what I wanted to remember, Seda. Was it not true that he looked at no one, that all were trying to catch his first look, but who was the chosen one whom the King would honor with his first glance no one knew. When the bishops brought the sword the Catholicos chanted the words in a loud, ringing voice: ‘Accept thou this sword from the hand of the apostolic bishops, and with this sword should thou reign to the salvation of the church and the people, and by the hand of thy Shepherd. Gird thyself with this sword, O Mighty, and reign in truth, Thou should raise it against the wrongdoer and the infidel, in revenge of those who do evil, and with this sword thou should save thy people and thy church, should hasten to the aid of your warriors and their sons, should emancipate the captives and comfort the disconsolate.’ When the Catholicos ended his words the King raised his eyes and cast his first look on me. It seemed to me he was saying to me: ‘All this I will do together with you.’ They all saw it and many were envious of me. Yes, all the royal princesses would have given their lives for that one look which exalted me and made me proud, and yet that exclusive gift was reserved only for the Lady of Gardman. How I felt at that moment I cannot describe in words; it seemed heaven itself came down or myself was lifted into the celestial heights.”

“Do you see, my Queen? You had forgotten all that.”

“Wait, don't interrupt me. After that, Seda, I heard nothing. My whole being was wrapped up in a blissful, ecstatic feeling. I was suddenly aroused from my trance by the whisper of the Queen Mother beside whom I stood: ‘Kneel down with me and pray to God that He will give me and your King a long life.’”

“And together we knelt down. I prayed ardently, prayed as I had never prayed in all my life. And the tears were flowing from my eyes like a running fountain. Were they tears of joy, or tears in premonition of my future trials, I could not tell. When the coronation and the Mass were over and the scribes started to chant their melodies, they came to embrace the King, first the bishops, then the Queen Mother, then the King of Georgia, then the princes, and lastly the princesses and maidens.”

“Among the young ladies I was the first to kiss the King’s right hand and my lips trembled. As I withdrew I felt that my face was aflame. I rushed to my mother and together we eased our way to the rear of the crowd who had opened a path for us and were blessing my name.”

“The King came out of the church surrounded by the bishops and the princes. He mounted the royal steed, a magnificent creature with golden trappings supporting the purple royal umbrella. The King was surrounded by the *Sparapet* who led the procession, the Crown-bearer on his right, and the bearer of the royal banner on his left, followed by the armored company of his guards. The royal and princely families completed the procession.

“As to the enthusiasm of the crowds outside the Cathedral and in the streets of the City, it is impossible to describe it. The whole City of Dvin, as if turned into one eye, one breath, and one soul,

was breathlessly waiting for the King's appearance. And when the banner of the *Sparapet* first appeared the people gave out a shout which shook the whole city, reverberating through the streets, the public squares, the pyramids, the turrets and as far as the fortresses outside the city.

“Upon our return to the palace we went to congratulate the King. The ladies of royalty, the princes and the princesses and their families were all there. After we had congratulated the King, the Queen Mother made me sit beside her and talked to me intimately. What she had seen in me I did not know but I could see that she was heartily devoted to me. Contrary to the accepted custom she kept us with her for a long time. As we were ready to take our leave she took off this necklace from her neck and putting it on mine said:

“This is the gift of Emperor Basil Arshakuni to the Queen of Ashot the First. She made me a present of it and now I am giving it to you as the future queen. Your successor shall inherit it from you, thus the gift of the last scion of the Arshakunis shall never be lost in the family of Bagratuni kings.’

“Saying this, she embraced me and kissed me.

“It was already decided. I was the King's betrothed. After that, you can guess the happiness which awaited me in the King's palace. But, alas, I dread to think that all these are doomed to remain as sweet memories including this necklace which first caressed my neck in the happiest moments of my life.”

Chapter 7 Three Years of Affliction

The Queen was silent. Far from soothing her, the sweet memories of the past, on the contrary, aggravated her affliction. Her bent head, supported in her hand, she was silent for a few moments, then, no longer able to restrain the surging emotion, she started to cry.

Seda watched the tears trickling down the Queen's cheeks. “You are crying, Majesty,” she said in a broken voice, “I thought refreshing the memories of the past would cheer you up, but I see it has depressed you all the more.”

“I am thinking all that is lost forever, and that, the hero whose look once made me feel proud and whose smile made me happy is no longer mine, it can never again be mine.”

“Don't say it, my Queen, don't say it. If happiness is not lasting, neither are the grieves eternal. They constantly give away to each other because every beginning has an end: sorrow is succeeded by gladness; your beloved hero is still yours and will return to you.”

“Ah, Seda, say no more.”

We must be patient. Take, for example, our King, your husband. How fickle fate has been to him, how many misfortunes he has encountered, and yet he has triumphed over all obstacles with patience and endurance!”

“Ah, Seda, how small is the extent of your feeling! But he has never had such an affliction, such a loss as I have. He never concentrated his happiness in a single heart which could be lost by a single blow.”

“And you, my Queen, how limited is the extent of your feeling! Forgive my boldness.”

“What are you saying, Seda?”

“I am referring to the weight of the accumulated grief which oppressed our King once upon a time.”

“Namely?”

“You yourself described the happy day in Dvin when they crowned the Victorious Ashot as King of Armenia, did you not?”

“Yes.”

“But soon after, before many months, how he was overwhelmed by so many heavy afflictions.”

“You know, Seda, I know very little about the events of that period.”

“Yes, because they have not told you about so many things.”

“The only thing which I have not forgotten is that, when we returned from Dvin to Gardman, my father said he was going to hasten several regiments to aid the King because a rebellion had broken out in the interior provinces.”

“That is true, but there were many other things which they did not tell you.”

“Sometimes I would ask why Ashot did not return, or... “

“Or when the wedding would take place.”

“You asked me that question one day with a blushing smile.”

“Yes I remember.”

“And Prince Sevada would string you along with evasive answers, sometimes hopeful, sometimes reassuring, but never distressing.”

“That's true, and yet they never fully explained to me everything because we were too busy with far more important happenings.”

“Yes, but if they had told you then you would have known the ordeal the poor King went through during those three years, struggling and fighting to prevent the miseries which man and nature were inflicting on our country. Then you would have known the extent of his suffering as well as his heroism. “

“Tell me in a few words, what happened after the coronation?”

“Oh many, many great things. And I might say the cause of one or two of those turbulent events was my young lady.”

“You mean I was the cause?”

“Yes, my Queen, you.”

“How come, Seda. Tell me, that is interesting.”

“You yourself saw how the Armenian princes, in complete unison and accord, came to Dvin to crown Ashot *Yerkat*. But soon some of them were disappointed and their joy was changed to sadness. Those princes whose hand you had rejected, although pleased that Ashot should be their king, nevertheless were opposed to his marrying you. They wanted to see the proud daughter of Sahak Sevada who had rejected their suit become the wife of a common nobleman but not the Queen of the Armenians. And yet the King’s mother selected you for the bride of her son from among those many princely maidens who had come to Dvin to attend the coronation. Besides the rejected princes, the King incurred the enmity of those who had marriageable daughters and who entertained the remote hope that the King might be their son-in-law. The bracelet, however, which is so precious to you now, shattered all their hopes.”

“As soon as they returned to their provinces their attitude toward their King became strained. The mother princesses, in particular, started to work on the vanity of their husbands, transforming the smoldering angers into open hatred. All this culminated in simultaneous uprisings in several parts of Armenia. Not daring openly to defy their King, some of the princes picked up quarrels with their equals, figuring that it was all the same thing in so far as they disturbed the King’s tranquility.

“Thus, Gurgen Artsruni, the King’s brother, taking advantage of the absence of Prince Smbat of Syunik, incited the latter’s brother, Gagik the Tyrant, to lay siege to Nakhichevan and captured it. The latter heeded the advice of his brother. Hearing it, Prince Smbat attacked the Artsrunis in the hope of saving his estate. The result was considerable destruction of life and property.

“Several other princes who by right were duty-bound to stand by their King and supply him with troops in time of need, openly defected and a few of them even attempted rebellion. The King was obliged to wage war against them and to conquer back many cities and fortresses, to ravage many places, and to wage massacres in his own country in order to restore the law and order in the land.

“Even King Atrnerseh of Georgia, instigated by the Armenian princes, marched against King Ashot in an attempt to seize several of our northern provinces. This attempt was really directed against one another in order to settle old scores or to seize each other’s lands. Thus the whole country was in a turmoil and the King was practically alone.

“The news of these commotions reached the Arab Emir Yusuf who, at first, terrified by the feats of King Ashot, was snuggled in the security of Albania. For some time he had been gnashing his teeth at King Ashot for he could not forget the massacre of his troops, and yet he had had no opportunity to take his revenge as long as the princes stood by their King. But now, when he learned that many of the princes had deserted the King, and others were fighting among themselves, he thought the time was ripe to invade the King country. What all the Arabs did after that in our provinces, it is impossible to describe, God forbid that such years should ever return.”

“What did the Arabs do, Seda? I told you I know very little about the happenings of those times.”

“Oh, how many of them shall I recount? How many to remember? The story of the sufferings of those years would make several volumes, how can I tell it all? How, like hungry wolves, they rushed into our land, and finding no opposition, took over wherever they wanted, how they ruined the villages and the towns, destroyed the cities, set fire to the churches, massacred part of the people and forced others to renounce their religion, how they murdered those who resisted, and how they deported many others. Not a single beautiful woman or girl escaped their fury, they killed the defending mothers right before the eyes of their daughters, the fathers before the eyes of their sons, they tore the suckling babies from their mothers’ breasts and dashed them against the ground. Everywhere there was blood, everywhere fire and pollution. No place was safe from the terror of those monsters. When they completed the ravage of the villages and the towns, then they turned against the castles and the fortresses. In some places the defenders put up a stiff resistance and wrought havoc among the enemy, but in many instances they seized the fortresses by force or treachery and ruthlessly massacred all the inmates.”

“And what was the King doing all that time?”

“What could he do? Some of the princes had joined the enemy, or had surrendered to him, others were busy with fratricidal wars. In other words, they were helping the foreigner to complete the ruin of their country. We have had many such stupid fratricidal wars in our land and always will. Some of the princes, safe in the security of their castles, would not come out into the open. All that remained was the King and your father together with his Arab regiments, the Princes of Sisakan with their regiments, and Prince Marzpetuni with the government’s troops. But all these, compared with the forces of the enemy, was almost nothing.

“You ask what the King was doing. He was doing what he could, or what he was bound to do. Having turned over a part of his troops to his loyal princes, he took the remainder, and like a wounded lion,

rushed from one part of the land to the other. He could not meet the enemy in open battle, therefore, he confused him with sudden attacks, isolating and destroying some units, or hastening to the rescue of besieged fortresses. In a word, he acted as the commander of a platoon, hoping that sooner or later his princes would come to their senses, and joining with him, would expel the enemy from the land.

“But the King received his greatest blow when his cousin, *Sparapet* Ashot, surrendered his troops to Emir Yusuf and together with him entered Dvin as his obedient servant. On the other hand, the Catholicos, instead of reconciling the princes with one another and winning them over to the King’s side, did nothing to save the situation, deserted his people, and sought safety in Albania, under the protection of King Atrnerseh. What could the King do under the circumstances?”

“My God! And he told me nothing about all this. Was this the reason then why my father never stayed in Gardman, now hastened to Syunik, now to Gugark, and now to Vostan, sometimes with a small company and sometimes with a powerful force?”

“And he quieted your anxieties with reassuring answers. He would tell you that the King was busy fortifying the fortresses of Kars and Yerazgavors, that he was surrounding Dvin with a ditch, or he was making a tour of inspection, etc. etc.”

“Yes, and those answers made me feel comfortable.”

“The Prince had given us strict orders never to disturb you with adverse news, especially not to say a word about the terrors of the war. Once some of the maids made a mistake and brought you some news but we did our best to destroy the effect of what you had heard.”

“I remember, it was about the youths who had been martyred in Dvin. But why were you trying to hide it all from me?”

“Because you were exceedingly sensitive. The news of the slightest massacre would make you cry for hours, and sometimes you would be so depressed that you had to go to bed.”

“You are right, Seda. It was a good thing that you did not tell me of those happenings at the time or I would have died from the anguish of my heart.”

“Oh, you don’t know how many other terrible things we hid from you.”

“Merciful God! What other terrible things, Seda?” the Queen shuddered.

“The famine, the terrible famine; then the wild beasts, the appearance of the wolves and the hyenas in the cities and the villages, and how they devoured the people.”

“I have heard about the famine.”

“What are you saying, my Queen? How could we have told you the truth? Your heart would have been torn apart. You knew about the famine of Gardman but that was no famine, it was merely a scarcity of bread. Do you think that the River Trdu (Tartar/Terter) and the warriors of Gardman would have tolerated any famine in our country? The famine, the terrible famine, was confined only to the lands on this side of Gardman.

“For two years Armenia was the arena of blood and fire. All that time the peasants could neither sow nor harvest. And how could they have done it when every valley and plain, the mountains and the woods were infested with bandits and Arab soldiers, while in those sections which were comparatively free, Armenian soldiers and Armenian princes were busy massacring one another? For this reason the fanners were dispersed, the vineyards and the orchards were deserted, the soldiers ate up the people's last remaining supply of food, and the famine was rampant in Armenia with all its terrors. Poverty and want, like a contagious epidemic, left the huts of the poor and crawled into the mansions of the rich. Hunger was stalking everywhere, the grimmest and the bitterest of all privations. Oh, blessed is he who never saw that calamity. Having consumed all their supplies, the mere of the cities and the villages scattered in the fields, the valleys and the mountains, in search of a blade of green grass or the bark of a tree to satiate their hunger. And while many died from pernicious herbs, nevertheless, in a short time, all the valleys and the mountains were stripped of all vegetation. After that they started to eat unclean animals, the donkey, the horse, dogs, and even worms.”

“Ah Seda, what are you saying? Stop it, I cannot hear any longer.”

“Yes, my lady, those were the things which they ate. But there is something even more terrible. Oh, no woman's ear should hear such a thing.”

“What is it, Seda?”

“It will shock you; I cannot tell it.”

“Tell it, Seda, tell it. You have already taught me how to be courageous.”

“They used to say, my Queen, that the public squares were filled with half-clad or naked famished men, wandering like ghosts, who collapsed the minute they touched each other. And those who still had some strength left in them would fall upon the dead and would verily devour the raw flesh with their teeth. Each falling carcass was instantly devoured by the vultures, human vultures, infernal, evil spirits.”

“Oh it is terrible.”

“And what would you say of the suckling babies who, exhausted from crying, would push back the dried breasts of their mothers, the little children who, with tears trickling down their pale cheeks,

and with their parched lips filled the air with their piteous cries of bread, and what shall we say of those fainting children who fell breathless and rolled on the ground.”

“Oh, stop it, Seda, stop it.”

“But I haven’t told you the most terrible of all. There were mothers, who, unable to endure the suffering of their babies, slaughtered them and ate them.”

“Silence, Seda, not another word.”

And pale from the terrible emotion, the Queen collapsed on her pillow.

Chapter 8 The Bride’s Recollections of Her Excitement on the Eve of the Groom’s Arrival

It was long past midnight. Seda was waiting for the Queen, exhausted now from listening to her long story, to retire for the night, and command her to do the same thing. She was to be disappointed in this. Her last narratives, it’s true, had excited the Queen’s nerves, causing a temporary silence, but when Seda rose to trim the wicks of the lamps and then returned to her seat, the Queen asked her:

“Wasn’t it at that time, Seda, that the King went to Constantinople?”

“Yes, my Queen, exactly in the midst of those misfortunes.” Seda resumed her seat, then continued: “I told you that misfortunes and grieves are not eternal, that the shining day succeeds the dark night, after the storm comes the sunshine. You talk about your troubles, but how could you compare them with those which the King endured? The mere mention of past wars, the famine and the terrors depress you, and what shall we say of him who carried on his shoulders the weight of those misfortunes, personally, as King, as the people’s father, the man who was looked upon as the sole supporter and savior of all the afflicted.

“Nevertheless he carried this heavy weight like a hero, putting his trust in God who did not fail to support him. At the very moment when the princes had deserted him, when the land was wasting away under the terrors of the enemy and the famine, the Greek Emperor and the Patriarch sympathized with the King’s plight and wrote him cheering letters. They also wrote to the Catholicos, exhorting him to do his utmost in reconciling the princes with their King and to confront the common enemy in a united front. The Catholicos worked hard but the princes would not hear his advice. He even interceded with the mighty princes of Taron but it was to no avail. Finally he was obliged to make a report to the Emperor and the Patriarch, soliciting on behalf of the King their aid against the internal enemies.

“The outsiders sympathized with our plight, and the Emperor asked the King and the Catholicos to have a personal consultation as to how he could be helpful under the circumstances. The Catholicos was reluctant to go to Constantinople for fear of a proposed union of the Armenian and Greek churches. Therefore, he rejected the invitation. But the King had no cause to detain him, so he set out for Constantinople with his princes and a stately entourage.

“The rest is known to you, the magnificent reception which they accorded the King in Byzantium, the stately festivities in his honor, how they crowned him with a royal crown, and how they showered him and his princes with precious costly gifts.”

“Prince Gevorg has told me about it,” the Queen said.

“The news of this success was enough to arouse the Armenian princes from their lethargy,” continued Seda. “A wave of patriotic enthusiasm swept over them. Gagik Artsruni started to chase the Arabs from Vaspurakan. The princes of Andzev and Mok drove out Yusuf’s troops from their territories while our guerrillas chased them out of the northern provinces. Taken by surprise Yusuf was completely dumbfounded. When he learned that King Ashot was returning to Armenia, accompanied by Greek auxiliary forces, he was terror-stricken, and without losing time, he gathered his remaining troops and fled from Dvin to Albania.”

“The King’s return was a triumphant march. Without striking a single blow he reoccupied all the territories which had been seized by the Arabs. Here and there, there were slight encounters, to be sure, but thanks to the united forces of the Armenians and the Greeks, everything was smoothed out. Our country was again pacified, the people had a chance to breathe, the fields and the vineyards turned green, the lane was full of the harvest, and the people not only enjoyed peace and security but they even turned to their customary festivals.

“I guess my brother-in-law Abas was the first to start the celebrations.”

“The King’s brother? Yes. Before the King’s return he married the daughter of Prince Gurgen of Abkhaz with whom he was in love for a long time.”

“I know. Their romance started in the days of the King’s coronation right before my eyes.”

“The wedding took place in Dvin, and the people began to gossip that his marriage took place before that of his elder brother the King.”

“Stuff and nonsense. It seems the daughter of Abkhaz was more attractive. She got her man first. What is there in that to gossip about?”

“No, my Queen. Your wedding was delayed because of unexpected developments. When Emir Yusuf heard that the King had joined the Greeks he lost no time in raising a powerful enemy against him. With consummate cunning he made *Sparapet* Ashot king and sent him to Armenia.”

“That’s right. His plan was to set up kin against his kin, and thus to destroy them both.”

“And, by weakening the Armenian army through a fratricidal war, he wanted to rule over Armenia without striking a blow.”

“Quite understandable. He tried the same trick in raising Gagik Artsruni against King Smbat. But later, upon the defection of Gagik, he took up the cause of the Commander. It’s an old trick which our enemies have used to weaken us. Instead of fighting against the Armenians with their own troops, they contrive to destroy them by fighting among themselves. The cost to them is comparatively small, after all. The promise of the crown to one, the promise of a principality to another, promise of titles, and appeals to their ambitions. But when they achieve their aim, they take back both the crown and the principality. That is the pet policy of all deceitful tyrants. For the sake of glory and personal gain there are men in all countries who are willing to sell their nation.

“Yes, my Queen. The Commander was well aware of Yusuf’s crafty design and yet he had no scruples in sacrificing the interests of his country to his own personal ambitions. As an imposter king he started a fratricidal war against his cousin, the legitimate King. He unleashed an orgy of massacres, ruined villages and towns, captured cities, until finally, badly defeated by the King’s troops at the gates of Vagharshapat, he fled to Dvin. It was these evils unchained by Ashot the Tyrant which caused the delay of the royal wedding. The King wanted first to pacify the land before occupying himself with the festivities of the nuptials.”

“And you, Seda, remember all this.”

“As if they took place yesterday.”

“And all this in such a short time, only two years. My God! And to think that we have lived so long in so short a timer “What did you say? You have lived so long?”

“Yes, Seda, I have suffered too long. Decades, it seems. I am not yet twenty-five and yet I already am an old woman.”

“You are still beautiful like an angel.” “Ha, Ha, Ha. Poor Seda. I am beautiful but for whom? Who needs the beauty of your Queen?”

“I remember it as if it were today. I was standing at the uppermost story of the castle surrounded by my maids. Below, at the courtyard, my father was giving instructions to a company of Arab horsemen who were to be sent to Aghstev that night to lead a regiment which was encamped there to the aid of the King in Vagharshapat. Suddenly in the distance, in the direction of Gardman Bridge, I noticed a red flag fluttering in the air. I called it to the attention of my maids and the keenest among them suddenly exclaimed, it’s a messenger! ‘Messenger?’ I asked mechanically, and my heart started to pound. He must come from the King, I thought, beside myself with joy.”

“If you remember, Seda, sometime before the princes of Gntuni, overseers of Gugark, had revolted against the King who, together with my brother-in-law Abas, had marched against them and had subdued them. The two then went to be the guests of the Grand Prince Gurgun of Abkhaz. Taking advantage of the King's absence, Ashot the Tyrant occupied Vagharshapat. Traveling by night through Gardman, the King and his brother Abas immediately marched against Vagharshapat. The King had seen my father for only a few moments and had given orders not to wake me. None of you knew about his coming.”

“Yes my Queen, because he intended to attack Ashot. He did not want anyone to know about it.”

“However, on the way he had told my father that, if by the help of God he succeeded in driving the imposter from the city walls, he would send him a messenger with a red flag, and later he would follow to celebrate the wedding. I knew this secret, Seda, my father had told me about it, and you can imagine the joy I felt at the sight of the red flag.”

“I can imagine.”

“And yet I could not give the news to my father because I was tongue-tied from joy. Later, when one of the maids screamed the news my father could hardly believe his ears and looked at me quizzically. “Yes, yes, it’s a red flag,” I screamed and ran downstairs. My face was verily aflame from the thrill. Do you remember that day, Seda?”

“How could I forget it? All the castle was rejoicing. The Prince rewarded the messenger with a precious sword, a steed, and much gold. He was Mushegh, the present Keeper of the Castle, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, it was he, I wanted to see him rewarded even better but said nothing to my father because the thing concerned me and I was bashful.”

“And in two days,” added Seda, “the whole of Gardman was transformed into a fair. The horsemen assigned to Aghstev were sent to Gugark, the Syunis were sent to Artsakh and other distant places to invite the princes to the royal wedding. The King deliberately delayed his return from Vagharshapat. When he arrived, all the princes, the *Sepuhs*, the Lords and the princely families already were in Gardman. Only the Prince of Abkhaz came one day earlier, while the King of Georgia purposely remained in Gandzak to time his entry in Gardman with the King, although he was second in rank. But Prince Gurgun of Artsrunis, although he had been rejected by you, nevertheless, to show his goodwill toward the King, not only came the wedding with a stately retinue, but went to Gandzak to induce King Atrnerseh of Georgia to be present at least one day ahead of time. Atrnerseh came in the evening while we welcomed the King the next morning.”

“You greeted them. Yes, it was you who welcomed the King. Gardman was rejuvenated, the mountains and the hills were rejoicing, the people were dazzled by the grandeur of Armenian

royalty, while Prince Sevada dazzled the princes with his rich, costly attire. But I, Seda, I was greeting him who brought with him the crowning reward of my rosy dreams, my boundless happiness, the heaven of my bliss. I was receiving him who bore in him my loving heart, my passionate soul, whose glance enraptured my whole being, whose voice was like the melody of the cherubim's to my ears, and that hero, that supernatural creature, Seda, was to be my spouse, my husband. Oh, how could one support so much happiness?

“And all those magnificent preparations, the homage bestowed by the princes, the enthusiasm of the people of Gardman and the Armenian army seemed trivial to me. I wanted to see this tribute to Ashot *Yerkat* doubled, trebled. Was he not the choicest of the Armenian elect, the highest and the most exalted among the Armenian princes? Ah, Seda, if only men knew how proud we feel of them, how a woman's fragile heart turns into a diamond when tied to the fate of a worthy hero! Oh, then they would never descend from the exalted altar on which our pious hearts worship them.”

“Poor woman,” Seda murmured.

“Before meeting the King with his company of guards, my father had given strict orders that I, as the King's bride, the daughter of the mighty Prince of Gardman, should not move, should not show herself to the people until the King was ready to receive me. Etiquette demands it, he would say to me. But I, O blissful moments never to return, could not stand the laws of etiquette. All Gardman was witnessing the glory of the reception of my King, my future husband. How could I deprive myself of such pleasure? I ordered the door of my chamber closed, I gave strict orders not to let anyone in, and accompanied with one of my maids, through a secret passageway, I ascended the top of the tower. Have you ever ascended there, Seda?”

“No, how can a woman ascend there? The archers can scarcely crawl through those passages.”

“But we ascended there like deer. We could see all around Gardman from that vantage point, the plain, the river, the mountains, the whole panorama unfolded before us. Everywhere was crowded with people.

“At first glance at the Bridge I saw the vanguard of the cavalry who were fleeting like the wind, carrying a white flag. They were followed by the King, surrounded by his tall handsome guards, their shining armor scintillating in the sun, showering as if were flashes of lightning all around them. The King was mounted on a white steed with golden trappings, clad in golden armor, and wearing a golden helmet, capped with the royal eagle.

“The King was followed by my father, together with his Gardman knights, then came the princes of Sisakan, the company of the Vostaniks, the *Sepuh* of Albania, the Viceroy of Gugark, the princes of the Artsrunis and Mok, the Lords of Artsakh and Khachen, etc.

“Then came the royal and princely troops, the companies of commanders and royal guard, and finally, the people who had come from the neighboring towns.

“When the company of the vanguards approached the castle and the trumpets notified the coming of the King, I could no longer see the princes who flooded Gardman, the soldiers and the multitude of the people. I could only see my loving King and Bridegroom. At the gate the vanguard came to a halt, forming two lines. The King passed through the lines. His steed, sensing the quality of the hero whom he carried, strutted proudly, neighing thunderously. My brothers, together with their entourage, led the King through the gates, and my mother welcomed him at the entrance of the Castle, surrounded by the dignitaries of Gardman and their wives.

“If I were not convinced that I would share this dazzling glory, if I did not know that this person was mine, who was the cynosure of all eyes, whose glance everyone tried to catch, and if I had been away at the time, secluded in my tower, oh, perhaps I would have thrown myself down from that height but when I thought that he was mine, that the man who commanded that multitude of soldiers and people was my future husband, when I saw the princes who once sought my hand bowing their heads before him with such boundless affection and respect, my heart wanted to fly out in sheer joy, and that very heart, if at that moment was in my hand, believe me, my good Seda, I would have rolled it at the feet of that hero.”

Chapter 9 The Revelation of Infidelity

The Queen stopped for a few moments wishing, as it were, to check her excitement, then resumed with fresh interest: “You are quite right, Seda. Indeed it is quite possible to forget the bitterness of the present by recalling the sweet memories of the past. And to be sure, the past is very precious. I still recall the happy moment when I first was introduced to the King. He was seated in the great salon of his castle, surrounded by his lords and princes. They all were waiting for me. The moment I appeared at the door of the salon, accompanied by my father, the King instantly rose from his throne and met us. His welcome was dignified and cordial. I still remember that moment, how confused I was, and how I blushed. My father put my hand in his hand said: ‘Behold, my King, my daughter and your bride.’”

Smiling and happy, the King took my right hand, warmly kissed it, and led me to my seat next to his throne.

“‘My Princes,’ he said in a solemn tone, ‘I present to you my future Queen. And the princes shouted in unison, Long live the King; long live the Queen.’”

“Then the princes approached me and greeted me in the order of their ranks. There were all the princes, Seda, whose hand I had rejected. Oh, how I wished at that moment that I were the only

beautiful woman in the world so that all could admire me and would say the King of Armenia had indeed chosen a worthy spouse.”

“You were beautiful like an angel.”

“And I was happy that I did not make my husband ashamed of me.”

“Yes, I understand he told Prince Marzpetuni how happy he was that you were more beautiful than the wife of Abas. The great Prince of Abkhaz, commented the King, can no longer boast that his daughter is the only ornament of the Armenian Court.

“When during the ceremony the Bishop put my hand in the King’s hand, I raised my eyes and looked at him. Oh how majestic he looked to me at that moment, and how I was exalted by his sight. ‘At last my dreams have come true; I am happy,’ I said to myself, then I became even more daring in my thoughts. ‘This Ashot, this Iron King,’ I said to myself, ‘is mine. No one can take him away from me. We are being married, the contract of our union is being sanctified by the divine seal. Whom God has united, let no man part,’ said the Bishop.”

“But today, Seda, I am deprived of him; he is no longer mine. How hard it is to believe this truth. Yet, did not God join us? Who was the one who separated us, Seda, tell me, you know who that person was. Didn’t you promise to tell me?”

“I have told you many things, my dear Queen.”

“No, you did not tell me who was the cause of my misfortune, who started it? Surely someone was the cause of this conflagration.”

“Yes, once again, the cause was our enemy.”

“Who?”

“Yusuf.”

“How so?”

“He sent the King many costly presents on the day of your wedding, do you remember?”

“Yes, a royal crown, a diamond-studded sword, golden Arabian steeds and many other costly presents.”

“Also a large regiment of Arabian cavalry as an auxiliary of the royal army.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“What was the purpose of that friendship?”

“There was a rumor that, in his desire to become the sole ruler of Persia, he intended to rebel against the Supreme Emir. And since the Armenian King was riding on the crest of success at the time, the Greek Emperor was his ally, the Armenian princes were united with him, that he was even reconciled with Gagik Artsruni while Ashot the Tyrant, badly defeated, had fled to Dvin; Yusuf was anxious to win the King’s friendship and our marriage was just the right opportunity. Yusuf indeed won the King’s heart with his gifts.

“But there was a hidden secret in that generosity,” Seda hastened to explain. “The Arab Emir naturally was no well wisher of the Armenian King yet he sought his friendship because at the time his star was ascendant. All the same, the Arab cavalry Yusuf sent to bolster the King’s army eventually brought about all troubles. The King was still chafing at the insolence of Ashot the Tyrant and therefore, immediately after the termination of the wedding festivals, he decided to march against him at Dvin. You will remember that Prince Sahak was in full accord with the King in this matter, and consequently, the two united their forces, and supported by the Gardman regiments and Yusuf’s Arab cavalry, they marched on Dvin. The Catholicos, on the other hand, was opposed to this fratricidal war and took immediate steps to prevent it. His efforts, however, proved futile. Relying on his power on the one hand, and, according to reports, instigated by your brother Prince Grigor on the other, the King started the war. But, since Yusuf was secretly in league with Ashot the Tyrant, obeying a secret command of their Commander, the Arab cavalry defected and in the thickest of the fight turned around and fled. This sudden defection confounded the King’s troops who were badly defeated by the enemy. Yusuf’s treason and the ensuing failure spurred the King to prepare for a new campaign. He organized a new army which he reinforced with units from the Prince of Abkhaz. He was bent on resuming the fight. Fortunately, however, the pleas of the Armenian Catholicos this time succeeded in bringing about a reconciliation.”

“Seda, I know all about that, but they have no connection with my troubles.”

“On the contrary, my Queen, they are intimately connected.”

“How?”

“Of course. The King's failure against Ashot the Tyrant encouraged Prince Movses, the Overseer of Utik, to rise against his King.”

“Then what?”

“The King and Prince Sahak marched against him to subdue him.”

“And they certainly subdued him,” the Queen confirmed with a touch of gratification. “In the battle the King cut off his head with his sword.”

“That is true, but later the King appointed Tslík Amram to succeed the rebel Movses as Overseer of Utik.”

“Tslík Amram? Yes. I remember. Then it was here that all our troubles started.” The Queen was plainly angry. She pushed aside the pillows and sat erect in her bed, her eyes fastened on her Governess. Seda said nothing, apparently trying hard to avoid making new revelations for fear of intensifying the Queen’s agitation.

“Why did you stop speaking, Seda?” the Queen asked.

“I don’t know what else I can say,” the Governess smiled sadly.

“You said the King appointed Tslík Amram overseer of Utik. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Why necessarily him and not another?”

“What do you know about that?”

“According to rumors, they had spoken very highly of Amram to the King.”

“Yes, he is a powerfully-built man, that's why they called him Tslík (Bull). But was that the only reason?”

Seda was silent.

“Tell me all that you know, without hiding an iota,” ordered the Queen sternly.

Seda no longer dared disobey the Queen’s command and continued her story:

“After crushing the rebellion in Utik, your brother, Prince Grigor, returned to Gardman alone, without the grand Prince. When your mother asked about the whereabouts of the grand Prince your brother said he and the King had gone to Yerazgavors to see the Queen. Our surprise was great when two days later we saw the grand Prince return to Gardman highly dejected and apparently in great distress. Your Mother was very uneasy thinking he brought some sad news from you but could not muster enough courage to ask him because your father generally resented giving explanations about his worries.

“For two days your father did not come out of the Castle. The third day he had a secret conference with your mother and brothers. Thereafter a pall of sadness descended upon the whole family, so much so I became curious. But your mother who held no secrets from me told me the whole truth. ‘My Sahakanush, Seda, she is finished,’ she said to me one day. ‘Why?’ I asked surprised. ‘My husband’s precautions have come to naught,’ she said sadly. The Prince had thought that by marrying

the Lady of Sevordis to Tslík Amram he would completely eradicate the memory of the King's old flame, but he was badly mistaken. The sparks of the old flame already have broken out and they may spread into a conflagration.”

“How?” I asked timidly.”

“After subduing the rebel Movses the King proceeded to the Valley of Sevordis to give his troops a rest. Here he met Tslík Amram, together with the princess of Sevordik who invited him to their Fortress of Tavush. Prince Sevada urged the King not to accept the invitation, realizing the disastrous consequences which would follow, but his effort was in vain. Although the King had promised to return to Yerazgavors to meet the Queen at the appointed time, he nevertheless gladly accepted Amram's invitation and went to Tavush.”

“Then what?” I asked.”

“The Prince accompanied the King,’ your mother continued, and this is what she told me. Tslík Amram's wife, the King's old flame was there. She herself met the King at the gates of the castle. She had become so much more beautiful and attractive that it was impossible to see her and not to be fascinated. When she first met the King, I saw how she changed color and blushed. The onlookers thought that she was either bashful or was confused by the King's presence but she did not fool me. Even the King's emotion did not escape my experienced eye. Amram's wife was so attractive at that moment that I would not have been surprised if the King had embraced her. I could plainly see that the sparks of their old love was being kindled in both their eyes, and their veiled looks conveyed to each other such thoughts and emotions which easily would have eluded the ordinary eye. But the King controlled himself, he no longer looked at the Princess, a circumstance which annoyed Amram, thinking his wife was not attracting the King's attention.’

“However,’ continued the Prince, ‘soon my suspicions came true. The King, who until then had intended to give the post of Utik to my son Grigor, suddenly changed his mind in favor of Amram. I did not oppose him because I could plainly see that a single silent glance of a beautiful princess was far more powerful than my eloquence. The next morning he signed the edict making Tslík Amram the Overseer of Utik. The Princess, armed with her beauty and feminine charm, personally came to express her gratitude to the King. As for Amram, he was beside himself with joy, almost ready to kiss the King's hands.”

“The same evening I reminded the King of his promise to meet the Queen and was greatly surprised when he told me he wanted to delay his stay in Tavush two days longer in order to give the necessary instructions in regard to Utik. I could no longer remain there and witness the renewal of the two old lovers friendship, therefore I hastened here, because I no longer cared to go Yerazgavors. How could I have faced my daughter then? How could I have justified the King's delay at the Fortress of Tavush?”

“Two days later,” said Seda, “the grand Prince called me and said to me, ‘Seda, my daughter, your Sahakanush, is alone, she will need your care from now on. Get ready to leave for Shirak tomorrow.’ I gladly agreed because no other task could have been more precious to me than to serve my beloved Queen.”

“The Prince already was aware that your mother had told me everything. As I was about to leave, he called me into the presence of the Princess and said to me: ‘Seda, you already know the danger which threatens my daughter’s happiness; she is young yet and may precipitate the impending danger by her impetuous behavior. Go and watch over her every step. You are a tested and tried woman. You know life. Try to keep the Queen always armed with her woman’s charms, so that her every step, word and glance shall arouse her husband’s love and make him forget the charms of Amram’s wife, her bewitching eyes. It is true that it is impossible to revive love by artificial means, yet by these same means it is quite possible to hold down the smoldering sparks of an old love and to prevent it from kindling into a flame. Marriage alone is not a safe guarantee of a husband’s love. Married people must constantly try to make themselves attractive to each other. The same competition which drives a man to win his beloved must be kept up, and if anything, even more zealously, because nature has created man so that, after he attains to his desired aim, he ceases to be attracted by that aim or to be animated by it. It is just at this moment that temptation comes in. Your Queen does not know these things, and it were far better that she never tried it. Her love is sincere, and for this reason she has great faith in the King. But he who loves sincerely is likely to take the wrong step which might repel the object of his love, especially when the latter does not reciprocate the love, or there is a rival who is a constant threat. Often, a careless word, an inadvertent gesture, even a poor dress is enough to inject the poison of disgust, drop after drop, until it is impossible to attract a receding heart. You are familiar with all this, Seda. Go and protect Sahanush from the impending peril. The King’s heart has been shaken. I could clearly see it. Try to see to it that my daughter shall not deal the last blow. I myself will think of ways and means to prevent the coming catastrophe.”

“With such advice the grand Prince set me off. After that, as you know, I came to Shirak, The King already was with you at Yerazgavors. He was most tender and affectionate to you. You were happy with your lot. The suspicions aroused by the Prince were not justified, at least I saw no change in the King because he was always kind and affectionate to you. But when he sent you to your summer resort in the mountains of Syunik and Gugark, attended by the princesses of Syunik, while he went to the domain of Sevordik, ostensibly to make some arrangements in Utik, then my suspicions were aroused. Naturally, I told you nothing about it, you were so gay and happy that even a heart of stone would not have dared to poison your spotless soul with the venom of suspicion. That Amram’s wife had won the King’s heart, however, of that I was sure. Thereafter the King’s trips to Utik became more frequent. You of course suspected nothing, but we, your parents in Gardman, and I in the Court, were wasting away worrying about you. Finally, these visits became so frequent that it was

common gossip among the women of the Court, and even among the King's guards, that 'The King is in love with the land of Sevordik.'

"And naturally everyone knew why the King visited Utik so often, is it not so?" the Queen asked, trembling with emotion.

"No, I think only two of the King's aides knew about it."

"Ah, Seda, why do you hide it from me? Two is enough to break the news to two hundred. And which one of the women of the court knew about my plight?"

"At the time, I guess no one. But when the King's brother Abas, together with his father-in-law Prince Gurgen of Abkhaz, conspired against the King and wanted to seize him, or kill him, the King escaped their trap. The conspirators sought him first at Shirak, then they marched with their troops against Yerazgavors. You of course remember that, before their arrival, the King took us to the safety of Utik, the Valley of Sevordis. We were in the safety of the Fortress of Tavush, with Tslik Amram. It was at that time some of our women noticed the intimate relations between the King and Princess Amram, and there was much gossip among them that, instead of taking us to the safety of one of the fortresses of Syunik, the King had taken us to the home of his beloved."

"Who were those women, Seda? Tell me, I must know their names."

"One was the mother of our Shahandukht, the other was Princess Gohar."

"And did they talk to you about it?"

"Yes, but secretly. Besides us no one knew about it. It is needless to say that I did my best to dissipate their suspicions."

"It is no use, you couldn't have closed their eyes. And yet, Seda, why didn't you tell me this secret at the time? If I had known that others besides me had noticed this thing I would first have plunged a dagger into that scoundrel's heart and then into mine. Then the kingdom of Ashot *Yerkat* would not have been endangered, and Sahak Sevada and his son would not have been blinded."

"How come, my Queen? Did you get on to this thing at the Fortress of Tavush?"

"Yes, Seda, in that very scoundrel's mansion, a few days after our arrival."

"How?"

"The day we were guests of Amram, and that prince, animated by wine, had forgotten his calling and was making love to the princesses who attended on me, do you remember? I left the salon in disgust. Suddenly I felt a depression which I could not shake off, neither could I let any of my attendants accompany me. Alone, I started to ramble through Amram's mansion. I had hoped that I would meet

the King somewhere, because I knew he had secluded himself in order to read the letters which had arrived from Vostan.

“While passing through the corridors, suddenly I heard the King’s voice and joyfully rushed to the opposite door which led to Princess Aspram’s chambers. It was there I heard his voice. I thought Aspram was busy with her household cares but was greatly surprised to see that she was having a conversation with the King. I was seized by a sinister premonition, and for a moment I had difficulty in breathing, yet I went on with mingled feelings of hope and fear; I opened the door from where the voice was coming, and lo, what should I see? Seda, Oh, it is a wonder that I did not drop dead. Princess Aspram. Seda, setting on the King’s lap!”

“My God!”

“Yes, my Ashot, the King of my boundless love and happiness, in the embrace of Tslík Amram’s wife! Ah, Seda, I wonder if you can grasp what a blow that was to me. No lightning could have struck a human heart with a more cruel force.” “Then what did you do?”

“Nothing. They both turned deathly pale while I, without saying a word, walked out and sought shelter in one of the neighboring rooms.”

“It seems that was the time when you fell sick.”

“Yes, the pain of that sinister incident dragged me to my bed and made me suffer for two months.”

“It’s strange that you told none of us about it.”

“I did not divulge it because I did not want to ruin the King’s family, I did not want to see the Crown of Armenia disgraced by the daughter of Sahak Sevada. Ah! Why should I hide it from you, Seda I did not tell it lest my enemies rejoiced, lest the jealous princesses made merry over my misfortune, and lest my rejected suitors made my pride the object of their mockery.”

“My poor, poor lady,” Seda whispered.

“And yet my pride took a terrible toll on me.”

“God is merciful, my gracious Lady. You have borne your grief so courageously, you shall surely regain your former happiness.”

“Poor Seda, how good are you. Surely you don’t believe that the dead can rise in our day. Stand up, Mother Seda, stand up, go take a little rest. I have tired you so much. Forgive me.”

Seda, who long since had been waiting for this command, approached the Queen, undressed her, straightened the bed, and bidding her good night, retired to her chambers.

The Queen likewise retired; yet for long hours her tumultuous thoughts kept storming her tortured mind. It was not until toward daybreak that she finally surrendered to sleep.

Chapter 10 The Blind Avenger

The sun was setting. Two riders were racing through the Plain of Gandzak. One of them was an elderly man of noble features wearing a light bronze helmet, and armed with a silver sheathed sword and a small shining shield. The other was a powerful youth in full armor, his head encased in a steel helmet, and armed with a heavy shield, a short sword, and a long lance in his hand. The elderly man who apparently was the prince was riding in front, while the youth, who was his aide, followed him. Both their horses were heavy with perspiration and covered with foam. It seemed they had covered a long road.

When the two riders crossed the plain and entered the Valley of Gardman, the prince turned to his aide and said: "Yeznik, the sun is already set, we must hurry and reach the castle before it is dark. I don't want the guards to make any noise when opening the gates."

"What are you afraid of, my Lord?" the aide asked.

"I don't want Prince Sahak to know that we are here. I want to appear before him incognito"

"You don't mean to tell me no one in the castle knows you."

"I think not. I haven't been in Gardman for eight years. I couldn't even make the King's wedding. I don't think any one will remember one. Seda, one of the old servants of the Prince's house, is with us now in Garni. The Princess knew me but she no longer lives. David, the Prince's son, is in Amram's army. There remain the Prince and his son Gevorg, but both of them are blind and cannot recognize me if I conceal my identity."

"In that case I must not enter the castle; I must spend the night in the town," the aide said.

"Why?" asked the Prince.

"Because the servants of Prince Sevada as well as the guards will recognize me."

"So what?"

"They know that I am in the service of Prince Marzpetuni. They will surely recognize you."

"In that case stay in the town."

"At your command, my Lord."

“That’s fine. You might be able to gather some information about the extent of the Prince’s part in this rebellion.”

“Of course, my Lord. Yeznik will never rest until he learns everything. The priest here is a talkative man; I will spend the night with him.”

“Be a man of few words but keep a sharp ear out.”

“I can be completely dumb, but very profuse in my kisses of his right hand

“That too is good. Have you any ready silver with you?”

“I can please the village priest with copper coins as well.”

The riders kept talking until they reached the rivulet of Gardman.

“On your way now, cross the stream” ordered the Prince.

The aide saluted his master, crossed the stream and headed to the left to the village of Gardman, while the Prince took the road to the castle.

When he reached the base of the heights, there unfolded before him the whole of Gardman with her white walls and mighty towers which, rising from the west and extending to right and left, formed a juncture at the Inaccessible mountain slopes on the north, and the natural ramparts of rocky elevations on north and east.

This impregnable fortress perched on the mountain crest, which left an awesome impression on the passerby especially at night-fall, filled the heart of the approaching prince with a feeling of profound sorrow. He remembered how eight years before he had entered this castle with Ashot, the King’s son. To be sure, even at that time he had not entered it with a light heart. The Armenian King having been martyred, the princes divided, the Crown Prince helpless and impotent, himself a wounded man, naturally he could not have been in a rejoicing mood. And yet, Gardman at that time inspired the visitor with hope and spirit. Sahak Sevada watched over the place like a mighty lion; his reputation struck terror into the enemy, and gave strength and comfort to the abandoned. But now? It seemed now the castle was in mourning, and its exterior bespoke not strength, but desolation and despair.

It was late in the day. In spite of the fact that the Prince’s steed was tired and the road was down slope, he nevertheless hurried the poor animal to reach the castle a few moments earlier.

Despite his efforts, however, before he had reached the base of the fort, he heard the sound of the bugle signaling the time of dosing the gates. There was no longer any need to hurry. “A plague on you

all, is this the time to close the gates?” he mumbled to himself and dropped the reins of his horse. Apparently sensing that his master’s zeal was gone, the animal itself fell into a slow pace.

In the castle the lights already were lit when the Prince arrived at the gate between the two towers rising on the western side. Dismounting his horse he approached the outer closet of the tower, and lifting the heavy wooden hammer concealed inside, knocked three times on the wooden panel.

“Who is it?” echoed the gruff voice of the guard.

The Prince hesitated to respond because he did not yet know by what name he should present himself.

“Who is calling?” repeated the guard, somewhat exasperated, and this time he stuck out his huge head through the narrow pane.

“A messenger from the King,” the Prince replied, without thinking.

“The messenger of the King cannot enter our castle,” the guard replied indignantly. “Does not the King know that Gardman now belongs to its old owner? Saying it, he moved away from the wicket.”

The Prince stood there perplexed. He had not expected that the men of Gardman had joined the Arabs, although he knew for a certainty that Sahak Sevada was mixed up with the rebellion of Tslik Amram, especially his son David who had openly joined the cause of Amram. Nevertheless, he had hoped that the commander of the castle of Gardman who had been appointed by the King would not betray his master since he had been a loyal subject of the King for many years. But when he heard the guard’s answer he was convinced that the whole country was with Amram.

“What to do now?” he asked himself. He then instantly decided to resort to a stratagem. He again picked up the hammer and knocked on the gate even louder.

“Hey fellow, it seems the servants of your King have a hankering to be hanged from the tower,” the guard shouted arrogantly, sticking his head through the wicket, then he added: “Do you want me to drive an arrow through your chest?”

“Fool, I was just trying you; only a dumb animal like you can serve the lawless king.”

“Who are you then?” the guard softened his voice.

“I am the aide of Prince Amram. I bring important news to Prince Sevada.”

“What if you are lying?”

“Idiot! You mean to tell me a solitary soldier can seize your castle? What are you afraid of?”

“Wait, we must get the Commander’s permission.” The guard withdrew.

A quarter of an hour later they waved a lantern from the tower window to see if there were others in front of the gate, and when they made sure that the stranger was alone they came down and opened the gate.

Seeing that the stranger was a man of princely rank, and not a common soldier, the guards offered him the appropriate salute, but at the same time they asked him to present himself to the Commander of the Castle as he had been ordered. And this was precisely what he wanted. He wanted to ascertain if the Commander was really with the rebels, or was pretending to be with them under duress.

The guards led the Prince to the nearby observation post in an upper story where the Commander was waiting for him. Crawling through the small low entrance he began to climb the narrow and winding stone steps. At the entrance of the upper story the guard who led him asked him to surrender his sword before he presented himself to the Commander. The Prince conformed with the accepted custom, and delivering his sword and shield, entered inside. The Commander was a tall, kindly looking man, with a large face and gentle eyes, standing there in his arched chamber, waiting for his mysterious visitor.

The minute the Prince stepped inside the Commander rushed at him with open arms and exclaimed:

“Prince Gevorg! Is it you? What wind, what occasion brings you here?” The two embraced and kissed each other.

Surmising from this cordial reception that the Commander was not with the rebels, the Prince signaled to the Commander that the guard was waiting outside the door and asked him to send him away.

“Who is there?” the Commander shouted, opening the door.

“It is I, my Lord,” and the guard stepped inside.

“Put down the Prince’s sword and shield here and go down at once,” the Commander ordered, and the guard instantly departed.

When the two were alone, the Commander broke the silence.

“I didn’t doubt for a minute that the visitor was a man from the King. The guards told me that first you said you came from the King, and then you said you came from Tslik Amram. At first I was confused, thinking the newcomer was one of Amram’s men, but when I learned that upon the guard’s derogatory expression toward the King you had changed your tune, I instantly surmised that you were one of our trusted friends. Tell me now, where do you come from, and how did you come here? Why are you alone? Where are your guards? What news do you bring from the King? Is there any hope of the Arabs? Should we assemble our forces in Vostan?” He hammered the questions one after another.

Apparently the Commander regarded Prince Marzpetuni as a man of authority. The Prince took his time, he seated himself on a wooden stool which was the only piece of furniture in the room, and asked the Commander to be seated opposite him, near the window.

“You are still young, Vahram, but I am an old man. The long trip has tired me, let me rest a bit and then we will talk,” said Prince Marzpetuni.

“Ah, forgive me, Prince. I was so overjoyed by your appearance that I even forgot my duties of the host. I didn’t even offer you ... Forgive me, I beg you. But why should we tarry here? Do me the honor, and come to my home and we will talk after you have relaxed.”

Saying this, the Commander rose to his feet, ready to lead the Prince. But the latter did not move. He asked the Commander to be seated.

“Vahram,” he said, “I cannot come to your home, they must not see me at your home. There are certain things I must learn from you, and in return I have some information for you. When we are through I will go see Prince Sevada. Our situation is so critical that we have no time for the amenities of hospitality.”

“Very well, do as you wish,” the Commander sat down.

The Prince fixed the Commander with a sharp gaze, measured him from head to foot, then asked in a serious tone:

“Prince Vahram, can we depend on you now as we used to trust *Sepuh* Vahram years ago?”

“Prince, I thank you for your candid question. We are living in such times that Prince Marzpetuni has a right to think that the former *Sepuh* Vahram has become a traitor, especially now that he is serving under the rebels’ flag. But I can assure you that neither the years nor the events which have transpired have changed me in the least. The King’s former loyal servant is his most faithful servant today. My alliance with the rebels is for the King’s good, something which I could not overlook “

“How so? Explain it to me.”

“When the news of Tslik Amram’s rebellion reached here, Prince Sevada thought this was the time to take advantage of the events in order to realize his long since cherished aim. He immediately assembled the nobles and the grandees of Gardman. I was one of the invited. The Prince made such a passionate speech that all the patriots were verily carried away.”

“What did he say?”

“I cannot remember it all, but I will tell you what I remember. The nobles were assembled on the Prince’s balcony, while the grandees of the people occupied the courtyard. Two servants brought out

Prince Sevada, holding him by the arms; two others brought Prince Grigor. The appearance of the blind father, accompanied by his blind son, was most depressing on us all. Even before the Prince had opened his mouth, there were curses to the King's name among the crowd in the courtyard. Advancing to the edge of the balcony, Prince Sevada leaned on his cane and said approximate!) the following.

“My princes and my people, behold, you see with your own eyes the mighty Sevada, the pride of Gardman, the terror of his enemies, blinded by his wicked son-in-law, coming before you with the aid of his servants. I would not wish such a calamity to befall the most villainous of my people, the plight of an old man and his young son inflicted by his own kin. Heavy is my grief. You can see Gardman, her sky and sun, her mountains and fertile fields, her blossoms and her spring. I am deprived of all this, but that is not the whole of my anguish. I cannot take care of my own people, cannot alleviate its pain, cannot visit the sick, cannot shelter my orphans, cannot wipe the tears of the widows, and cannot restore my captives. Sevada now needs the favor of his servants, if they deny it, O men of Gardman, I cannot even warm my cold body with the rays of the sun. My home which once upon a time was a flaming center of life and joy has now become the abode of blind owls. I bear all this with patience and fortitude because I am deprived of the ability to see God's light But you, warriors of Gardman, you have your sight and your mighty arms, you who are possessed of indomitable will, how could you have endured the colossal insult which Ashot *Yerkat* has implanted on your foreheads by blinding your father and leader, and by shackling your freedom?

“Men of Gardman, the Prince exclaimed, exalted your name with my victories, and now you have debased it, disgraced it, and degraded it with your murmurless servility. If you haven't the courage to shed off the despicable yoke, at least have the courage to drive a sword in my breast and make an end of Prince Sevada's anguish, let your offspring hear the cry of Prince Sevada and curse you.' The Prince had not finished when all the grandees together with the people cried in unison, 'Down with the Tyrant! Gardman is free from this moment. We recognize none but our Prince Sahak Sevada.'

“A few moments later the entire castle was like a raging sea and the people rushed out with arms in hand, as if they had been besieged by the King's army. The guards from Vanand were driven off from their turrets and were threatened with summary execution if they did not obey the Prince. The infuriated mob hauled down the royal flag and replaced it with the emblem of the Dragon of Gardman.”

“Oh, that's going too far,” exclaimed Marzpetuni.

“Yes indeed, and they would have wrought much havoc if I had not instantly gathered my guards and sworn allegiance to the Prince.”

“Wouldn't it have been better if you had left the place with your followers rather than to swear allegiance?”

“No, had I done so I would have deprived myself of the opportunity to serve my King by watching their operations. By staying with the rebels I can see and learn many things.”

Prince Marzpetuni was greatly depressed hearing all this and hanging his head he fell into deep thought.

“Do you blame me?” the Commander asked after a brief silence.

“Yes, I blame you,” replied the Prince, raising his head.

“But I had to submit to the contingencies of the moment.”

“There have always and in all places been such contingencies. If every keeper of the castle yields to the contingencies, then all the King’s fortresses will be seized by the enemy.”

“I have yielded not to the external, but to the internal enemies. I could not have resisted the entire force with my small company, nor could I have waged a fratricidal fight against my kinsmen. We have shed enough of each other’s blood already.”

There was passion in the Commander’s last words. Marzpetuni measured him with a solemn look and shook his head.

“Are you angry with me, or perhaps do you doubt my sincerity?” the Commander asked.

“On the contrary, I know you are sincere. I myself realize the gravity of the situation. The enemy is eagerly watching for the proper moment to invade our country, and we ourselves are helping to prepare that opportunity. You, my friend, are loath to wage a fratricidal war against your kinsmen. How can I oppose such a noble impulse? Is not fratricide the equivalent of suicide?”

“I thank you for understanding the delicacy of my situation. Had I shown such weakness against the external enemy I would not have begrudged you the right to drive me through with your sword, but raising my arms against my own flesh and blood was too much.”

“And you shall never raise your hand against your brother. And yet, perhaps you could have prevented this division by more tactful means. To preserve the integrity of the state, yes, one must never shed the blood of his brother, but it is always possible to disarm the rebellious brother through cunning. Everywhere the mob is like sheep who, by being deceived by the words of the wolf surrender their guardian dogs to win the wolf’s friendship, but every time, the latter, after having strangled the guardian dogs, has invariably devoured the sheep. Those princes who exploit the common herd’s credulity should be hanged. It is the duty of each of us to rise against such traitors. He who is the enemy of the fatherland’s throne should be regarded by every Armenian as his personal enemy. Because, after the loss of this rich heritage which has been won by such heavy sacrifices, there is nothing left for them except slavery and serfdom.”

“I know all that, yet I had no way of resorting to crafty means, my dear Prince.”

“Very well. I don’t blame you. What is done is done. Our present task is how to heal this division. Have you thought about it? Can’t you see that we are heading for the precipice?”

“I have thought about it for a long time. I have even worked out definite plans as to how we shall move under given circumstances. But you, Prince, tell me now, what is the situation in Vostan? Who is with the King? How much of a force can we separate from the Castle? And then, why are you here just now? In brief, I want you to tell me in detail the state of the nation, because I know very little, and learn little in this seclusion of mine. After that I will tell you of my plans. If you find them practicable, we will carry them out together; if not, I will do whatever you tell me.

The Commander’s interest and his questions seemed to inject a doubt in Prince Marzpetuni. Could it be that he was asking those questions in order to frustrate his plans? He fell silent for a few moments. Noticing the cause of his silence, the Commander observed with a smile:

“Don't let your doubts disturb you, dear Prince. Do not measure my loyalty by my present situation, measure it by my past which is known both to you and the King. I told you that I bowed to the will of Sevada in order to protect the interests of my King. This is the absolute truth. Do not seek any other ulterior motives in my conduct. If they were to donate me the whole of Gardman, again such a gift would not have transcended the subsequent insult which could accrue to my dignity did I really betray my King.”

The Commander spoke so sincerely that Prince Marzpetuni’s doubts were dissipated instantly.

“Yes, Vahram,” he confessed with feeling, “I do not pretend to conceal any doubts; I am afraid to tell you everything. Time and men have shaken my faith. But beginning with this moment, I trust you implicitly. Nevertheless, I shall not say much because the time is short and I must hasten to Sevada. I will try to come back again, but if I fail, I want to tell you that I am certain of one thing, that is, our King has a faithful servant in Gardman.”

“And most devoted.”

“Thank you, and listen to me now. For the moment Vostan is quiet. As you know, the King has been reconciled with his brother Abas long since, thanks to the mediation of Prince Vasak of Syunik. The only problem was *Sparapet* (Commander-in-chief) Ashot’s defection, but that too has been resolved. The Catholicos and I did our utmost to reconcile him with the King. The two even joined their forces and drove out the Arabs from Dvin. We were hopeful that there would be no fresh disturbances within our borders for quite some time. We even staged some celebrations in Dvin and presently we received the news of Amram’s revolt. The King did not believe the rebellion was so widespread, and consequently, he came out of Shirak with no more than a company of his guards. He thought he could easily crush the revolt without bloodshed once he arrived at Utik and took charge of the local

force. But as he advanced, he saw that the entire province was in revolt. When he sent me word about it I already had brought the royal family to Garni because we no longer could rely on the fort of Yerazavors. I did not tell the Queen the extent of the revolt to spare her needless worry, and I contrived the simulation so well that she herself offered to go to Utik to learn directly from the King about his expedition and, if necessary, to hasten to him some recruits. That was the reason for my coming. But much to my disappointment, I saw that not only the whole of Utik, but the greater part of Artsakh and Gugark are in revolt. I met the King at the Valley of Gugark. I found him discouraged and ready to return to Vostan but this was too risky. If he entered Shirak without first having subdued Amram, I was firmly convinced that the rebellion would spread farther and the integrity of the state would be irreparably lost. What could we do under the circumstances? We had no troops. The castles and the forts of the land were closed before the King. Even those who were known to be loyal had joined Amram. Nevertheless, it was necessary to show that the King was not alone in Utik and that the rebel should be crushed on the spot.

“To reach this aim we decided that the King should continue his journey to the land of the Arabs, ostensibly to pay a visit to their king, and that he never intended to stop at Utik. On the other hand, we firmly believed that the king of the Arabs would send the King an auxiliary force in return for the latter’s favor to him in dispersing the rebels and in driving away

Prince Gurgun from the borders of his land. Thus, the King set out with his company of guards while I started on a tour of Utik together with a trusted servant. I passed through all the villages and the towns, I watched the fortresses, and after exploring the extent of the rebellion I came to the conclusion that there was not one spot in these parts where we could find refuge in order to resolve the matter by peaceful means. Meanwhile a messenger from the King brought me the good news that the Arab king had lent him a substantial force and that he was already on his way to these parts.”

“Then the King is coming with an Arab force?” the Commander asked, overjoyed.

“Yes. Only a few days ago I sent a messenger to the Queen announcing that we would soon crush the rebellion, but I did not tell her that we had applied to all of the Arabs.”

“There was no need to tell her, to be sure. But do you think the King will be here very soon?”

“Of course. He will be with us in a few days. But before his arrival, I had to uncover one last secret, that is what was the motive which drove Amram to rise against his benefactor the King? Amram owes his present position of Governor of Utik and commander of the army to the grace of Ashot *Yerkat*. Why should he repay the King’s goodness with evil?”

“Yes Amram’s behavior has been a puzzle to me too.”

“Do you know of any reason?” Marzpetuni asked with a sort of simulated simplicity.

“No.”

“It seems to me he revolted at the instigation of Sevada.”

“On the contrary, I think Sevada turned against the King having been encouraged by Amram’s boldness.”

“Could you be mistaken?”

“It seems to me I am not mistaken. Sevada could not have instigated him.”

“But I have come here to solve that very puzzle. I suspected Sevada, and the information I have gathered during my trip has confirmed this suspicion. I was not aware that he had raised Gardman against the King because I could not bring myself around to believe that Vahram, the Commander of the Castle, would permit him to take such a step.”

“I already explained to you the circumstances which led me to my action.”

“Don’t interrupt me; I do not blame you; I know now exactly what took place, that Gardman has joined the rebels, and that our only friend in Gardman is the Commander of the Castle.”

“Whom the King can trust to the limit.”

“Of course. And now, you stay here and order one of your guards to lead me to the mansion of Sevada. I shall present myself as a stranger and will use every artifice in my power to extract from him this secret.”

“But what will it profit to discover the secret? Does it matter who incited whom? The rebellion is a fact. It is our job to suppress it.”

“The rebellion must be squelched, that is true. But it is equally important to solve the riddle of its authors if we are to cure the evil from the root.”

“I have no right to ask more questions. Do whatever pleases you. You are too experienced to need my counsel,” the Commander capitulated, and ordered one of his guards to lead the Prince to Sevada.

By this time it was quite dark, rendering the narrow and winding pathways of the castle invisible. The people had retired to their homes; there was silence everywhere interrupted only by the hoofbeats of the Prince’s horse along the deserted lanes which occasionally invited the sharp bark of the watch dogs, disturbing the peace of the Castle’s inhabitants.

When they arrived at the mansion of Sevada, the Prince ordered his guide to return to his post while he advanced alone. The Prince’s mansion, which at the time was converted into a fortified castle, was still open on all sides at that hour of the night. Apparently, the two blind masters expected no attack

and did not even dream that there could be an enemy so inhuman and cowardly as to menace two helpless men at that hour of the night.

The Prince entered the mansion through the main gate. This large two-story structure, with its spacious parlors, countless chambers, and the mighty watch towers on either side, was practically submerged in a thick veil of darkness. And although Sevada was still the master of his land and castle, nevertheless there was no sign of life, not a whisper in the mansion. Only on one side of the castle, through the narrow wickets there shone a faint light, while below, in the cells of the first story, one could hear the stirrings of the servants.

For a moment the Prince surveyed the huge, sprawling building, and the surrounding sad silence pressed heavily on his heart. He recalled the happy day when first he had set foot on that threshold. In contrast with the life, the animation, the happy hustle and bustle of the olden days, he now saw only a deathly silence. It seemed the heavy hand of death had descended on this once resplendent princely mansion.

“And to think that all this was caused by one illegal step, one transgression against sanity!” the Prince murmured with a sigh. He then approached one of the servants’ rooms and knocked on the door with the handle of his whip.

The man to meet him was one of his old servants. Marzpetuni recognized him instantly by the lantern which he carried in his hand. This unhappy meeting upset the Prince because if he was recognized he no longer could carry out his plan. The only remote hope left to him was that perhaps his servant had forgotten him after the long lapse of time.

The latter who from the Prince’s apparel instantly recognized that their visitor was not an ordinary man, called his companions, who, scampering from all sides, lit the large bituminous light in the center of the court, and started to wait on the Prince. They sent word to their Master that a distinguished guest had come to call on him. Prince Sevada sent word to his guest that “he gladly awaited his old friend, the noble Prince Gevorg Marzpetuni.”

The Prince stood frozen on the threshold of the door. “How did the Prince know that his caller is Marzpetuni?” he asked the announcer, surprised.

“Oh, it was I who gave him the good news,” the servant replied with a pleased smile. “I wanted to make my Prince happy.”

“And you, lad, do you know me?” the Prince asked, turning to the lad who had brought him Sevada’s message.

“The lad is my son, my Lord,” the old servant interrupted, approaching the Prince. “I told him that our visitor is our glorious Marzpetuni, do you see, Prince, my son has grown up; he was a small boy when you were with us sick in bed. He is a good boy.”

The Prince saw that he could no longer hide the truth. “Yes, yes, he looks like a good boy. God keep him,” he mumbled irritably and hastily ascended the second story where Prince Sevada awaited him.

“A futile visit which perhaps will ruin my whole plan,” the Prince muttered as he entered the privacy of Sevada.

Dressed in black, fingering the beads of his rosary, the Prince of Gardman was squatting on a flat velvet-cushioned seat deep in a corner of his private chamber.

Like all the blind, his head was held high, his attention tense, facing the door. The minute he heard the footsteps of the caller he asked smiling:

“Is that you, Prince?”

“Yes, your humble servant.” And Marzpetuni approached him with swift steps.

“Come, my beloved guest; come close to me; I cannot come forward to meet you. God has deprived me of that joy. Come and embrace me.”

Saying it, he opened his arms, and Prince Marzpetuni warmly embraced him. Sevada pressed the Prince to his breast, kissed him several times, and sobbed:

“I cannot see your face, my noble friend, but my soul is united with yours and I can hear it saying to me that your heart is broken at sight of my plight, and that your eyes are weeping.”

And of a truth Prince Marzpetuni could not control himself. He completely broke down in the arms of Prince Sevada and wept silently.

The man who was so rugged externally, so powerful and invincible, had the tender heart of a young girl.

“Sit down near me,” said Sevada, “be brave, scorn the blows of fate but never scorn virtue. In this world no crime has gone unpunished. Surely Sevada too must have committed a crime worthy of this punishment.”

“I did not expect you to receive me with such bitter words,” Marzpetuni deliberately observed to force his unfortunate host to change the sad tone of the conversation.

“No my friend, there can be no bitterness in my words because your coming has filled my heart with joy. So then, Prince Gevorg, you are with me, in my own home, once again we are together. How

happy I am! And now, your home, your family, your son, they are all right I hope. Gor must be a grown man now, able to carry his sword and shield.”

“Yes Lord, by the grace of your blessing.”

“By the grace of God's blessing. And are they all at Yerazgavors now?”

“No, they are at Garni, with the Queen.”

“The Queen? My Sahakanush?”

With the words Prince Sevada instantly paled, as if driven by a sword, but he instantly controlled himself, and assuming his former composure, continued.

“Is my Sahakanush well?”

“Yes Prince, she was very well when I left Garni.”

“She is very well? That is good, very good. I didn't think . . . Sevada interrupted as if he did not wish to hear it. It was hard for him to hear that his Sahakanush was in good health at a time when her father and brother languished in Gardman with their sight gone. Had they not encountered this misfortune in their very attempt to remove the obstacles on the path of her happiness?”

It was a heavy thing for Prince Sevada, indeed, to believe that Sahakanush could have a moment's peace of mind from the day her father and brother were blinded because of her, that she could smile, laugh, and be happy . . . that the golden rays of each dawning morning did not fill her heart with infinite sadness, reminding her of her father and brother who forever were deprived of such happiness.

Yet Prince Gevorg noticed no sign of emotion in Sevada. The thing which pre-occupied his mind was not Sevada's inner world, but what should he answer if the Prince asked the cause of his visit. Should he invent false explanations, or should he make a clean breast and tell the truth. He was still hesitating when Prince Sevada broke into his thoughts.

“Our people have a good custom, Prince; when a guest comes from a distant land no one asks him his name, his village or city, nor his mission, until he has not dined and wined. This custom has its advantages which are perfectly known to you. Yet I feel compelled to forego the amenities of hospitality, first, because we are not strangers, and it would be very strange indeed if we did not come to the point at once, and exchanged our information in regard to those matters which interest us most. Secondly, ever since my misfortune I have become irritable and impatient. Impatient, yes, are you surprised? Has a blind man any right to be impatient? But I am that way, and it seems to me the reason is that my spirit is still very lively and invincible, and therefore, my inaction excites my zeal to act. Yes, ever since that day I have become impatient. Tell me then, dear Prince, what has

happened? What has brought you to my castle at this unusual hour? Surely you have come for a good purpose. I know that personal affairs do not busy Prince Marzpetuni. It is the fatherland and her afflictions which lend him power or despair. Tell me, to cure what ill, to relieve what pain have you come to see me?"

Prince Gevorg's face lit up as if Sevada had reached out with his hand and had lifted him up from a bottomless pit. The Prince's words opened the path which had been closed before him, and he decided to speak freely.

"I thank you, Lord Prince, for your fine opinion of me. You already have surmised the reason for my coming, you were quite right when you said personal affairs were not my primary concern. Yes, I have not come to Gardman on personal business. Our country, Prince, is again in a crisis; our own kinsmen are again paving the way for the enemy's attack. I have come to solicit your help to prevent future encounters."

"My help?"

"Yes. your help."

"You have sound eyes. Lord Marzpetuni, you cannot have lost your way," Sevada replied with a smile.

The Prince's sarcasm pierced Marzpetuni to the heart, yet he kept his composure.

"Even if I had been deprived of that useful sense, again through the eyes of my soul I would have found the road which leads to the castle of Gardman's wise and patriotic prince. Perhaps I have often wandered away from the true road, but this time I have made it. I have reached exactly where my desire and my duty have led me."

"The Prince of Gardman has not lost his mind, that's true, and you would not believe me if I called myself a fool. But he, Prince, is no longer a patriot. Do not honor him by that name."

"He does not want to see the Armenian royal crown jeopardized, that I know for a certainty. And even if you insist to the contrary. I cannot believe you."

"Sevada is a criminal now, Prince, believe me."

"No, he is only hurt; he is angry at the injustice of his closest kin. Because of his temporary anger, however, he will not punish the Fatherland, denying her servants his wise counsel"

"Counsel? Have you come to me for counsel, Prince?" Sevada asked, as if surprised.

"Yes, Lord Prince. Tslík Amram, the Governor of Utik, has risen against the King. The whole of Utik, and the greater part of Artsakh and Gugark have taken up arms against the King. I have come to seek

the advice of an old soldier as to what we should do to suppress the rebellion without a fratricidal war.”

“Are you mocking me, Prince?” Sevada asked seriously.

“How could I dare?”

“Hear, Lord Marzpetuni. I have no right to force you to open your heart to me. You are a man devoted to the fatherland; you are your King’s faithful servant; Sevada is obliged to respect you. I am not angry with you even if you do not openly upbraid me for making a common cause with Amram. Consideration and tact are not unknown virtues to the heir of the Marzpetunis. But Sahak Sevada has no right to hide his motives; the Prince of Gardman cannot hide his enmity with the veil of friendship. It is true that I am with Tslík Amram; you are now at the home of your King’s enemy, although he is your personal friend. Talk to me as if you were talking to the King’s enemy. Only in that case I can thank you.”

Prince Marzpetuni drew a deep breath. It seemed the last weight which pressed heavily on his heart was lifted.

“You mean to tell me then that the Lord of Gardman is with the rebels?” the Prince asked coolly.

“Not only he is with the rebels, but it was he himself who instigated and inflamed that rebellion “

“That is impossible. It is quite possible that the evil has carried away the infuriated Sevada, but Sevada himself did not create the evil.”

“Yes. I myself created the evil.”

“You yourself?”

“Yes.”

“The reason?”

“To satisfy my thirst for revenge.”

“But”

“What was Ashot *Yerkat* thinking when he blinded Sevada? Did he think that the physical blindness could prevent his soul from seeing the criminal’s bloody hand and not be filled with the fire of revenge? What harm had I caused him? Why did he darken my sight? Why did he doom me to a living death, to forever grope in the dark?”

“But, Prince, were you not the one who revolted against the King? Did you not raise all the northern provinces against him? Did you not threaten the integrity of the state? Were you not trying to dig the

grave of the royal throne? Do you think the King should not have defended the land against your ambitious encroachments? Forgive me for speaking so frankly but I love sincerity.”

“Yes, yes, be frank by all means. It is unseemly to the princely man to cover himself with the rags of hypocrisy. But see that your zeal for candor does not carry you away to the border of slander.”

“Slander? God forbid”

“Yes, you have slandered me this very moment. You said that the King was defending the country against my ambitious encroachments.”

“Yes, I did say it. You foreswore your former oath of the first settlement and rebelled against the King the second time. Was it not ambition which drove you to that perjury?”

“I am glad that you are speaking so frankly. I cannot stand the coward. At the same time I feel sorry that you know so little of the truth. To me that is a grief beyond repair. I do not grieve that the land of Armenia thinks that way of me, but it does grieve me that the man who is closest to the Court, the intimate friend of the King Ashot, Prince Gevorg of Marzpetuni defends the same opinion. Do you mean to tell me Prince Sevada rose against the King because of his ambition? Should I be surprised if the *Vardapets* who write the history of the Armenian nation plant the same insult on my memory? Oh, that’s a heavy, a very heavy slander, Prince.”

“What then was the cause of your first and second rebellions?”

“It is natural that you should ask that question; you must perforce know the real reason, if you already do not know. But first tell me; could I have wished the unhappiness of my own daughter who was the Queen of the Armenians and whom I loved dearer than my two eyes?”

“No.”

“Could I have broken her peace, the peace of the court, and lastly, could I have jeopardized the throne of my own son-in-law, the King? Would it not have been as bad as committing suicide, had I done such a thing?”

“Of course. That was the very thing which puzzled us, that Prince Sevada should raise the banner of rebellion against his own daughter and his son-in-law.”

“And you thought the reason of all this was my ambition?”

“There was nothing else we could have thought.”

“Very well. What more could I have wanted? My daughter a Queen, my son-in-law a King, myself a free, rich and powerful prince of Gardman. Could I have asked more of my fate?”

“Of course not.”

“And lastly, was I so far gone as to lack the patriotism of a common soldier? Was I so unfamiliar with the history of my nation as not to know at what cost we had won the crown of the Bagratunis, and to permit my ambition to jeopardize the solidarity of that throne?”

“If so, what then was the reason of your rebellion at the time?”

“The reason? Yes, you have a right to ask that question. There is no reason for hiding it now. But as to the reason, I think you know a good deal about it.”

“As yet I know nothing.”

“You know nothing? Listen to me then. The first time I rose against your King to warn him against taking an evil course; the second time, to save the honor of the royal throne; but now I have risen against him and have incited Tslik Aram to do the same thing in order to avenge the personal insult to me and my son.”

“First of all explain to me the reason for your first rebellion. What do you mean by saying you wanted to warn the King against an evil course? What was the evil course?”

“What evil course?”

“Yes.”

“You know that he once was in love with the daughter of Prince Gevorg of Sevordis.”

“Yes he was once, but that was a long time ago.”

“Before his marriage, it is not so?”

“Yes.”

“When a man marries, he must respect marital obligation, the oath he has taken before God and men, his word of honor, his pledge. Is that right?”

“Of course.”

“If this is true of the common man, the peasant and the slave, how much more it must be binding on the King, the people’s father and leader, he whom, at the time of his coronation, the officiating bishop solemnly enjoined: ‘Take thou this ring, the pledge of thy kingdom’s justice, for today thou art the blest prince and king of thy people. Be strong and firm, and support Christianity and the Christian faith, for thou shalt glorify the king of kings.’ And now, he who is called not only to stand firm in the Christian faith but to watch over the preservation of that faith, and to be an example of

justice and virtue to his people, has such a man the right to disgrace that faith and become a stumbling block to this people?

“Of course not.”

“But the King has done this very thing. He married my daughter but never forgot his former flame, the daughter of Sevordis. The day he appointed Tslík Amram Governor of Utík, he trampled underfoot his solemn oath before God and men; he forgot his legal marriage, and became the paramour of Tslík Amram’s wife. Don’t you know all this?”

“I know, but”

“But they constitute no crime in your eyes, is it not so?”

“God forbid that I should condone wickedness. I only want to say that we should not judge people without a conscientious examination of the causes of their error.”

“When I ask you to defend your King you may do so to your heart’s content, but now you must listen to me. Above all I am a man, and at the same time a loving father. I make no effort to hide my ambitious nature. I wanted the Armenian King to be my son-in-law, especially when I saw that he was enamored of my beautiful daughter, while I loved my daughter tenderly and found my joys in hers. That was the reason why I wanted Ashot *Yerkat* to marry her.

“Ashot could have openly refused that union; no one had the right to chain his heart against his will. But once he was united with my daughter by the bond of holy matrimony, it was his duty to respect a union which was blessed by God and men.

“But he disgraced that union. Will God forgive him for it, that I do not know. You men who have seen it are reluctant to judge him severely. But I, her father, have a heart and feelings; I have paternal pity and love, and withal, I am the proud prince of the House of Gardman. I could not have looked with indifference upon my daughter’s misfortune, and at the same time, under no circumstances could I have tolerated even the most powerful man in the kingdom to insult my dignity. With one blow I would crush the man who had the temerity of tarnishing the spotless name of my ancestral home. I could have done it. But first of all, I listened to the voice of discretion. No one as yet knows the plight of my daughter, I thought. She herself knows nothing about it, why then should I make public the festering wound? It can be healed in seclusion, provided my daughter’s peace of mind was unimpaired and the honor of the royal crown unblemished. That is the way I thought and made my appeal to the King. I talked to him like a father; I exhorted him to put a check on his passion, to turn away from the path of dishonor. At first he was unwilling to admit his guilt, he laughed at the suspicions of a father who had been chastened by bitter experience, and with his nimble tongue he painted a monstrous picture of my suspicions, trying to dispel them. Thereupon I put the proof before him. Oh, there is no heavier punishment for the virtuous man than seeing the man whom he had

respected, in whom he had reposed his noblest hopes, whom he regarded as his hero, crushed by the consciousness of his incontrovertible guilt. I bore that heavy grief as a father, as a man; but later I suffered as a parent, when I weighed the impending blow which would crush my daughter's heart.

"Finally, the King confessed to me his weakness and promised to sever his relations with the home of Tslík Amram. With a glad heart I returned to Gardman. But when the summer arrived, he sent the Queen to the resorts of Syunik while he went to Utik and for weeks indulged himself under the tents of Tslík Amram in the mountains of Sevordik and the pleasure resorts of Princess Aspram. This was too much for me. I wrote him a reprimanding letter and threatened that, if he did not instantly withdraw from the land of Sevordik, I myself would chase him out with my regiments.

"Your King not only ignored my letter but laughed at my threat. 'What's this? Do the men of Gardman war against lovers too?' he remarked derisively to my trusted messenger. But I, who naturally abhorred making jokes, decided to give the villain a good lesson. The only thing is, I did not carry out my threat instantly because I had to prepare my daughter for the bad news. It was a grievous duty for a loving father to announce to his child her misfortune who thought herself happy until then.

"Meanwhile, the King's brother Abas and his father-in-law rose against the King, forcing him to take refuge in Utik. And one unhappy day I received a letter from the Governess of my daughter announcing that the Queen was on her deathbed in the Castle of Tavush and wanted to see me. I immediately hastened to Tavush where I saw my daughter in the agonies of death. I asked her the cause of her sickness and she, with agonizing tears, told me the story.

"What could I do? How could I be patient any longer? I told my daughter not to worry when she heard the news of my war against the King. I am doing this, I said to her, to bring your husband to his senses, but there will be no bloodshed. To make my intentions all the more convincing, I thoroughly denounced the King with insulting words and threatened to ravage his land. With this warning I departed.

"That was the reason why, upon my arrival at Gardman. I assembled my forces and occupied a few provinces of Utik. To convince you that I was doing this solely to bring the King to his senses, I will tell you this. The King had just withdrawn his army from Shirak, and I secretly sent word to princes Smbat and Babgen of Syunik to come and mediate between me and the King. You and several other princes were among the mediators. Had I not contrived deliberately to delay the encounter before your arrival, there would have been a great massacre on both sides before the Village of Akhayan. But with your timely arrival the situation was changed. The princes of Syunik had told you nothing about my covert plan, therefore, many of you concluded that Prince Sevada was driven by his ambition in rising against the King. I did not deem it necessary to dissipate that false impression but preferred to keep the princes ignorant of my daughter's misfortune, and to spare the King's name, rather than to subject myself to the false ignominy of having cherished ambitious designs.

“And I publicly swore eternal reconciliation and signed treaties to this effect But you never heard the confession which King Ashot made to me in the presence of the Bishop of Syunik, swearing upon his sacred honor to sever once and forever his intimate relations with Princess Aspram and to return to his Queen with a clean heart. Even as the motive of this rebellion was not my ambition, but my desire to redeem the King’s integrity, so the real condition of our reconciliation and the sacred oath was not the thing which you princes thought, but the solemn pledge which was sealed between the King, the Bishop of Syunik, and myself.”

“Now I fully know the motive of your first story, what was the cause of the second rebellion?” asked Marzpetuni.

“The second?”

“Yes.”

“The reasons of the second rising are more weighty.”

“Tell me briefly, if you are not tired.”

“Tired? Oh no. I never get tired talking with Prince Marzpetuni,” Sevada said as he launched on his second explanation.

“I have always been of the opinion,” he said, “that it is always possible to forgive a guilty man who, either through the contingency of circumstances, or through his own personal weakness commits an error, but who is possessed of a good conscience, a sensitive heart, who acknowledges his error and repents. But the guilty man who not only does not confess his guilt but praises it as a virtue, seduces the inexperienced to follow his example, or to cover up the enormity of his guilt slanders those around him, accusing them of the most grievous crimes, such a criminal, I say, not only should not be forgiven but should be punished severely, otherwise, one evil will give rise to a hundred more evils.

“Our King, my friend, belongs to this category of infractors. I was obliged to punish him; my dignity, my parental and human duty demanded it. I should have removed him from the world once and forever as a stumbling block. And it was not difficult for me to do it. And do you think for a moment that his removal would have been a loss for us? Never. Don’t be silly. The royal Armenian throne would not be vacant. The King has no heir, sooner or later his throne will be occupied by his brother Abas, therefore, the sooner the better. Such a change might be for the better. And yet I acted the fool. I insisted on defending the throne for a while longer.

“And I postponed the punishment. I still thought the leopard might change his spots, and the Ethiopian his skin. Through my forgiving spirit I thought I could soften his stoney heart and awaken his dead conscience. And while I was engrossed with these humane considerations, Ashot *Yerkat* arrested Prince Vasak of Syunik, my friend, and confined him in the Castle of Kayan. And what was

the reason for his imprisonment, pray tell me, Prince Marzpetuni. You are the King's intimate friend. You no doubt know the mystery."

"Don't you know?" Marzpetuni asked.

"I want you to tell it."

"Prince Vasak of Syunik was involved in a conspiracy against the King's life."

"What conspiracy?"

"The conspiracy which was organized by Ashot the Tyrant, the King's brother Abas, and his father-in-law Gurgen of Abkhaz."

"My friend, let us lay conscience aside and use our heads. Abas and Gurgen had long since joined hands against the King. You know the reason. The daughter of Gurgen Abkhaz, wife of Abas, wanted to be queen while my daughter still was alive. The proud daughter of Abkhaz could not bear the thought that the Armenian Queen was the daughter of a prince and was not satisfied with her status as wife of the King's brother. No, she wanted to be queen by all means. While the menfolk, well, you know them; they are the slaves of women. Our ancestor Adam set the pace for this slavery. And presently, young Abas joins forces with his father-in-law to dethrone and kill his own brother. Abas of course loves his wife too much to deny her ambition. Add to that his own youthful ambition and the cause of the conspiracy becomes perfectly clear.

"The son-in-law and the father-in-law, as you know, joined forces and marched on Yerazgavors to seize and kill the King but they failed in the attempt. Having been advised of the conspiracy beforehand, Ashot took refuge in Utik together with his family. The conspirators looted Yerazgavors and departed. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that is right."

"Well, Ashot *Yerkat* naturally could not endure this insult and retaliated by ravaging the land of Abkhaz. And thus, the war continued on both sides. The King was victorious in all battles, that's true, but the end result was the same thing. It was the Armenian soldiers who were being decimated on both sides. To prevent the carnage, my friend Prince Vasak acted as mediator and reconciled the two sides. Is that right?"

"Yes, that is true."

"And now', the same Prince Vasak who had become the brunt of the negotiations, who had crossed the two camps ten times, trying to exhort them, to persuade them, to pacify the passions, and who finally brought about the reconciliation, how could this man have been a party to the conspiracy, the same conspiracy which Abas and Gurgen tried to organize with the aid of Ashot the Tyrant? He

could not possibly have joined them, positively not, we all thought. But the facts proved the exact opposite. They found a letter of Ashot the Tyrant in the possession of Prince Vasak in which the former thanked the Prince for his role of mediator to allow Prince Abkhaz and Abas enough time to rally their forces and give the King the finishing blow, the presumption being that the cause of their defeats was their unpreparedness.

“And now, Prince, I ask you, was it possible to believe the authenticity of that letter? Ashot *Yerkat* was warring against the King because he wanted to be the ruler. I told you the reason why Abas and Gurgen were fighting. What motive drove Prince Vasak to rise against his uncle the King? Was it not all the same to him which of his uncles was king, Ashot or Abas? Was it not natural that he should favor the elder brother who was the legal king?”

“That is so, but I myself read the letter. It was the writing of Ashot the Tyrant. It was found in Prince Vasak’s pocket during a search.”

“Are you through? Now listen to me. That was a slander, a black, vile, vicious slander. To exonerate himself before my daughter the Queen, the King wanted to tarnish the spotless name of Gardman, and to do so he tarnished the reputation of Prince Vasak.”

“I thought the Queen’s name was not involved in this matter.”

“As far as you are concerned, only Vasak was involved, but I know something else.”

“What?”

“The King told me that Vasak had intimate relations with the Queen.”

“What sort of relations?”

“Amorous relations, Lord Marzpetuni, amorous relations My daughter, my immaculate daughter Sahakanush. Do you hear, Prince?”

“That's impossible.”

“Impossible? Have you no other word for it?”

“That was a terrible slander.”

“Yes, shocking to the hearer.”

“And he invented that abominable slander. He had no scruples about it. He had conceived the thought long since. Do you remember, soon after the reconciliation I spoke about, Prince Vasak ceased calling at the Court. When the Catholicos asked him why he did not call on the King Vasak had told him that ‘the King suspected his loyalty.’ And that was true. One day the Prince took a stroll

with the Queen in Dvin. Upon their return the King remarked to the Prince, ‘Princess Mariam always complains that you never accompany her at the amusements. Tell the Princess for me that the reason is not for your lack of love for amusements, but that she is not as beautiful as the Queen’.”

“Did the King utter these very words?”

“Prince Vasak himself told me that with a heavy heart.”

“Was that the reason why the Catholicos obtained a writ of confidence from the King about the Prince?”

“Yes. The Prince had told the Catholicos that he would never set foot in the royal Court until the King gave his solemn oath that he had implicit confidence in his loyalty. The Catholicos obtained this writ. Thereafter the Prince freely visited the Court. But one day the King suddenly had him arrested and confined to the Castle of Kayan. When I heard the news I was terribly distressed I instantly wrote the King a letter asking him why he had imprisoned my friend. I wanted to know the Prince’s crime. And this is what the King wrote to me.”

At this the Prince clapped his hands and a servant came in.

“Call my scribe,” he ordered.

A few minutes later the scribe came in.

“Go to my files and bring me the King’s letter. It is tied with black ribbon and sealed with wax,” ordered Sevada.

The scribe went out and a few minutes later returned with the letter. After dismissing the scribe, Sevada handed the letter to Marzpetuni, saying “Read it yourself. I don’t want you to have the slightest doubt.”

“To me your word is truth. What need is there of digging up old secrets?” Marzpetuni replied, reluctant to open the let-ter.

“No Prince, you are the intimate friend of the King, as well as my sincere friend. It is well that you learn the true cause of our enmity, so that you may resort to other means to prevent further mischief, and not be forced to travel a long journey to seek the advice of Prince Sevada.”

“I will read it if it will please you,” the Prince said, and releasing the seal, opened the parchment.

“Read it out loud. I want to hear the words of it again.”

The Prince read the following:

“From Ashot Shahanshah, King of the Armenians, to Prince Sahak Sevada,

Lord of Gardman: Greetings.

“I have received your letter, asking me to inform you why I have confined Prince Vasak of Sisak, my relative and your friend, in the Castle of Kayan. And although it is a painful task, and will disturb the tranquility of my gracious father, I feel constrained to divulge the reason, since the father of my Queen requests it. I have arrested Prince Vasak and will sentence him to death for his unworthy conduct, wherein he has blemished the honor of the royal house, having maintained improper relations with your daughter and my spouse. I personally ascertained his guilt, and therefore I had him imprisoned, in order to destroy evil with evil. To spare the honor of the royal family, as well as the honor of my father, the Lord of Gardman, however. I have proclaimed Prince Vasak as a fellow conspirator of Abas, and to this end, I have forced him to issue a writ of confession. You should thank me for having made provision to preserve your family name unblemished. As to the matter of punishing Prince Vasak’s accomplice, your daughter, I leave it to you as a just father. Ashot I, King of the Armenians.” (Signed)

Ashot I, King of the Armenians

The King’s letter made a profound impression on Prince Marzpetuni. It seemed, the same king who until then was so exalted and sublime, suddenly toppled from his height, his sublimity vanished, and he now presented the spectacle of a common scoundrel whose passions turned and circled in all directions, who had become the captive and the slave of beastly instincts which debase human dignity.

Until then Prince Marzpetuni had occasionally been tolerant of the King, ascribing his weakness to his natural temperament. He knew many respectable men who were not entirely immune to human frailty. But he never could believe that the King, to cover up his guilty weakness, could resort to crime, could slander the irreproachable, virtuous Queen, whom he, Prince Marzpetuni, knew well, and that he could incarcerate a good and patriotic man like Prince Vasak, slandering him for crimes he had not committed.

“What are you thinking of now, Prince?” Sevada asked, seeing the latter was silent after reading the letter.

“Not a thing.”

“That’s strange.”

“When the sword pierces the heart, the mind stops thinking. You have driven a sword into my heart. Prince.”

“You are hurt, isn’t it so? You have been pierced deeply. O, that is only you, the King’s companion in arms, a soldier of the fatherland. You are hurt so deeply that your brain stopped thinking. What if

you also had been a loving father? If you had seen the glory and the happiness you had built up for the daughter you loved with years of toil and sacrifice suddenly lie shattered before your eyes, and with it, your best hopes reduced to dust, the tranquility of your heart irretrievably lost, the joy of your heart departed, the honor of your family stained. What would you have done then?"

"Isn't the pain felt for the entire fatherland even more bitter than all this?"

"But what shall we say of this added load to the pain of the fatherland?"

"Of course it would be beyond human endurance."

"Yes, Prince, I was no less a patriot than the other man. That was the reason why, after receiving this vile and slanderous letter, I did not instantly mount my horse, did not fly to Shirak, and with one stroke of the sword sever the criminal's head. That is the reason why I did not unfurl the banner of rebellion the second time, but with foresight decided to put the pressure on the royal estates and the people, hoping perhaps that I could make a dent on the King's petrified heart, could force him to mend his ways, could return the lost wanderer to the true path, and could save the throne from the impending disaster.

"With this end in view, I mobilized my ready force in Gardman, numbering no less than eight thousand, and marched straight to Dzorapor. My first task was to besiege and capture the fort of Kayan. I liberated the wives of several rebel princes who were incarcerated with Prince Vasak. I was satisfied with this much until the King returned from Abkhazia with his troops.

"But the troops who had retired from Kayan joined the peasants of nearby villages and started to annoy my soldiers. I was forced to attack them, and when they rushed to my side. He saw that I was mad with anger, that I was headed for certain death. He came to save me, but your company was alert. Your soldiers captured us both. God betrayed me to my enemy, he wanted to punish me for my sins. Yes, it was God, and not King Ashot who subdued Sevada."

"You yourself told me that you had left your army in Abkhazia, and came to Gugark with only a few companies. It follows that your pitiful force of hundreds could not have destroyed my army of eight thousand. But God betrayed me and my son into your hands, and the army, deprived of its leaders, dispersed. Is this the truth or not?"

"That is true."

"Very well. Tell me now, if the King really wanted to become reconciled with me, if he abhorred a bloodshed, why then did he dip his hands in blood when I no longer was a menace to him? He had already captured me and my son. The soldiers of Gardman had scattered like shepherdless sheep. What forced him to blind me and Grigor, his father and brother? Is this the heart of a man or a beast which throbs under his breast?"

“The King was afraid of a future rebellion, afraid of your revenge.”

“Why should he be afraid? Thank God, the King had many fortified castles, he could have confined us in one of them. Why blind us? Why darken the sun of his own kinsmen? How could he bring himself around to give his executioner that cruel order? It does not matter much as far as I am concerned. I am an old man, I have seen and enjoyed life, I have spent many happy hours, and lastly, I have committed errors for which I should perhaps be justly punished. But what shall we say of my poor child, so young, so budding, and so full of hopes, still in the pursuit of the goal of all youths, name, honor and glory. Why? Why did he have to blind him? He had committed no crime, had no part in the internal conflicts which stormed my miserable and his stern heart and pitted is against each other. And lastly, did he not have a drop of pity for his Queen, his own wife, my ungrateful daughter, the woman who loved him ardently? You say he was afraid of retaliation. Very well, did he think a blind man could not revenge himself?”

“He did not expect it.”

“Well, let him see now what the blind avenger can do. Go tell your King that the news of his successes was veritable torture for me. When I learned that he had been reconciled with his brother Abas and Ashot the Tyrant, that their joint forces had occupied Dvin and were celebrating their victory, I was seized by the spirit of evil, my heart cried for revenge and I harkened to its voice. I invited Tslik Amram to my castle, I told him of the illicit love affair between his wife and the King, I fanned the flames of his jealousy,

I put in him the unquenchable fire of revenge, I made him rise against the lawless King and I joined his cause. There will be many others who will join us. And now, let your King cling tight to his throne and see what the blind avenger can do to him.”

“By doing so you only take your revenge on the nation and not the King,” Prince Marzpetuni observed sadly.

“No, we will only be revenged on the King.”

“The King won’t be vanquished. He is coming with an army of ferocious Arabs and will surely repel Tslik Amram’s troops who unfortunately are all Armenians. He may even kill your son David who now is in Amram’s service.”

“No. God who is just will not let him prevail. And you shall see it with your own eyes. This time the mighty arm of God will punish him.”

Chapter 11 The Blind Eye Forgives, but the Blind Heart does not

The words of Prince Sevada made a profound impression on Marzpetuni. Although, in the excitement of the moment he had threatened the Prince that the King would come with the Arab auxiliaries, drive out Tslik Amram and would kill Sevada's son, Prince David, nevertheless, Sevada's last prediction filled his heart with dismay. He was as devout and godly as he was brave; he believed that God "would hear the prayer of old blindmen, and would fulfill their entreaties either with blessing or curse. The thought filled him with a secret unknown doubt. Was it premonition, or the effect of superstition? He could not of course determine, but he knew that the King was wrong, and God would punish the guilty sooner or later. He thought the King might be defeated, and that the rebels might succeed in dispersing the Arab auxiliaries. That certainly would be a disgrace to the Armenian King who with his kinsmen, had come to do battle with the foreigners. This dishonor, of course, would be followed by fresh massacres and fresh desolations.

The Prince was terrified by the thought. But he sat there, silently waiting for what Sevada might say. He had decided not to antagonize or oppose him further, not to provoke his wounded soul, but to submit and to placate him. "I might be able to soften his hardened heart, to waken his benumbed conscience, and save the fatherland from the menace of his righteous indignation," he thought.

At this moment one of the servants came in, bringing with him a basin of water for the guest's washing. Marzpetuni asked the servant first to offer the water to Prince Sevada, because, being the younger of the two, it was not proper that he should wash first.

Sevada, whose attention missed nothing, smiled at this. "I am surprised," he said, "that the King who grew up with you from his childhood learned nothing from you about good manners."

"But he possesses many other virtues which would lead one to be lenient toward his frailties," Marzpetuni observed gently.

After the ablutions, supper was served by two servants, loaded on two ornate silver trays, one of which was set before Marzpetuni, and the other before Sevada. One of the youthful servants knelt before Sevada to help him partake of the meal, while the other, standing, poured the wine from a silver decanter both for his master and the guest. But Marzpetuni, too deeply moved, hardly touched his food. Sevada noticed this from a remark of his servant and smiled. "Do you see, Prince?" he said, "the common people are wiser. A man never asks questions until he has fed his guest. That is what I told you one hour ago. But I made an exception of the common custom in view of the fact that we are not strangers. I see now that I was mistaken. If I had not asked the reason of your visit, if I had not answered your questions, your appetite would not have been ruined."

"That's true, Prince," Marzpetuni replied, "it is not good that we disregard the advice of our forefathers."

"I agree with you. The advice of our fathers is sacred; we should never forget them."

“But we are forgetting the most important of all. Our forefathers have a saying:

Unity is the mother of all good; disunity is the parent of evil’.”

Sevada was silent for a moment, then he smiled and said: “You are scolding me. Lord Marzpetuni, and you have a right. But I beseech you to enjoy your repast, that will make me even more happy than all the benefits of unity which often cannot be distinguished from the real evil.”

Recalling his decision not to antagonize Sevada, the Prince said no more and started to eat. Nevertheless, the sight of the servant feeding Prince Sevada was most depressing to him. He wished that he had never entered Gardman, just to avoid witnessing this spectacle. Pie had seen the Prince when he had his eyesight, pacing before him like a giant, with fiery eyes, with a proud look, and an imperious expression of his face. And now ... He sat there huddled in the corner, a wasted figure, and pale. Only his soul stood defiant, unconquered by his physical affliction.

When supper was over Marzpetuni asked why Prince Grigor could not join them. “Grigor is with Amram,” Sevada said. “My son David is leading the Albanian regiments, while Grigor is leading the Gardman troops.”

“Leading the Gardman troops?” Marzpetuni asked, surprised.

“Yes, he is leading the Gardman troops. Are you surprised? You perhaps are wondering how the blind can lead the blind, is it not so? But my troops have other leaders. Grigor’s presence is necessary for the army to inflame their spirit of revenge. No word of any commander can so well rekindle the valor of the soldiers as the blindness of my son. They love their master and they will never rest until they have avenged me and my son against the King.”

Marzpetuni was surprised that Sevada should expose his heart so freely and openly before him and reveal his carefully laid plans, and he was doing it without shrinking, without fear that he, Marzpetuni, as the King's loyal servant and ally, could obstruct the realization of his aims. This boldness on the part of Sevada dismayed Marzpetuni all the more.

“So then, you have seen to it that the revenge of the Gardman troops shall never be extinguished, but the rebellion shall go on, ever expanding and devastating in its results,” Marzpetuni observed in despair.

“Yes, Lord Marzpetuni. I have no alternative. You may curse me, if you wish, but mark this well that when the cup is full you cannot add a few drops more and expect it not to overflow.”

Marzpetuni felt that the time had come when he should employ his weapons which only could placate the Prince’s inexorable heart, namely, to plead with him, to appeal to his finer sensibilities. By using this weapon, he did not necessarily beg the fatherland’s salvation from the foreigners, but, to make an end of an internal turbulence, he did not desist from importuning his kinsman, because, by

doing so, he would not be debasing or humiliating himself but would raise himself in the estimation of Sevada. So, he made his supreme appeal: “If I should kneel at your feet, Prince Sevada,” he pleaded, “if I should kiss your feet and beseech you to spare the blood of your brothers and sons, to prevent the slaughter which in one day will destroy countless families, will make orphans of myriads of infants, will make widows of women and young brides; if I should remind you of your sacred duty as an Armenian and as a Christian, not to requite evil with evil, and not to press a point of personal revenge at the cost of the fatherland’s ruination, what would you do, Prince Sevada? Would you still remain unmoved to my entreaties, my tears?”

“Not one word on that subject, Lord Marzpetuni. Nature has created man one

way but we conceive it in an entirely different way. The rebellious heart does not obey the brain’s command; in vain are the exhortations, our appeals to our sense of Christianity. There are no Christians in the world. Christ’s commands are obeyed only by those who have not been hurt by ungrateful fellowmen, or if they have been wronged, they are unable to retaliate in kind — an eye for an eye. But those who have the power to retaliate will do so, and that is more natural than the Christian teaching of forgiveness.”

“And what shall we say of those who have the power to retaliate and yet forgive?”

“If there are such men, they are super-men, they are the disciples of Christ. But I know no such men.”

“Why can’t you be such a man, Prince Sevada? Do you think you will feel prouder when you vent your revenge by spreading massacre and ruin all around you? He who knows what is good and what is better and yet does the opposite is a criminal. The Lord of Gardman of course would not wish that any one of us should dare call him by that name “

“The Lord of Gardman, unfortunately, is a common man; nature has given him a heart like the others; he cannot feel that which his likes do not feel.”

“No, the Lord of Gardman is not a knave or a churl who does not recognize virtue; he knows how great it is to forgive; he surely will forgive. I am begging this boon in behalf of the mothers and the women whose sons and husbands shall be sacrificed to your revenge.”

“Lord Marzpetuni, you are disarming me. Your words oppress me deeply, because you are seated there before me while I listen to your living words. But when you are gone and I am all alone, when the bats once again accompany me in this hollow room, when the morning sun brings me the same darkness as did the night, when I need the aid of my servants to take two steps, when I long for the whisper of my spouse which never comes, and when I think of your King’s brutal command which took her to her grave, that worshipful woman, that devout mother ... When I hear the sad songs of that hapless young bride, and her wailing bemoaning the black fate of her blind husband, when

Grigor's boy, little Sevada, comes to ask me for the hundredth time: 'Grandpa, you are old, God blinded you, but why is my father blind? ... Tell me, Lord Marzpetuni, when all these storm my brain, when they disturb my spirit, and my heart incessantly cries out 'Revenge, Revenge to the scoundrel!' what shall I do then?'

"What shall you do then?"

"Yes, tell me, I want to conquer myself.1

"What did King Smbat do when, seeing his country was being ruined, he came down from the Blue Castle and surrendered to the enemy. What did he do when his executioners tucked his handkerchief down his throat, when they clamped his jaws and twisted his neck in a rope, when they beat up his head and sat on his back, and when his heroic spirits refused to yield, they tore him limb by limb and finally crucified him?"

Sevada was silent.

"He did nothing but said: 'Lord, receive this sacrifice which I bring to Thee for the sake of my nation. In return, I ask You to save my people from this calamity.' He said: 'It is better that one man should perish, rather than the whole nation. And he willingly became a martyr. You too, Prince, admit that it was the evil Arab who blinded you, and you will be able to repeat the same words every time the memory of your beloved spouse, the cries of your young daughter-in-law, and the stuttering of little Sevada disturb your

peace. It was impossible to appease the wrath of the Arab beast, it was futile to try to restrain them, nothing could restrain their beastly passion except blood, but God has not granted such a soul to the Armenian Prince, therefore, he will listen to the voice of his conscience, he will listen to my entreaty, and believe that in me speaks the voice of the whole nation." After a long pause, Sevada raised his head and asked: "What do you want me to do, Prince Gevorg?"

"Disengage your two sons from Amram, and recall the Albania and Gardman troops from Utik."

Sevada again bowed his head and sank into his meditations. For a moment there was a tense silence in the room. Prince Gevorg felt that his words had impressed Prince Sevada favorably and was anxiously awaiting his agreement. Finally Sevada spoke:

"You have persuaded me, Lord Marzpetuni. You have stirred the better in-stinct in me. I cannot let you excel me in patriotism. Let it be as you say. I will give up my revenge. But there is still one more obstacle to quell the rebellion which is aflame which is beyond my means. That job belongs to you."

"I accept the job gladly. I am not running away from any task. Just tell me, what is this obstacle?"

“I will persuade my sons and will recall the troops, but I cannot persuade Tslík Amram because it was I who incited him to his enmity; how can I advise him to the contrary now?”

“I will take care of that,” Marzpetuni replied.

“Very well. But know this, that I cannot stop until Amram is won over. I cannot separate my troops from his. I have promised to support him in every contingency. I cannot break my word. If you succeed in your mission, send me a messenger and I will at once give my sons the necessary instructions to leave Utík with their troops. If you fail, then you will know that God would not let this cup pass from us, and that one of us must drink it to the dregs.”

Prince Marzpetuni was overjoyed. He kissed the right hand of Sevada in expression of his gratitude. In his opinion, the greatest obstacle of all had been surmounted. Sevada, who was recognized by all as an impregnable rock, had been persuaded. It would be easy to win over Tslík Amram who by nature was a kindhearted man. With these happy meditations Prince Marzpetuni retired for the night to his bedchamber, led by the Prince’s chamberlain. The soft bed and the quiet of the night brought a refreshing stupor to his tired body and soon he closed his eyes in sweet slumber.

Early in the morning Prince Marzpetuni dressed and descended to the yard. Awakening one of the servants, he ordered him to saddle his horse. The season was cold and the sky overcast. The autumn frost had covered the ground, reminding of the imminent winter. The servant who had just got out of his warm bed was having difficulty in saddling the horse in the open cold. The moments were precious, and the Prince, exasperated, pushed the servant aside and finished the job. Then he ascended the stairs again and woke up the Prince’s door keeper to find out if he could see the Prince. Hearing their conversation, the chamberlain stepped out, and surprised seeing Prince Gevorg there, he asked: “What is your command, Prince?”

“If you could awaken the Prince and tell him that I would like to see him before I leave.”

The chamberlain stepped inside, and a few moments later he reappeared, announcing that the Prince was ready to see him. Marzpetuni followed him through two narrow aisles, entered Sevada’s bedroom, and taking off his helmet, he approached the

bed. The room still was illuminated by the flicker of a small silver lamp. The Prince was seated in his bed in his night shirt.

“Why so early, dear Prince?” Sevada asked.

“I want to reach Amram’s camp today. Time is precious. I must hurry.”

“But do you know where he is camped?” “When I was making the rounds of Utík they told me he had just passed through Aghstev and was camped somewhere near the Castle of Tavush. I don’t know where he is now. That is why I came to see you.” “Two days ago our troops were camped on the

banks of Sakam (Dzagam river); Amram still is near Tavush. If they have received the news of the King's arrival, the two armies must have joined by now. You will meet them somewhere around there."

"Can't you tell me where the two armies will join?" the Prince asked with a smile.

"No, I have no right to divulge that to you. And you, Prince, will not demand it from me. You persuaded me and I gave you my assent to reconcile with the King. I did what I could. Now go and persuade Tslík Amram; if you succeed, well and good; if not, war is inevitable, therefore it is impossible for me to divulge the site of the army."

"Very well, let it be as you say. Thank you for your assent. Now give me your blessing and I will go. That blessing is necessary for the success of my mission."

"God's blessings be on your mission. You are the agent of peace and reconciliation. Providence will surely crown your effort with success. But if it has preordained that the guilty should find his punishment . . . I will do that which I am commanded by duty and Fatherland; as to God's will, we can only bless it. May His will be done."

Saying it, the Prince approached Sevada, embraced and kissed him, and took his leave. In fifteen minutes he was with Vahram, the Keeper of the Castle.

Wrapped in his thick and long coat of goatskin, his large head encased in a steel headgear, the Keeper was pacing the floor of his watch tower, when Marzpetuni approached him.

"I knew that you would leave the Prince early, so I got up early to open the gates for you." the Keeper said approaching the Prince. He was curious to know if he had succeeded in keeping his incognito with Sevada. Had he obtained the secrets he was after?

The Prince told him briefly all that had happened, what he had discussed and learned from Sevada, concealing of course the part which pertained to domestic troubles and secret love affairs. The good-hearted Vahram was surprised that he, who had been so close to Sevada, had never learned the secrets, and that until that moment he did not know that the man who incited Tslík Amram to his rebellious act was Sevada. The Prince wanted to take advantage of the situation in order to further win the Keeper's confidence.

"What do you think, friend?" he asked laughingly. "If Sevada had not known you, do you think he would let you remain the Keeper of his castle?"

"What? Does he know that I still am loyal to the King."

"He knows everything; but he knows you."

“How does he know me?”

“He knows that you cannot harm him.” “How does he know that I cannot harm him? Do I lack in courage? Or does he think my arms are weak because of my advancing age?”

“He even knows that you cannot defend the King if necessary,” Marzpetuni added, deliberately arousing the Keeper’s ego.

“Did he tell you this?” Vahram asked, deeply displeased.

“No, he said nothing explicitly.”

“He said nothing explicitly? I get you. But you surmised it from his hints. Very

well. I will compel that man to respect me. Prince Gevorg, I am with you right now” ... there was a note of decision in his voice ...

“Go now and see if you can bring about a reconciliation; but if you fail, send me a messenger and the next day I will be with you. This sword of mine will open a path for the King, to reoccupy Utik, as well as Gardman.” When he said this, he opened the folds of his tunic and planted a power-ful hand on the hilt of his sword.

Marzpetuni was secretly overjoyed over his accomplishment in stirring up Vahram and getting from him this much of a promise. Indeed, the King needed the support of a man like Vahram at that moment. He belonged to that set of the warriors who at first approach a danger cautiously, but once they close in, they never are afraid of it.

“Give me your hand and take the oath that you will respond to my call wherever I am, even unto death,” Marzpetuni said, fixing the Keeper’s eyes with his penetrating look.

Marzpetuni grasped the extended hand firmly and said:

“I thank you, Prince Vahram. Up to this moment I relied only on the person whom I could sacrifice for the sake of the Throne and the Fatherland. Now I can rely on two persons.”

“Yes, Vahram *Sepuh* belongs to you just as much. Sacrifice him if need be, provided you sacrifice him on the altar of Armenia’s salvation.”

“I know no other altar, and lo, from this moment, I commit my hope and faith into your hands.”

Saying it, the Prince embraced the Keeper, kissed him, gave him a few last minute instructions, and mounting his steed flew out of the fortress. The Prince’s aide who had spent a restless night as a result of some unpleasant rumors circulating in the village, had hastened to the fortress early in the morning. He wanted to be on hand in time lest his master’s life be endangered by the rebellious

prince. But to his great surprise he was overjoyed seeing the Prince descending the slopes of the castle even before he had crossed the stream.

“Where have you been, and how come you are so early, Yeznik?” the Prince asked his aide when the two joined.

“My Lord, if I could enter the fort in the dark, I would have come last night to join you, but I knew Gardman is inaccessible to intruders,” the aide apologized. “What was the cause of your hurry?”

“I learned some new developments and I was afraid for your life.”

“Worried about me? Thank God, I am still sound of body and limb, mounted on my black steed. Now tell me, what are those new things you learned in the village?”

“Unpleasant news. My host the priest would tell me nothing.”

“Then what?”

“I left all my money in his house. Part of it I gave to him for the privilege of kissing his hand, another part I donated to his wife, and the remainder to his daughter for washing my feet.”

“And was the daughter beautiful?”

“Oh my Master, you must be feeling really good to be joking with your Yeznik. To tell the truth, she was very beautiful, black-eyed, red-cheeked, and with long flowing hair.”

“Why didn’t you get engaged to her?” “Ha! To bribe the priest? But I bribed him with something else. I promised him that I would ask you to move him to Dvin. The peasant aspires to be a priest in the capital.”

“Wouldn’t you be glad if I made you captain?”

“Why not? I can fight like a lion.”

“Well, a priest can baptize, can officiate at weddings, can bury the dead. People are born and die in the capital as well as in the villages.”

“That’s true, my Lord.”

“But what did you learn from the priest?” “I learned that the Albanians and the Gardman troops too have rebelled against the King. It’s all the work of Sevada. The Father told me that one day the Mayor of the village, at the behest of the Prince, invited all the peasants to the church yard and swore them to take up arms against the King. All of them took the oath. They have done the same thing in all the other villages and towns. In three days, the Father said, four thousand men have rallied to the

banners of Prince David. With this army David marched on Utik. As to the people who were left behind, they have sworn to boycott the royal troops.”

“I know all that; you spent your money for nothing,” the Prince said. Then he asked: “What did you learn about the movements of the army? How far will the rebels go to meet the King, or where will the Gardman troops join the Utis?”

“I learned nothing about that, although I spent two hours at the tavern for that very purpose. I should tell you that I met a deserter who had fled from the Valley of Tavush. He told me that several companies of Amram are lying in ambush in the bullrushes of Kur to waylay the King with their arrows when he crosses the river, because Amram fears the Arabs and will not risk a battle in the open.”

“They will never succeed in that,” the Prince observed calmly. “The King’s guards are Vanandians. Even the lightning will not pierce their armor, to say nothing of Utik arrows.”

“But if the troops of Abkhaz arrive — said the deserter — then Amram will face the King in the open.”

“How did the deserter know this secret of Amram?”

“He learned it when he was scouting the bulrush for Amram. The natives of Utik assured him that Prince Amram would take him to the land of Abkhaz together with them. After delivering Utik to Gurgen, Amram would move to Abkhaz and settle there. This was enough for him to desert the cause of Amram. This deserter is a wonderful Armenian. ‘If this Amram is going to move to Abkhaz, why should we fight his battles against our King?’ he said to me.”

At this, the Prince’s face clouded. He was alarmed by the new information which his aided unconsciously had communicated to him. Until then he had hoped that the King’s appearance with a powerful army would compel Amram to retire to his fortress, and thus the war might be avoided. But now, when he learned that Prince Gurgen, too, had a hand in the rebellion, he was exceedingly sad. Relying on such foreign aid, Amram could cause great harm to the fatherland.

His only recourse was a lesser degree of hope, that is, to rely on his vigor and his eloquence to appease the rebel. He knew no other way of preventing the impending calamity.

“My Lord, this old wolf of Abkhaz has given us plenty of trouble; when are we going to meet him his due punishment?” Yeznik broke the silence.

“Whenever God wills it,” the Prince replied indifferently as he spurred his horse to a faster pace.

“But where are we going?” the servant asked, keeping pace with his master.

“We will try to make the camp of Amram today, every hour we lose may result in additional new dangers.”

“But we have had no rest. I hardly think our horses can make it in one day, exhausted as they are.”

“Why? How many leagues is the distance between here and Tavush?”

“More than one hundred leagues. We can hardly cross the Valley of Sakam by evening.”

“What about by morning?”

“Yes, we could be in Tavush by sunrise.”

“That will be good enough. Let's hurry,” the Prince said laying the whip to his steed. The animal started to fly like the wind, followed closely by the servant.

By evening the travelers found them-selves at the Valley of Sakam. Some villagers who were relaxing on the river bank informed them that the joint army of Princes David and Grigor had broken camp the same day, and Amram's army was at the confluence of the rivers Aghstev and Kur at the time. When they crossed the river and came out into the open plain, Yeznik wanted to know why Amram had extended his line of communications so far from his fortress.

“It means that the troops of Abkhaz are very close,” the Prince said.

“As you see, the Gardman troops too have advanced from here. The two armies are about to join.”

“Then they must have heard about the King's coming.”

“Of course. Why else should they join their armies? They could easily exhaust the supply of the neighboring regions in a few days.”

“Master, it seems to me we are walking right into the battle, and not the recon-ciliation. Is it not so?” Yeznik was uneasy.

“That is known to God alone. Let us see what the morning will bring for us,” the Prince said with apparent indifference, but inwardly he was deeply concerned. Some premonition was pressing heavily on his heart, and as if to rid himself of the oppressive thought he spurred on his horse at a furious pace.

The Prince and his aide spent the night in one of the villages of the Valley of Sevard where they learned that Tslík Amram had placed his family and the families of the princes who joined him in the security of the Fortress of Tavush, while he had advanced as far as Aghstev in order to make his encounter with the King away from his castle. He had taken this precautionary measure, first, to spare the women folk from the terrors of the war, and secondly, to have more leeway in his

operations, which meant that, if he was defeated he could withdraw to the mountains where he could reorganize his army, but if the King laid siege to his fort, he could attack him from the rear and thus save his castle. All these plans became perfectly clear to Marzpetuni once he learned that Amram had left his castle.

“We have nothing more to do at his castle. We shall be in Aghstev in the morning,” the Prince said to his aide.

“We can cross the waters of Hassan before dawn,” the aide assured him.

Thus the two retired for the night for a few hours’ rest. The next morning, early with the sunrise, they arrived at the Plain of Aghstev. The entire plain, from the source of the river as far as the skirts of the mountain, was occupied with the tents of the allied rebels. The Utiks and Sevordik had pitched their tents on the east side; one league away were the tents of the Gardman troops and the Albanians. All the tents were pitched on straight lines, forming larger regular squares, in the center of each of which stood the tent of a commander or a prince. But the camp was unprotected on all sides which meant that the army did not intend to stay there very long.

The allied troops of Abkhaz had just arrived and had pitched their tents promiscuously along the plain which leads to Kur. Seeing these vast preparations, Prince Marzpetuni exclaimed bitterly: “How well they are organized to destroy one another!”

“You never expected such an organization, eh, Master?” Yeznik asked with a smile.

“Never! The scoundrels organize well only when they are fighting against their brothers, or when they want to ruin their own country.”

“Do you intend to enter the camp?” the aide asked.

The Prince did not reply. Having halted his horse under the shadow of a solid tree, he was critically watching the camp, the extent, the movements around the tents, the maneuvers of a cavalry company, and a little way off the maneuvers of the lancers. After a while, the Prince turned to his aide: “Do you see yonder large tent with a princely banner?”

“The banner with two colors?”

“Yes. That’s the banner of *Seputh* Amram. Go to that tent right through the army.”

“Is it not better to approach it from the skirts of the plain?”

“No. Sevordik are wild men, they are liable to shoot an arrow through you. Go at full speed right through the camp, without looking right or left. Aim straight for the Prince’s tent and enter. Do you know the Prince?”

“Of course I do. I have seen him many times.”

“Good. Step inside and tell him I want to see him. Tell him it is urgent.”

“Do you command me to give him the real reason, should he ask me?”

“No. It is not your business to speak about the causes. Go now. Don’t tarry.”

“Yes Sire,” and Yeznik drove his horse full speed straight at the camp.

The compartment indicated by the Prince was a large square, consisting of some forty tents, each decade of tents opposing another on a straight line. In the center of the square was located the *Sepuhs* large tent, signaled by the commander’s banner which floated above it. The front of the tent was adorned with the princely insignia, and the interior was decorated with costly red draperies. From the triple pillars which supported the tent, decorated with shining bronze links, hung beautiful and ornate pieces of arms, such as, silver-sheathed swords and cutlasses, ornamented shields and bucklers, arrow pouches, silver guilt bows. In a corner of the tent, leaning against the wall, were a large assembly of javelins and heavy spears.

Heavy armored guards with iron head-gear, holding in their hands long javelins and small shields, kept watch in front of the tent. Inside the tent, Tslik Amram was pacing the floor, alone and preoccupied with his thoughts. He was a tall and powerfully built man with a large and impressive face. His broad forehead covered with wrinkles, his sharp piercing eyes under thick and almost united brows, his large nose with the nostrils of a lion which dominated his long hairy face, and his rich gray beard which covered half of his bronze breastplate, gave him a serious and formidable appearance. He was in full armor, from head to foot. He wore a steel plated coat of armor, a shining breast plate, his arms encased in heavy bracelets, his feet shod with sandals and braced with heavy leggings, and girded with a heavy silver-sheathed sword. His steel helmet, topped by a shining eagle of bronze, decorated with a thick black crest of tassel, was laid on a small table.

Suddenly *Sepuh* heard an argument in front of his tent.

“Who is there?” he roared from inside, inquiring the cause of the commotion.

“A footman who wants to see you, my Lord, but refuses to disarm,” the guard replied, approaching the entrance.

“Who is this stubborn man? Let him come in,” *Sepuh* commanded.

The new visitor was Yeznik. He surrendered his long javelin to the guard, and stepping inside, stood at salute before the Prince.

“Who are you?” Amram asked in a proud tone.

“I am the aide of the Great Prince Gevorg of Marzpetunis,” replied Yeznik.

“Don’t you know that you have no right to enter the Prince’s tent with your sword and shield?”

“I have never parted with my arms, my Lord.”

“Haven’t you ever played the role of a messenger?”

“This is the first and the last time I shall ever play the role, if to do so I must surrender my arms,” Yeznik replied somewhat pale.

Sepuh smiled. “What have you to tell me?” he asked.

“The Prince commanded me to tell you that he has come to your camp on important business. He wants to talk with my Lord *Sepuh*.”

“You mean Prince Gevorg is here, right in my camp?”

“Yes, he is outside the camp, waiting for your word.”

“Go tell him to come right over,” the *Sepuh* commanded, then he called the guard and ordered him to send a company of guards to meet the Prince.

Instantly a company of armed guards mounted their horses, met Prince Marzpetuni outside the camp, and led him to the *Sepuh’s* tent

“I had expected to see anyone in my tent except the Prince of the Marzpetunis. I never expected to see the King’s loyal and trusted friend,” *Sepuh* said warmly, offering him a small tripod stool to be seated.

“Fortunately, I am always there where they least expect me,” the Prince said smiling.

“Fortunately? What do you mean?”

“It means that I never call on our friends on an evil errand.”

“For your friends, yes. But you are in the camp of your enemy.”

“No. Marzpetuni has no Armenian enemies. He recognizes no such enemy.”

“Are not the enemies of the King your enemies too?”

“There was a time when you were the King’s friend; you again can be his friend.”

“His friend? To hell with him. I will extend my hand of friendship to the devil, but to him? Never!” *Sepuh* interrupted the Prince vigorously.

Marzpetuni fell silent, and with a sort of doubtful look, started to watch the face of *Sepuh* which had turned pale from his sudden emotion.

“Had I known that I would excite you this much, I would never have cut such a long distance,” the Prince observed calmly.

“The King is scarcely a day’s distance away from us,” *Sepuh* resumed, likewise calmly, “tomorrow perhaps we shall face each other. If you have come to reconcile us, I am sorry. You have undertaken a futile task.”

“No one in Vostan could believe that *Sepuh* Amram could rebel against his King.”

“I have not rebelled against my King, *Sepuh* interrupted, “you will recall how devoted I was to him. How many times I fought against the rebels, how many times I defended his person in the thick of the battle! I was the one who valiantly unfurled his banner on Shamshulteh. How many of them do you want me to recount?”

“And he did not fail to reward you. He made you Prince over Utik and the land of Sevordik. He gave you the command of the northern army. You had no need of taking advantage of your

power, your ready troops, to unfurl the banner of rebellion, and to raise your sword against your benefactor and King.”

“Never against my King. Don’t say it. Say, against my personal enemy “Your personal enemy? How can the King be the personal enemy of his own officers?” the Prince observed, as if he had not understood *Sepuh’s* words.

“Prince, if you know nothing about the real causes which have incited my enmity to the King, I have nothing more to say.”

“I don’t want you to tell me the whole story. I know the causes which have impelled our princes to rise against the King.”

“You say you know the causes?” *Sepuh* interrupted. “Which is it? Ambition? Greed? Selfish interest? What do you think? Is it not one of these that has incited me against the King?”

“I don’t know, and I said I don't want to know; but I want you to desist from your rebellious act and put your sword back in its sheath.”

“Is that a threat, Prince?”

“No, just a request. A petition.”

"I cannot understand it. Is Prince Marzpetuni begging, imploring *Sepuh* Amram? I don't think the Marzpetunis have ever had such humility. I wonder if a secret mystery lurks in your request."

"Listen, *Sepuh* Amram. The Marzpetuni princes were more proud than your ancestors, but their heirs prefer patriotism to pride. Do you think that is a strain on the ancestral honor?"

"Never! Blessed is he who can serve the fatherland with such devotion."

"Behold, it is this love of the fatherland which makes me humble myself, my pride, and my ancestral reputation. Can you despise such humility? Can you seek any vile secrets in such self-effacement?"

"No"

"Then listen to me. Soften your hard heart and stop this senseless massacre which will take place two days later."

"I cannot."

"You mean to tell me that thousands of Armenian mothers have brought children into the world with such pain and anguish, have brought them up with such toil and patience and suffering so that one day you princes should sacrifice them to your selfish passion?"

"But when you lead these very children against the Arabs, when they are decimated by the foreigner's swords, why don't you remember the pain and the anguish of those very mothers?"

"To fight against the enemies of the fatherland, to die for its freedom is a sacred duty. No one can escape from that duty; but fratricide is a crime which is cursed by God and men."

Amram, who had risen from his seat during the conversation, again sat down on the tripod stool and silently stared at the stack of javelins at the corner of the tent. A moment later he began to stroke the folds of his luxuriant soft beard and said: "Lord Marzpetuni, it is much easier to talk profitably than to act profitably. I abhor having to earn the title of a criminal but circumstances have made me that criminal. Henceforth I shall no longer care what the world thinks of me. I shall only give my account to one man — myself, my conscience."

"That conscience will never let you jeopardize the life of your brothers."

"Do not interrupt me; I know my own conscience much better than you do. But that is beside the point. Even if I suppressed my righteous indignation, even if I violate my conscience, again I cannot acquiesce in your wish because I am not the only one who has risen against the King. I have the princes of Gardman and Abkhaz and their allies to deal with. You of course have seen the countless tents on this plain, the princes who are gathered here and all of whom have their scores to settle with the King. If I lower the banner of Utik, it's all the same to them. None of them will follow me,

neither the Sevordis, nor the Gardman s, nor the Albanians, nor the Prince of Tayk, nor the crown prince of Abkhaz.”

“What about Prince Ber? Is he here too?”

“Yes, he is here, the family foe of the Armenian King.”

“And you have made an alliance with him.”

“Yes, I have sworn to him, as I have sworn to the other allies, that I shall fight with them to my last breath.”

“And if you break your alliance with them?”

“In that case I will compel them to raise their sword against me. Those are our conditions.”

“Of all those whom you have mentioned, dear Amram, only the young prince of Abkhaz will be dissatisfied with the reconciliation, because he has come with the intention of destroying. You yourself told me that he is the family enemy of the King, and it is natural that he will be unwilling to return to his fatherland empty-handed. But the other princes will not oppose the project, once you become reconciled and prevent the massacre.”

“And what about Prince Sevada, his two sons, the infuriated Gardman princes who have come to avenge the blinded princes?”

“Prince Sevada already has forgiven the King.”

“What? Prince Sevada forgives the King?” Amram exclaimed, leaping to his feet.

“Yes. I was with him. He has forgiven and he will recall his troops if you are magnanimous enough to lay down your sword.”

At this Amram’s eyes flashed with anger, he turned pale, and it seemed his breathing stopped just like the smoke of the suffocating flame in the furnace. He advanced a few steps, retraced his steps, and stopping before the Prince, again asked: “So that’s it. So he has forgiven the King and will recall his troops if I do the same.”

“Yes, he has completely forgiven. He respected my petition. He proved that he loves the fatherland.”

Amram eased his hand, seized the Prince’s arm and said softly: “They may hear us in here. Come to my private room.” Saying it, he led the way, and lifting the inner curtain, entered the second apartment of the tent. The Prince followed him.

“That Sevada, that proud Gardman who had sworn to punish his executioner, how did he become reconciled with the King, on what grounds, on what hope of benefit?” Amram insisted.

“Never for his own benefit. He did it to spare the blood of his compatriots.”

“But did he tell you why I have drawn my sword?”

“He did. I know it all.”

“He told you, and you know everything?” Amram almost choked with anger. “Don't get excited.”

“You talk as if it depended on my wish. Can you command the lion not to roar when he is being pierced by the ambusher's sword?”

“Patience is the strongest weapon.” “What? Is this the time to talk about patience, Prince Marzpetuni? You say Sevada has forgiven him. Why? Why did that old man kindle the fires of hell in my heart? Why did he disturb the tranquility of my soul? Why did he poison me if he was going to forgive me today?” “When a man's soul is blinded by his passion for revenge . .

“Not another word, Prince Marzpetuni. Let Sevada forgive, let his sons forgive, let the whole world forgive, but *Sepuh* Amram cannot forgive. Reconciliation? ...

With Ashot *Yerkat*? Never! If I can, I will even join forces with the Devil to overthrow that unworthy king ... If only you could enter the world of my spirit and see the agony and the torture which is raging there, you would be frightened, terrified ...”

“It is precisely at a time like this that the hero, the true patriot, can demonstrate to the world that his mother did not give birth to an ordinary son.”

“The most ordinary, the vilest knave can endure such a dishonor. A great spirit, on the contrary, can never endure it”

“Sevada is not a small man. Ashot blinded him in his two eyes, blinded also his son, and yet he has forgotten this irreparable loss and has forgiven his poor son-in-law for the sake of the fatherland.”

“Ashot blinded his eyes, what about what he did to my heart? The blind eye can forgive but the blind heart can never forgive.”

“But ...”

“Lord Marzpetuni, the man who knows how the King has insulted my name and yet advises me to make up with him, that man is my enemy. If you were not in my tent just now I would challenge you to a duel”

“In that case my mission is ended,” Marzpetuni rose to his feet, saluted Amram, and came out of the tent deeply disturbed.

He had taken hardly a few steps when *Sepuh* raised the curtain and called after him: “Lord Marzpetuni.”

The Prince turned back and asked him: “Have you anything further to say to me?”

“I haven't told you anything yet,” Amram replied.

This pleased the Prince very much. A new ray of hope flashed through his mind. “Perhaps he was sorry for the cold reception he gave me; perhaps he will accept my entreaty,” he thought and cheerfully reentered the tent

“What else have you to tell me?” he asked when he was inside.

“Be seated here for a moment,” *Sepuh* said, pointing to the bedstead. The Prince obeyed.

“Lord Marzpetuni,” *Sepuh* proceeded, “you have come to see me as a messenger, therefore you must take him my full answer, whoever sent you.”

“No one has sent me. The King, as you know, just returned from the land of the Arabs and I have not seen him since he was in Utik.”

“I thought perhaps the Queen . .

“Nor the Queen, nor the Catholicos ... I myself saw the ruin which was threatening our country. I ran everywhere, observed everything, and finally I decided to implore the two of you, you and Sevada, to have pity, and to spare our suffering fatherland. Prince Sevada, I am thankful to say, listened to me, forgot his wrong and gave up his revenge. I firmly believe you too ...

“No, Lord Marzpetuni, don't believe it,” *Sepuh* suddenly interrupted. “Do not believe that I will listen to you, that your words can move my heart, that Amram can think of the fatherland.”

“Why then did you call me back? I already was leaving you with that conviction.”

“I called you back so that I could open to you my heart and show you its infested wounds, so that you would tell the King, when you meet him, why Amram has bared his sword against him.”

“He will not justify you.”

“Do you think I expect him to justify me?”

“Why then should I explain to him the reasons which have led you to your action?”

“So that, should God grant me success, and I destroy the King's power, ruin the land, put the cities to fire and bury his throne and crown under the ashes, he shall know that Amram has avenged the insult to his name.”

“He shall know that, of course he shall realize it. But mark this well that the whole world will curse you for your unconscionable deed.”

“Those curses shall not torture my soul any more than I am now being tortured by the insult of that ungrateful King. Not even blessings can heal those wounds which are devouring, consuming my whole existence.”

“But if only you could reason with a cool mind, if your inexperienced youthful passion could give away to prudence and wisdom, if your heart could be rekindled with the love of the fatherland instead of your fatuous revenge, then I believe you would not want to earn the title of traitor over a mere woman.”

Sepuh walked over to the Prince shaking from emotion, and fixing him with his flaming eyes, said:

“Over a mere woman, you say? Oh, how I wish we were somewhere else, to hear you say it there instead of in my tent. Believe me, Lord Marzpetuni, no matter how mighty and brave you are, I would pierce you through with this sword, no matter how well protected that breast might be. You dare call a mere woman that creature who was the queen of my home, the goddess of my heart until today?”

“Forgive me, dear Amram, I didn’t mean to hurt you. Nor by saying ‘a mere woman’ I meant to detract from the merit of Princess Aspram.”

“Silence, I beseech you. Don’t mention her name, at least in my presence. Don’t speak about her humiliation; I will go mad,” *Sepuh* exclaimed, pale with emotion.

“I must beg your pardon a thousand times for having entered your tent,” Marzpetuni apologized humbly.

Sepuh did not reply. Furious with his emotion, he began to pace the floor, now raising his hand to his forehead, rubbing it, trying as if to dispel the thoughts which crowded his mind. For a few moments there was a tense silence. Only the dull thud of *Sepuh’s* steps could be heard in the tent. Fascinated, the Prince was following the steps of Amram, desperately searching for a way to prevent the frustration of his mission. He could plainly see that his words had no effect on *Sepuh*, and yet he did not despair. He was distressed all the more that, after having convinced the stubborn Sevada, he would have to return empty-handed from Tslik Amram. He could not reconcile his mind with the thought that a man of intelligence and a sterling heart could sacrifice the fatherland’s interest to his personal trivial whim, his revenge. For that reason he was waiting until Amram’s anger cooled down and he could resume the conversation.

Finally *Sepuh* sat down on the edge of his bedstead, and as if completely exhausted from his emotion, he kept staring silently at the entrance of the tent,

“*Sepuh* Amram, what would you call the man who, to get warm for a few moments, would bum down his house?” the Prince suddenly asked, without waiting for the answer.

“I would call him a mad man,” the latter replied, still staring.

“I think, for each of us, our real home, our shelter is the security of our fatherland. If we, for the sake of our personal and transitory pleasure, endanger the peace of that fatherland, we are like the man who burns down his house to warm his body for a few moments, without thinking that, when the fire is over, when the pillars are reduced to ashes, he will be homeless, without shelter, always persecuted by the cold wind and the sun’s burning rays.”

“That’s true,” *Sepuh* said, turning to the Prince. “But there is such a bleak cold which surrounds the man, burning the house down becomes a necessity. We are men, first of all, made of flesh and blood. Come, let me drive this sword in your side and see if the agony of death will surround you or not.”

“It will surround me. But even in that agony my soul shall gladly part from the body when I think that I am dying for the fatherland.”

“But when the dagger pierces your soul? When the soul itself is in agony?”

“If you have any heart and feeling, if there is a drop of red blood in your veins, it is impossible that your soul will not be pierced when you see that the fatherland has suffered at your hand, your brothers’ blood is spilled, the throne has been endangered, and the enemy has come in through the path which you have carved, to ravage and ruin the fatherland.”

“You know something, Lord Marzpetuni?”

“Tell me, I am listening.”

“You are acquainted with Greek literature better than I. They tell me when you went to Byzantium with the King, at the Emperor’s court they had marveled at your knowledge of Greek culture. Is that right?”

“That’s true. But why do you ask me?”

“I will tell you why. Have you ever read Homer?”

“Why not? I know many passages from Homer by heart.”

“Then you know how Troy was destroyed. How countless Greek generals and thousands of soldiers were massacred under the walls.”

“I know. It was all due to the faithfulness of a woman, Helen.”

“No. You are wrong. It was because of a traitor named Paris.”

“That’s not the way I understand Homer.”

“But the ancient Greeks understood it that way. Helen is a woman, they said, but a woman is nothing but weakness, who is susceptible to virtue and passion at the same time. It is the duty of the man not to take advantage of a woman’s weakness but to spare her, and protect her, especially when she needs protection. Paris did the exact opposite. He betrayed his host Menelaus, seduced his wife, and eloped with her to Troy. For this reason the Greek warriors rose up in arms, marched on Troy in thousands, laid siege to Priam’s capital for ten years, captured it and reduced it to ashes, and thus they avenged the insult of the traitor Paris who had abused the hospitality of the Greek King. Two thousand years before our time that’s the way men avenged the family honor and that’s the way they will do two thousand years hence. What do you think?”

“For the sake of one Helen, I would not spill the blood of even ten Greeks, to say nothing of thousands of soldiers, generals and kings.”

“Ah! Then you are a great man. But Greece did not think as you do. She said: ‘If today we leave Paris unpunished, tomorrow Hector will do the same thing. Therefore, we do well to deliver the first blow on the head of the first offender?’

“And you justify the massacre of thousands of men for the sake of one man? “For the sake of honor.”

“And you can do the same thing?”

“I shall do the same thing. I must do the same thing.”

“And with a quiet mind you will gaze upon that battle field where Arab javelins shall pierce the heart of Armenian warriors, where shining swords shall decapitate Armenian heads, where the Armenian soldier, to save the honor of his flag, shall fight to the death. While the spilt blood, the rolling corpses, the curses of the dying, the moans of the wounded — will not all this

cut up your heart, especially as you think all this is happening because of one woman?”

“Listen, Lord Marzpetuni. You are talking like a monk, I am a soldier.”

“*Sepuh* Amram, you are forgetting yourself,” the Prince exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “You should distinguish between the patriot and the monk.”

“I beg your pardon, Lord Marzpetuni. I used the word ‘monk’ in the sense of the pacifier. Amram is not unfamiliar with the valor of the heir of the Marzpetunis.”

The Prince apparently was satisfied with the apology and again sat on the bedstead.

“You said that the terrors of the war will soften my heart when I contemplate that it’s all because of one woman.” Amram resumed the conversation. “That is true, Prince. They will torment me if still a

single spark of patriotism is left in me. But if that last spark is already extinguished, if my heart beats only for Revenge?"

"In that case you are not worthy to be called a brave soldier," Marzpetuni observed, deeply hurt

"I am not angry at you for saying that. I am obliged to respect my Lord Marzpetuni rank and age. But I shall come back to Homer once more. Achilles not only was brave but he was a hero. Is that right, Prince?"

"Yes."

"Who is his peer among all the Greeks?"

"None."

"He was the only one, right?"

"Yes."

"And yet he sulked there in his ship for a long time and with an easy heart v watched Hector's victories, he saw the Trojans massacre his kinsmen, burning the Greek ships, disgracing their corpses; he saw the proud Hellenes shrivel on the seashore while the Trojan sword triumphed everywhere. He knew that his mere appearance on the battlefield would inspire the Greeks with fresh hope and courage, would make an end of the slaughter, and yet he would not budge, would not listen to the importunities of the commanders, would not go into battle. Why? Why didn't the massacre of his brothers move him?" The Prince was silent

"The reason again was a similar insult," Amram continued. "King Agamemnon, the head of the Greek confederation, had taken away Achilles' mistress. Achilles could not endure the insult and he sheathed his sword, would no longer take part in the war, and for the sake of one woman thousands of Greeks were killed. And now you want *Sepuh* Amram to be greater and braver than the son of Thetis, the hero Achilles."

"Wouldn't you be greater and braver?" "I would."

"Then forget your insult for the sake of the fatherland and you will be greater than Achilles."

"You interrupted me. I was about to say, I would but I cannot. It is nature which turns a man's heart into stone in such circumstances. I am not to be blamed." "What then is your decision?"

"To fight I know no other way of punishing the unworthy king. Ashot *Yerkat* shall never return to his capital alive. I have decided, and that's the way it shall be."

"Are you not afraid that you might be the first victim?"

“It’s all the same to me. Either he or I, one of us must die. The two shall never enjoy God’s light together”

“But if you should survive, I presume you will gladly enjoy that light.”

“No. There is no longer any joy for me,” my joy has been embittered, all around me is hell. The pain which torments me, Lord Marzpetuni, I would not wish it on my worst enemy. Mine is the most insufferable pain of all. It is God’s curse, it is the eternal damnation. You know me. All the Armenians know me. They all call me Tslík Amram, not because of my malignance or cruelty but for my prowess and valor. You have been with me in battles, you know how fearless I was, how awesome and terrible to my enemies. But when it comes to living with the Armenians, my own brothers, who is the man who is meeker than I, more gentle, more kind, and more affectionate than Tslík Amram? Have you ever seen the slightest malice in me toward my kinsman, toward any man who bears the Armenian name? Of course not. But now I have become a ferocious beast, the hell of evil burns in my heart. I no longer distinguish between the Armenian and the foreigner. My eyes are looking for only one man, Ashot *Yerkat*. My soul yearns for only one deed — revenge, ruthless, deathly revenge. And each cause which retards the hour of that revenge, I want to brush aside with fire and sword. And now, is it reconciliation which you offer me? Is it forgiveness that you seek? To forgive as Sevada forgave? And you are surprised that one who had been deprived of his sight could forget his hatred and forgive the criminal while I cannot. What can I do, how can I make you understand that my hurt is far different than the hurt of Sevada. Pluck out my eyes, take away from me my rule, my wealth, my estates, all my worldly goods, but return to me my honor, my Amram. Can you do it? Oh, how heavy, heavy is my burden!”

Amram, who all this while was standing, again fell on his bed, buried his head in his hands, and began to breathe heavily. There was a tense silence in the tent Lord Marzpetuni was deep in thought. This lasted for several moments. Suddenly they heard a horse’s neighing outside the tent, a guard came in and announced that Prince Ber was coming to see the *Sepuh*.

The two conversants raised their heads at the same time. When the guard was gone Marzpetuni rose to his feet, and extending his hand to Amram, said in a despondent voice:

“Good bye, friend, it seems God was not pleased to spare our people at this time, that’s why he hardened your heart. But I have paid my debt to you and my conscience no longer hurts me. I must now fulfil my debt to the nation and the King.”

“Farewell. At this moment we are foes. I am not angry that you defend the King. I respect you even when, to defend him, you should drive your sword in my side. My only regret is that the noble heir of the Marzpetunis is not engaged in the defense of a worthier king.”

“What can we do? It happens Ashot *Yerkat* is on the throne just now, and I am the Throne’s humble servant. Farewell “ Saying it, Prince Gevorg grasped the hand of Amram and with a heavy heart came out of the tent. Amram accompanied him to the entrance. Right here Marzpetuni came face to face with Prince Ber, the crown prince of Abkhaz. He was a slender, slightly built, tall and handsome youth, who having just dismounted his horse, was about to enter the tent. The Prince stared at the youth, measured him with a stem look from head to foot, and without greeting him made off.

“Like the buzzards, the wretches have caught the scent of corpses. Wait, we shall see you some day,” Prince Gevorg hissed with a bitter smile as he put the spurs to his horse. Yeznik followed him.

Chapter 12 Unexpected Demise

King Ashot’s army, which chiefly consisted of the Arab king’s cavalry, was steadily approaching the Armenian frontier. Its vanguard already had reached the valley where the woods of Sevordik ended and where the murmuring waters of the Khram, having absorbed the stream of Dzoraget, poured into the serene Kur River.

Hero, having encamped on the river bank, they were busy preparing for the imminent attack. For a few days the virgin forests of Dsoraket were being stripped of their ancient adornments. The old cedars and willows, unable to withstand the keen blade of the axe, were bending, then falling down with a resounding crash like dying giants, and were crushing the young green trees and their branches under the weight of their heavy trunks. Yoked oxen from the neighboring villages carried huge beams of timber to the banks of the Kur River. Here raft-building Arab engineers wove the huge beams with willow strips, and forming massive rafts, launched them into the river.

After they had completed a few tens of these rafts, the engineers tied them together with heavy ropes and slowly pushed them to the opposite bank.

Pretty soon King Ashot arrived with his Arab rearguard. After one day's rest he reviewed his troops. The regiment of the cavalry which consisted of several thousands lined up along the plain which joined the river bank, each regiment led by a princely commander. Here were the Arabs, the Khaldis, the Kurians, the Mukrels, the Abkhaz and the warriors of the Valley of Chorokh. They were joined by the Armenian cavalry regiments of the Province of Tayk. Thus, the King was leading a formidable army which the rebels apparently could hardly resist. They all were powerfully built, mighty and valiant warriors, all clad in iron armor and protected by breastplates riveted with iron side plates, huge and terrifying helmets and iron visors. They were armed with light javelins which they hurled at the enemy from a distance, and with long lances when they fought at close quarters. They had light and heavy shields, and square shaped bucklers. They were armed with long swords and short cutlasses. They also had regiments of archers with broad arches and poisoned arrows.

Having drawn up his troops on his frontier, the King wanted to be sure if his cavalry had the military knowledge commensurate with its external form and formidable aspect, capable of conquering the might of the Utis and the Sevordis.

The preliminary maneuvers convinced the King that the Arabs were worthy of their fame. He was happy that with these tribal enemies of the Abkhaz, he would be able to give a second sound lesson to Prince Ber who had come to the land of Utis from Abkhaz to aid the Armenian rebel princes.

And yet, regardless of all this, and regardless of the timely assistance of the Arab king when he was all alone, and so much in need of a friend, a kind of inner sadness was weighing heavily on his heart. The thought that he was entering his country with the aid of foreign troops to fight against his own kinsmen was torturing his soul. Besides the slaughter of Armenian troops which surely would ensue whether he was victorious or defeated, the very thought of which depressed him sorely, the King was being oppressed also by his shame, the thought that he was alone, that he didn't have with him even a few Armenian princes who, together with his Vanandian bodyguard, might form his royal entourage. He was ashamed of the Arab princes and even the Arab troops. Nevertheless, he tried hard to appear cheerful, carrying a smile on his face.

The King was also troubled at the delay of Prince Marzpetuni. He wondered about the general situation in the country, if a new insurrection had sprung up, or if his forts had been attacked. Having returned to his tent after the maneuvers, the King was preoccupied with these thoughts when his doorkeeper, one of his loyal Vanandians, suddenly entered in and announced the arrival of Gevorg Marzpetuni. He sprung to his feet from sheer joy, as if a new succor had come to him in this hour of danger.

"Where is he? Tell him to come in," he ordered as he instantly started to pace the floor of his tent restlessly.

Marzpetuni came in and bowed low in salute to the King. The latter, however, embraced him like a loved one whom he had not seen for years.

"No one in his life has waited for you so anxiously, Prince, as I have been waiting for you now," the King said, smiling. "Whence do you come, and how did you arrive here? Are you alone? Have you any troops with you, and what are the rebels doing? What is the situation in the provinces?" He asked the questions like a trip hammer, then, sitting on his divan, he asked the Prince to be seated. "You are tired, of course. Catch your breath, rest a while, then we will talk " he added without removing his questioning glance.

"I have come alone, Majesty," replied Marzpetuni, taking a seat. "I returned my only bodyguard to Gardman from Aghstev to bring here the Fortkeeper Vahram, together with his loyal Vanandians.

“What did you say?” the King interrupted. “How can Vahram come here without jeopardizing Gardman? Would not his departure leave Sevada free to plot his machinations?”

Marzpetuni then told the King in detail the whole story of his journey, beginning from the day he had parted from him at the Valley of Gargar to the present. He described the situation in the country exactly as he had seen it, including his conversations with Prince Sevada and Tslik Amram, the latter’s inflexible resolution, the external motives of the rebellion, its expansion, and the rebels’ forces and their strategic plans. In short, he told the King all that was important for him to know for the success of his invasion. But he told him nothing in regard to the real inner motives of the rebellion.

The King was listening to the Prince attentively without the slightest trace of displeasure on his face. He was taking it all in as if he were listening to an ordinary story which had no connection with the afflictions of his country. But inwardly he was very uneasy. Although the Prince had told him nothing of the secrets of Sevada and Tslik Amram, nevertheless he surmised that Marzpetuni knew them but was carefully concealing them from him.

When the Prince was through with his story the King rose to his feet and began to pace the floor silently. He knew the real cause of Amram’s rebellion but was not sure how much Marzpetuni knew about it. He was pondering whether he should broach the subject, whether he should open the old wounds and make an appeal to his friendly understanding, or maintain his kingly dignity. Should he do the first, he would have a loyal counselor who would aid him at this critical moment in deed and advice; should he desist, he would be free of the humiliating anxiety of seeking the help of his vassal. By nature he was proud and invincible. He might be destroyed, but to be blinded? Never! For this reason, after long meditation, he decided to remain firm in his first resolution, namely, to say nothing about these secrets and to face his fate fearlessly.

“So then, tomorrow morning we shall set out for Aghstev,” the King said. “If the rebels don’t wish to tire themselves, we shall spare them the pain. My cavalry can fight even when it is tired.”

“But we must be prepared against ambush or sudden attack. We must scout the enemy’s movements,” observed Marzpetuni.

“My scouts have long since been in the rebels’ camp. Two of them three days ago reported to me that Amram had laid an ambush for me near the waters of Goghba, in the bulrushes of Kur. For this reason I took the precaution of crossing my army from his side. Before we reach Aghstev, my scouts will bring me news of the enemy’s latest intentions.”

“What is my King’s plan of battle?” the Prince asked.

“I shall attack them in the open plain. We must avoid meeting the enemy in the mountains at all cost. My cavalry surely will be victorious in the open.”

The same day the King called a council of the Arab princes and Marzpetuni and decided to advance to Aghstev the following morning. And that is precisely what they did. The next day, before noon, the royal army crossed the waters of Goghba River and encamped at the base of the adjoining mountain. Here *Sepuh* Vahram joined the King with his Vanand followers. He reported that the enemy is encamped at a distance of three hours waiting for the King at three points. One part of the army is entrenched in the plain west of Aghstev to draw the attack of the royal army; the second part is hidden in the bulrushes of Kur; and the third is poised in the woods of the opposite mountain. Once the royal army closes in with the first corps, their plan is to surround the King with the remaining two forces. This information was confirmed by the King's scouts.

There was a second council of war. The King proposed to resort to strategy in order

to draw out the enemy from his hiding place. He would retreat a few leagues to make them think that he wanted to advance on Utik from the opposite direction. This move would force the enemy to pursue him. Then the royal army would turn back and attack them. The sudden attack would confuse the enemy and force them into flight. They all approved of this plan but deemed it better to postpone the retreat by one day to give the cavalry sufficient rest for the about face and the sudden attack. But since the base of the mountain where they were encamped was exposed to sudden attack and was indefensible; therefore they decided to cross the neighboring pass and spend the night in the large but desolate fortress on the mountain slope.

This fort which from antiquity bore the name of "Averak" (Desolate), and which none of the princes had renovated because of its strategic unsuitability, was located on a broad slope of Goghba Mountain, occupying a vast stretch. Its half-ruined walls and towers, which cast a dismal impression on the observer, still included many homes and entrenchments capable of habitation. But since the enemy sword had ruthlessly destroyed the inhabitants, no one had dared reestablish residence. Behind it rose a serried ranks of towering mountains with no pathways, and therefore, they were inaccessible either to the enemy which lay in ambush outside, or to the occupants of the fort who wanted to flee. The front was protected by a deep dry valley, covered with thick bushes, rocks and hollows. The only path leading to the fort was a defile between two lowest mountains, toward which the King, accompanied by his princes, advanced, to lodge his troops for the night.

The Arab princes approved of the place as a safe shelter from the autumn cold. Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram, on the other hand, thought otherwise. They were afraid the enemy might close up the defile and trap the King's forces. The King agreed with his loyal followers, but wishing to please his foreign allies and thereby to satisfy their egotism, and especially since he did not think the enemy would relinquish his positions and advance against him in the night, supported the Arab princes. The *Sepuh* and Prince Marzpetuni did not oppose the King, but secretly they were very uneasy.

Toward evening the cavalry steadily entered the defile and began to ascend to the fort, followed by the King and the Arab princes. They posted a company of guards at the entrance of the defile to watch through the night and to announce the minute the enemy approached.

In a short while the desolate fort was converted into a lively place. Fires were started on all sides, while the troops, after they had attended to their horses, started to butcher the sheep which the King had offered. The King himself had given the order to celebrate the pre-battle festival with a hearty meal.

Besides, he had arranged that the princes should dine with him. He was in high spirits and he thought this fact was a good omen of his imminent success.

The Hours of the banquet and the enjoyment were over, the fires were extinguished, and beginning with the King to the last soldier they all fell asleep. Only the company of sentries at the defile were awake, and those of the King's guards who took turns to watch over the royal tent. A deep silence surrounded the fort of Averak. Only the occasional neighing of the horses interrupted the silence.

Prince Marzpetuni, however, could not sleep. At first he indeed had a slight nap, but having been awakened by the noise of some fighting horses, he could no longer go to sleep. He was still tormented by the lurking doubt that the enemy might close the fort in the night. He was afraid of a sudden attack, and this fear was not altogether unfounded. In the open field, true, the enemy could not harm the royal army, but cooped up in this fort surrounded by deep gullies and tall cliffs, they might easily be besieged and badly mauled.

After a long and restless tossing around the Prince rose up, and throwing his woolen tunic on his shoulders, he stepped out of the low shack where he had been lying. Yeznik, his aide, likewise flew to his feet and followed his master.

"Where are you going, my Master?" Yeznik asked.

"I feel a little restless, Yeznik. I could not sleep. I want to take a look down the valley," the Prince said.

"Permit me to accompany you."

"No, you have been quite tired these past two days. Go to bed and rest. You have plenty to do tomorrow," the Prince said.

"No, my Master, I am no longer tired. Permit me to accompany you."

The Prince could not resist his servant's persistence and the two departed from the shack. It was a cold autumn night but the sky was clear and starry. The moon was serenely gliding over the celestial arch illuminating with its silvery rays the surrounding mountains, the cliffs, the precipices, and the

half-ruined buildings of the sprawling fort which at the moment presented in their abysmal silence a solemn and awe-inspiring spectacle. Inside and outside the fort the troops lay in companies, wrapped up in their goatskin coats and their heads resting on knapsacks or saddles. The horses likewise, in groups or alone, were enjoying their fodder voraciously, while the sentries, swinging their long lances, paced to and fro in front of the ruins or the slopes of the defile

where the road led to the pass. Through the distant rains could be heard the hooting of an owl which, in that peaceful hour, grated upon the ears of those who were awake.

The Prince and Yeznik crept through the sleeping company with light steps. No one woke up. Some of the guards challenged from afar and having received the watch-word again fell silent. Finally they reached the base of the mountain

“Shall we go very far from the camp, my Master?” Yeznik asked.

“No, we shall go as far as the mouth of the defile then we shall return,” the Prince replied. “I want to see if our guards are watching the defile or have gone to sleep.”

Marzpetuni had hardly spoken the words when, suddenly, they heard sounds from the direction of the defile.

“What's this? It seems the guards are fighting,” the Prince stopped in his tracks.

“Riders are coming toward us, my Master. Who can they be?” Yeznik asked, suspecting something.

And, of a truth, a company of riders raced into the hollow at that moment.

“It is our sentries,” the Prince said, shaking with a sudden fear.

“Then the enemy is approaching,” the Aide surmised.

The Prince did not reply, but advancing towards the riders, he asked in a loud voice, “Guards, where are you going?”

“The enemy is here, right before us, my Master,” the captain of the guards said, stopping before the Prince.

“What? The enemy?” the Prince exclaimed, as if reluctant to believe his ears.

“Yes, the enemy,” the latter repeated, “their companies have closed up the entrance of the defile.”

It seemed the Prince was stricken by lightning. His suspicions had come true.

“How did they arrive here? Why didn't you notice them in time to notify us?” the Prince asked, after a pause.

“No, my Lord, we didn’t see them in the open plain.’

“How come you did not see them? Did they drop from a clear sky?”

“It was as if they dropped from a clear sky. They rushed from the slopes of the mountain which closes the mouth of the pass.”

The Prince stood there bewildered.

“Let’s hurry and wake up the soldiers, my Master,” Yeznik ventured softly.

“It’s needless. The rebels will not go farther. They are not so careless as we,” Marzpetuni observed and with steady steps returned to the fort.

And indeed no one pursued the fleeing sentries. Amram’s troops had securely closed up the defile. He could sit easy now and wait for his foe’s surrender.

Prince Gevorg reached the King’s tent and stopped there. He did not dare to enter in and wake him up. “Sevada’s prediction has been fulfilled,” he mused, “God has punished the guilty. In vain we tried to escape from His anger. That anger has caught up with us and has betrayed us to the enemy.”

But the clatter of the fleeing sentries had awakened many of the troops. In a moment the news of the enemy’s arrival ran through the camp like lightning arousing both the troops and the commanders. The din and the tumult awakened the King. Just then Prince Gevorg entered and told the King the sad news.

“To arms! To arms!” shouted the King, springing to his feet. In a flash he donned his helmet and sword and was ready to fly out, but the Prince held him back. There is no need of hurrying, my Lord King. The enemy is not advancing. He is firmly entrenched at the entrance of the pass.”

“How can you speak like that, Prince Marzpetuni? Are you still asleep?” the

King exclaimed, seeing the composure of his loyal servant.

“I have not slept. I could not sleep. I had expected this disaster any moment.”

“What disaster are you talking about? This is not the first time we are being attacked.”

“No, Lord King. But our present position?”

“Nonsense,” interrupted the King, loath to be contradicted on the position he had chosen “Go tell the commander to make ready for instant attack.”

Without a word the Prince left the tent and communicated the King’s command to the chiefs. In a few moments the soldiers were ready. And yet, how could the cavalry attack on these slopes and deep

hollows? The cavalry needed an open plain, a broad front with plenty of leeway, whereas it now confronted a deep gulch and a closed pass.

The princes and the captains of the troops came to take counsel with the King.

“We must attack at once, we must give the enemy no time for rest,” the King argued. “If we wait for tomorrow, the rebels will occupy the heights and will surround us on both sides. It will be more difficult to fight then.”

“We are not familiar with our present position, nor our surroundings,” the Arab princes argued, “therefore, we cannot meet them in the night. Let us wait until morning, then we will act as you see fit. Just now we can only explore our surroundings so that we can fight when the light dawns.”

Finally it was decided that *Sepuh* Vahram and an Arab prince should proceed at once with their aides to reconnoiter the surrounding positions. If they should discover a path to the open plain, the troops would come out and this way the danger would be minimized. If they should discover no path, they would fight to prevent a siege. Prince Gevorg and *Sepuh* Vahram supported this view, and finally the King was forced to assent in order to prevent needless slaughter.

Early in the morning Vahram and the Arab prince returned with their aides and told the King the result of their exploration. “We are shut in from all sides,” said *Sepuh* Vahram, “the opposite mountain has not a single passage. If we should cut a path through the woods, again it would be of no use to the cavalry because the base of the mountain on the other side is covered with natural obstacles. These hills behind us likewise hinder our path because they slowly rise to join the mountains. Our only exit is through the defile which is now held by the enemy. Our only course is to let the archers ascend the heights and put the enemy to flight with their arrows. In the general confusion we might be able to release our cavalry company out into the open field.”

“But to accomplish that we need days,” interrupted the Arab prince who had accompanied the *Sepuh*.

“We can keep the archers busy for a whole week,” the King observed. “We have a good supply of arrows.”

“Yes, my Lord, we have a good supply of arrows but we have no water,” repeated the Prince.

“How come we have no water?”

“It's true,” confirmed the *Sepuh*. “In these parts there is neither a stream nor spring. The only stream which we used yesterday is the one at the mouth of the pass, but the enemy already has deflected its course.”

“There must be some other source of water in these mountains,” the King repeated.

“We have searched everywhere but we couldn’t even find rain water,” the Arab prince replied.

“Then we are lost,” exclaimed his colleagues in unison.

The King was completely bewildered.

“What shall we do, my Lord?” asked a young Arab prince.

“We shall do what we must do,” the King replied with sudden composure.

“And what is the thing we must do?” the young prince persisted.

“In such a case the Armenians fight. I don’t know what the Arabs do,” the King retorted acidly, as if wishing to reproach the young prince.

“No nation's cavalry will fight on the slopes of a mountain or in a gulch, O King,” replied the leader of the Arabs, wishing to defend the honor of his kinsmen.

The King made no reply, but turning to Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram, he commanded:

“Go this minute, assemble the riders of the Vanandians and the Tays, and tell them the King will lead them. In a few moments we shall attack the rebels.”

The Prince and the *Sepuh* departed, but the Arab princes remained standing. For a few moments the King silently paced the floor, then turning to their leader, he said, “When King Constantine dismissed me, he told me he was sending with me the choicest and the bravest of the Arab princes, who command the bravest and the most fearless troops. I do not demand that you should help me at this grave moment. Life, after all, is a precious gift, why should you jeopardize it? But I do demand that, when you return to your country, you shall tell your brave King that his princes could not face the Armenian rebels. That much will be enough for King Constantine to measure the bravery of his princes.”

Saying it, the King went out of his tent. The Arab princes were deeply hurt by the King’s words. Bewildered, they looked at one another, unable to utter a single complaint.

“Shall we stand this insult?” finally one of the young princes asked his leader.

“He who cannot stand it should take his company and follow the Armenian King,” the leader spoke deliberately.

And yet, no one answered, because no one wanted to become a party of such a foolhardy attempt.

When King Ashot stepped out of his tent, he saw that the Vanandian and Tayk warriors were all ready, headed by Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram. The King instantly mounted his fleet steed, and leading the troops shouted in a loud voice:

“My warriors, which of you is willing to fight and die with his King?”

“All of us,” the warriors shouted in unison, echoing the distant mountains.

“Very well then. Forward!” the King shouted, and unsheathing his sword he headed straight for the enemy. The cavalry followed him. A company of the rebels had already advanced as far as the mouth of the gully and from a distance was watching the advance of the royal army. Seeing the advance of the cavalry, it hastily retreated to the security of the defile. The King caught up with them in the middle of the pass. By this sudden attack he intended to put the company to flight, and thus to create confusion among the force which closed up the pass. The Vanandians and the Tays fought fiercely. Their horses trampled over the helpless infantry who fought with short swords and worked havoc among them with their long lances. The encounter lasted scarcely half an hour because the attack of the royal troops was so sudden, and the clash was so violent that the rebel company could not stand the shock, and fled in disorder with the victorious royalists in jubilant pursuit.

For a moment it seemed fate badly smiled on the King. Having reached the mouth of the defile, the seeing rebels scattered on the slopes of the mountain. The King’s cavalry now fell upon new companies who already were confused by the shouts of both the fleeing rebels and the victors, and started to massacre them mercilessly. The encounter did not last long and these companies were put to flight, clearing the defile before the King’s troops. But presently there appeared on the scene *Sepuh* Tslik Amram and Prince David of Gardman, mounted on their mighty stallions, the first leading the ferocious Sevordi warriors, and the second the mighty Gardman warriors, who instantly changed the entire complexion of the battle. *Sepuh* Amram cheered his warriors and with drawn swords swooped upon the King’s troops. His voice rang in the defile like the roar of the mighty spring torrent, heightened by the deafening cries of his myriad followers. The King and Prince Marzpetuni likewise encouraged their warriors and the warriors on both sides closed in with renewed furor.

Neither side would yield. The royalists were trying hard to drive the rebels from the defile while the latter fought hard to repel them back into the valley. The King’s horsemen were at a disadvantage. They could not attack, and in order to fight the infantry which swarmed all over them, they were obliged to discard their long lances and fight with their swords. And yet they fearlessly pressed the enemy. And although the numbers of the latter steadily increased while theirs decreased, nevertheless the royalists withstood the mighty torrent and fought with the ferocity of despair.

At this moment there was a terrible shower of arrows coming from the mountain slope to the right. This was the work of the Abkhazis. Prince Ber, seeing the royalists’ stubborn resistance and the havoc which they were working among his allies, had withdrawn his archers to the slope from which position he assailed the royalists. And since this new attack came from the right, their shields were useless (because they used the left hand to hold the shield while they used the right for the sword), and thus they were caught between two fires. Seeing the desperate position of his troops, as well as

the fact that he was hopelessly outnumbered, deeming further resistance useless, the King called Prince Marzpetuni and commanded him to sound the retreat.

This command struck the Prince like the shock of lightning. The man who always had tried to prevent a fratricidal war would no longer listen to the call of retreat; the din of the battle and the reek of blood had intoxicated his soul. At that moment it did not occur to him that he was fighting against his brothers, but that he was punishing the rebels, the enemies of the throne and the fatherland. Therefore, no matter how small his company was, and how strong the enemy, nevertheless his invincible soul would not succumb to superiority of numbers. He was defending his King, the potentate of the Armenian throne, and this thought was enough to steel his heart and to convert him into a lion. But when the King commanded the retreat his body shuddered in revolt, his mighty arm staggered, and the bloody sword hung limply in his hand like a useless tool. He howled a moan which was more like a dull roar, and following the riders, he sounded the alarm to retreat.

The royal army started to retreat slowly, deliberately, never in flight. When they reached the valley they saw that the Arabs were descending the fort to hasten to their aid. Having witnessed the King's initial success, the allied princes finally had decided to fulfill their duty. But when they saw the King's retreat they stopped on the slope.

The rebels, seeing the appearance of the Arabs, withdrew from the fight, and the royal regiment, now substantially diminished, returned to the camp without any difficulty.

"We were coming to help you, Lord King," the leader of the Arabs said when the King reached the slope.

"You shouldn't have bothered, Prince," the King replied bitterly. "The defile us no place for the Arab warriors to fight."

"But we were ready to fulfill our duty. We delayed in order to line up our regiments."

"And your delay was not entirely useless. You saved the honor of your warriors by not sharing the indignity of our shameful defeat." Saying it, the King left them, with a contemptuous smile on his lips. The leader of the Arabs looked after him wildly, and seething with anger returned to his tent.

The spirit of division which generally follows defeat already had resolved the unity between the King and his allies. The Arab princes who at first, in obedience to King Constantine's command, had joyfully come to the aid of the King, and they had done this not only in order to cement the friendship of the two nations, but in the hope of a shining victory and a rich loot, now discomfited and heart-broken, had rallied to the tent of their leader and were thinking of separation and flight. These strangers had come for their own personal interest only, the hope of getting rich quickly. Instead, there awaited them inevitable slaughter and death by starvation. Besides, there were murmurs among their troops. Although they had sufficient food supplies to last a week's siege, what

was worst of all, they had no water. Both themselves and their horses suffered from lack of water. No soldier could withstand such a heavy affliction.

For this reason, they came in companies and crowded in front of the prince's quarters and demanded that they either be disarmed and be allowed to leave the army, or they show them a way of obtaining water.

After long consultations, the chief of the Arab princes decided to appeal to the King to show them a way out. Together with his Arab colleagues he entered the King's tent just when the latter was holding a conference with his two loyal captains, Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram.

"The troops are complaining, Lord King," the chief of the Arab princes said. "Their unrest is spreading and soon may become menacing. What shall we do? What is your command?"

"It is the Arab soldiers who are doing the complaining. Is it not so?" the King asked.

"Yes, Lord King."

"What do they want?"

"The commonest, the most natural of demands."

"Namely?"

"They want water, Lord King."

"Or else?"

"Or else they surrender their arms to the enemy and be free of this prison."

The King transfixed the chief for a short moment, then said, "The troops' demand is both unnatural and unjust.

"How so, Lord King? Have men no right to drink water?" the chief of the Arabs asked with a smile mingled with wonder and sarcasm.

"No!" The King replied in a stern tone. The princes stared at the King.

"My answer perhaps surprises you," said the King, "but I said nothing to be surprised at. He who demands water in a waterless place, makes an unnatural demand; he who seeks freedom at the cost of surrendering his arms submits to the most humiliating of all acts."

"What shall we do then? Die? Is it not better to be disgraced rather than to die?"

“No, it is better to die, rather than to be disgraced,” The King replied deliberately. There was a moment’s silence. The King’s answer impressed the Arab chief who hung his head low and began to ponder. But one of the princes, a young man, stepped forward and said: “Lord King, a soldier is disgraced not only when he fails in valor, but also when he fails in sincerity. Therefore, I beseech you, do not be angry with me when I venture candidly to admit a certain truth to hide which, in my opinion, is equivalent to treason.”

“Speak,” the King commanded.

“We have come to help you by command of our king. We would have fulfilled that duty had we had the chance. But fate, or perchance our lack of foresight has cooped us up in a small village to escape from which we have no chance. Thirst is torturing our soldiers, the enemy’s sword is decimating them. We cannot fight because we have no range for battle. We cannot get out because there is no way. We naturally do not want to die. There is nothing left for us except to surrender our arms and save our lives for our families.” “To save at the cost of dishonor?” the King shouted.

“There is no dishonor in it. We are guests in your land and we would have fought for your majesty. Therefore, neither the glory of victory, nor the loss of defeat belongs to us.”

“So?”

“So you will show us a way to enable us to fulfill our duty, or permit us to surrender our arms to the enemy.”

The King stared at the youth, then he surveyed the princes. They all were silent, waiting for his answer.

“You have come here on the command of your King, under the Arab banner,” the King began in a soft steady voice.” “You have come to help the Armenian

King according to the treaty between your king and my late father. Therefore, by doing your duty, you will prove that you know how to keep your self-respect; on the other hand, if you should escape from this place, you will dishonor your king and will stain the Arab banner. This is my answer to your proposition. As to the other matter, whether or not I, the king of the Armenians, can agree with you to surrender my arms to the enemy, my answer is, that I cannot do. King Ashot has met with many such mishaps, many times has been surrounded by enemies and traitors, but not for a moment has he ever thought of surrendering to the enemy. I may fall sword in hand, but to submit to the indignity of surrendering to the enemy, never. In case of a siege you think only of saving your skin, while I think of saving my honor. As you see, you and I serve entirely different purposes. Therefore, we shall not obstruct each other. When a man is determined to fall it is impossible to hold him erect. You are free to do what you please at this moment. The Armenian King still has a few warriors left with whom he can die. But when you reach your land safe and sound, be sure to tell your wives and

children that you bought your lives at the cost of your arms. Such a novelty surely will delight the Arab women.”

“Lord King, you are insulting your allies,” observed the chief of the princes.

“You are thinking of surrender; you cannot be my allies.”

“Then we are not your allies,” the chief replied angrily, and turning to his colleagues he said, “Princes, the desperate soldier is waiting for us. Let us go and fulfill our last duty.” Saying it, he saluted the King coldly and led the way. His princes followed him. The King heeded not either the prince’s last words nor the princes’ salute. Staring at the person entering the tent, he was deep in thought. When he sensed the tense silence in the tent, he turned to his own princes and said, “Yes, the Arabs shall save their skin. He who submits to dishonor achieves a benefit which he deems superior to honor. What do you think of the Armenian soldier?”

“The Armenian soldier is ready to fight to his last breath,” *Sepuh* Vahram answered. “All he needs is a leader.”

“We shall lead him, but what profit from fighting?” observed Prince Marzpetuni. “Our numbers are so few that the enemy will annihilate them in a few moments.” “You say they are ready to fight to the last breath?” the King asked.

“Yes, my Lord,” answered *Sepuh* Vahram.

“Then we must profit from that readiness. Tonight we shall fall on the enemy with all the force we possess.”

“With the aim of engaging the enemy?” *Sepuh* asked surprised.

“No, with the aim of piercing through.” The Prince’s face brightened. This means of salvation, indeed, was the easiest and the most honorable. Marzpetuni likewise was agreeable to the idea. However, they had to prepare secretly, lest the Arabs obstructed their design.

At the King’s command, the princes went out to give the necessary orders to their troops. Toward evening, a few Arab companies descended the walls of the fort and reached the valley. Prince Gevorg noticed this movement, and concluded that the Arabs had come to an agreement with the enemy with a view of surrendering their arms. He was still amid these thoughts when Yeznik, his aide, came in and whispered to him, “My Master, the Arabs are cooking up treason. We must save the King’s life.”

“What sort of plot, Yeznik?” the Prince asked in alarm.

“They have agreed with Tslík Amram to surrender the King. In return, Amram has agreed to free the Arabs without dis-arming.”

“How did you learn this?”

“Every soldier who reached the valley knows it. The princes have ordered them to guard the pass closely; should the King escape they will pay with their lives.”

Yeznik’s news worried the King’s trusted friend. He saw that all hope of escape was lost, and once again he remembered Sevada’s words: “This time God will punish the guilty.”

Troubled with this apprehension, Marzpetuni joined the *Sepuh* and the two entered the King’s tent to bring him the sad news. But great was their surprise when the King laughed at them after hearing the news.

“That scoundrel is thirsty for my blood,” he said calmly. “I have known Tslík Amram long since. He has no ambition, therefore, it was not ambition that led him to rebel against his king. He wants my person. The riddle is solved now.”

“Your person? My Lord, why should Amram want your person?” *Sepuh* asked, surprised.

The King apparently was embarrassed. He sensed the inadvertance of his words and tried to avoid explanations.

“In this manner our little force, too, will be saved. When I am gone the enemy will leave alone both the Arabs and our remaining force,” said the King enigmatically, without answering Vahram’s question. Prince Gevorg was puzzled and asked the King to explain his words.

“Tonight I shall leave this place,” the King said.

“You? Alone?” the Prince asked.

“Yes.”

“By what way?”

“Between the Arab guards and the enemy camp.”

Both the *Sepuh* and the Prince stared at the king in wonder.

“I will make the princes of the Arabs and the Sevordis understand that seizing Ashot *Yerkat* and delivering him to Tslík Amram is something beyond their power. “

The Prince was delighted at these words while the face of the *Sepuh* became lit with a broad smile of satisfaction.

“Up to now I have been concerned solely with the safety of my loyal followers,” the King continued, “but now I see it was my person which endangered their safety. Therefore, I shall go away from this place and remove the danger which hangs over you.”

“You go away to save your precious life “because the land is waiting for its king. As to us, even if we should die, it will not be a great loss to the country,” the *Sepuh* said with feeling.

“All the same, it will be a loss to the Armenian king,” the King added.

It was evening. Only Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram knew of the King’s intention. According to the King’s command, they summoned two of the King’s bravest and most trusted young guards and ordered them to be ready to follow the King. Early in the night the King emerged from his tent, armed from head to foot in steel. The two guards, likewise armed in heavy armor, brought the King’s mighty stallion. With the agility of a twenty-year-old youth, the King mounted his horse. The two guards likewise mounted their horses.

“We must go through them like a tornado. Neither man nor demon shall be able to resist us. We shall cut our way through their regiments, their battalions, we shall trample them over. In a quarter of an hour we shall be on the plain of Kur,” the King commanded as he drew his sword. “On then. Forward, my warriors!” And spurring his horse, the King was off.

The guards raced close to him. In a few moments the three riders disappeared in the dark. By the King’s luck the sky was overcast and the moon was hidden. No one could spot them in the distance.

When they reached the depression the clatter of the hoofbeats awakened the Arab guards who instantly blocked the King’s path, but the King’s stallion and the blows of his mighty sword cut through them, while the shouts of the two guards and the shock of their lances scattered the company. Like the wind, sweeping through the rest of the companies which obstructed their path, they reached the mouth of the defile. Having learned that it was the King who had cut through their ranks, the Arabs instantly pursued the King with wild cries. The King and the two guards added to the shouts as they reached the rebel banks. The latter, surprised by the shouts, thought the Arabs were attacking them, and in the general confusion began to trample over each other in their haste to reach the camp.

The King took full advantage of the confusion. Together with his two guards, hacking right and left like an irresistible torrent, he cut his way through the entire length of the defile, and having come out into the open plain, even in front of Amram’s army, racing like lightning, disappeared in the darkness of the plain.

A few hours later the rebels became aware of the King’s flight. The princes of the Sevordik and the Arabs were keenly chagrined, while Tsluk Amram and Prince Ber of Abkhaz could hardly suppress their fury.

The next morning the rebel army occupied the fort. They disarmed the Arabs and set them free with only their horses. But they did not touch the remaining few Armenian horsemen because Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram begged Amram not to be severe to his brothers. Although furious at the King, Amram nevertheless respected the princes' request and parted with them without rancor.

PART II

Chapter 1 In the Monastery of Ayrivank

This magnificent monastery which was the repository of centuries' old relics of pagan and Christian history of the Armenian people, long respected by the people as an epic temple, as well as the sanctuary of the Christian religion, was located on the slopes of rocky Geghardasar, to the northeast of the fortress of Garni. Before it flowed the second tributary of the River Azat which, catapulting from dizzying heights, filled the valley below and its surroundings with its tumultuous and awesome roar. The antediluvian earthquakes, having erupted fiery torrents from the bosom of the earth, had shaped here huge, rock-ribbed hills, formidable ramparts, grotesque masses of uniform rocks, cuneiform basalt pyramids, which in their serried overhanging ranks surrounded the Monastery of Ayrivank, rendering it inaccessible to unwelcome visitors. It seemed nature, with its mighty hand had accumulated the ruins of these titanic mountains and had formed here the magnificent and the awesome in order to show the mortal weaklings its invincible might.

Here, in the bosom of the towering mountain, amid the rugged cliffs and crags, were dug countless caves, crevices, and chapels, surrounded by walls and mighty towers. Some of these served the Armenian kings as the secret store of the royal treasury, while others as a prayer house or a sacrificial temple.

Here, St. Gregory the Illuminator, the founder of the Armenian Church, first planted the holy symbol of Christianity, confounding, of course, the pagan worship. Under the shelter of this symbol were assembled countless dwellers of the desert who converted Ayrivank into an inn of tranquility and seclusion. Here, Nerses the Great, the Benefactor of Armenia, sought his haven of rest after his long and arduous years of labor for the fatherland's welfare. Here retired his worthy son Sahak the Great together with his sixty disciples to complete the task of illuminating the nation in the bosom of the rocks.

At the time of our description here thrived a brotherhood of holy fathers who had reformed and enriched the Monastery of Ayrivank. Here was the residence of the Patriarch of the Armenians, Catholicos Hovhannes, who, frightened by the pursuit of the Arab Emir, had abandoned his seat in Dvin and together with his loyal functionaries and his patriarchal treasures had sought refuge in the fortifications of Ayrivank.

Two days before the Patriarch had received news that the Emir Nusr, who had succeeded Yusuf as viceroy in Atrpatakan, already had reached Nakhichevan and was proceeding to Dvin. The Emir had been advised of the Armenian King's misfortunes, the rebellion of the Armenian princes, and the general destitution of the land. Consequently, he was making haste to take advantage of the situation. The Catholicos learned that the Emir was bent on seizing the Catholicosate and his estates, to achieve

which aim he first intended to seize the person of the Catholicos and his treasures, then, accusing him of artificial charges, to seize the Catholicosate itself.

For this reason the Patriarch, who until then was hidden in the catacombs, withdrew his loyal followers to the upper story of the Monastery where the animals were kept. Hiding himself in these upper recesses, the Catholicos had hoped to escape the Emir's pursuit and to save his patriarchal riches which he had brought with him, consisting mostly of holy relics and precious antiques inherited from former kings. In the opinion of the Catholicos the enemy could not approach these obscure recesses which was the abode of the beggars and where the beasts of burden were treated for their wounds. But as steadily mounting fresh news intensified the fear, his counsellors advised him to abandon Ayrivank and seek refuge in the fortress of Garni where the queen was staying at the time. The Catholicos was inclined to follow this advice but Bishop Sahak, his coadjutor, who was a wise and sagacious man, opposed the idea, saying:

“The people are already accusing you, Majesty, of having abandoned the Catholicosate of Dvin and that you have fled to the security of Ayrivank in order to save your life. If you move to Garni now you will surely incite the enmity of the clergy.”

“Now that I have abandoned the Catholicosate, why should the clergy be excited if I should move on to Garni?” the Catholicos asked.

“You have an excuse for staying here, Majesty. You are guarding the Monastery as well as the brotherhood which is here. The Queen and the women of the nobility who are at Garni do not need your protection.”

The Catholicos hung his head and began to meditate. The Bishop's objection indeed was logical. The Catholicos' place was with his brotherhood and not with the women who already were protected by the fortress. Still, the fear of the imminent danger pressed heavily on his heart. In his handsome, healthy and strong body there resided a weak and timid heart. Although he was very fond of his flock and always worked for its welfare, still he was very sensitive about the safety of his person and was loath to endanger himself if the best interest of his flock demanded it. He was the own son of the fatherland and the sincere friend of its happiness. But, to achieve this happiness, if it was necessary to sacrifice his friendship with the reigning king or some powerful prince, he wavered, and finally was inclined to spare the loss of that friendship. He worked for the good of his nation sometimes from a motive of winning glory, but more often he avoided opposing the impending evils in order not to blemish that glory. He had neither a strong will nor a resolute disposition, and for this reason he was equally influenced by the big or the small, the deceitful gossipmonger and the wise counsellor. The influence of a strong man or event invariably nullified in him the strongest. Often it was the exact opposite, depending on who was the one who tried to influence him.

As to his Coadjutor, the Bishop, however, the Catholicos held him in high esteem as a wise and virtuous man, and for this reason, despite his fears as a result of the evermounting sinister news, he decided to follow his advice and remain at Ayrivank, together with his spiritual league.

But presently there was a newcomer, a deacon named Gevorg from the Catholicosate, who brought the latest menacing news. The Emir had already arrived in Dvin, bringing with him the great princes Sahak and Babgen of Syunik in chains. He had also captured forty Arab princes of Dvin.

The Catholicos turned pale at the ominous tidings. The prisoners were noted princes; how could Nusr have dared to arrest them, especially the princes of Dvin some of whom were the Chief Emir's favorite friends? It was clear that the Emir had instructions to raise persecutions.

"Where and how did he arrest the Princes of Syunis?" the Catholicos asked the deacon.

"When the Emir was in Nakhichevan," the deacon replied, "Prince Babgen came to see him to protest against his brother Sahak who had deprived him of his paternal inheritance and to solicit his aid. The Emir gladly accepted the prince's petition and sent word to Prince Sahak to appear before him. The latter promptly complied with the Emir's command. Both princes had brought with them gifts for the Emir. The Emir kept the two princes with him for two days then proposed to go to Dvin with them where he would settle their quarrel. The princes agreed, but the minute they reached Dvin the Emir arrested them and put them in jail."

"He must have done it in order to seize their lands, is it not so, Bishop Sahak?" the Catholicos asked his Coadjutor who had been listening to the deacon's report standing.

"That is true, Majesty, the Emir would not have dared seize the province of the Syunik without arresting the princes."

"Of course. When the princes are free they can raise troops and wage war. Now that they are deprived of this freedom, this is a great misfortune for our country, including the King and myself," the Catholicos observed.

"And as to you, Majesty?" the Deacon asked concerned.

"Ah, yes, as for myself!" the Catholicos repeated mechanically.

"The Emir may set a trap for you too."

"Meaning?"

"He intends to arrest you."

"Arrest me?"

“Yes, Majesty.”

“How did you happen to learn this?”

“The Emir summoned the Overseers of the Catholicosate and ordered him to send word here.”

“To summon me?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“What business has the Emir got with me, Bishop Sahak?” the Catholicos asked his bishop.

“God alone knows, Majesty,” the bishop replied.

“The Emir told the overseer that the place of the Catholicos is at his See, and not in the fortifications of the mountains,” the deacon added.

“Then he knows where I am staying?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

The Catholicos paled. “I will not leave here ... today or tomorrow he will send troops after me,” the Patriarch said to his Bishop.

The latter was silent.

“Don’t you think so, Holy Brother?” the Catholicos pressed.

“He will send troops when you leave here, Majesty.”

“But he cannot arrest me then.”

“He will seize and massacre the brotherhood of Ayrivank,” the Bishop added solemnly.

The Catholicos grasped the meaning of the Bishop’s words and was silent.

“You said a moment ago, Bishop, that the Emir could not have seized the land of the Syuniks had he not first arrested the princes,” the Catholicos finally broke the silence.

“Yes, Majesty, that’s true.”

“It follows then that he will seize the Catholicosate if he arrests me.”

“Of course.”

“And if I stay here it’s the same as surrendering myself to Nusr’s executioners.”

The Bishop did not reply.

At that moment the representative of the Catholicosate arrived, bringing with him the Emir's command, ordering the Catholicos to return to the capital. The Emir's command put an end to his hesitation, and the Catholicos decided to withdraw to Garni. He ordered the Deacon Gevorg to mount his horse, hasten to the fortress, and notify the Keeper and the Queen of his coming. He decided to leave that very night.

The brotherhood of Ayrivank were highly disturbed by this news, and while many grumbled, none of them dared to criticize the Catholicos, especially as they saw that the Bishop was silent. That was a sure sign that the Bishop could no longer influence the Catholicos who was clearly frightened.

The Catholicos was supported only by his closest associates who likewise were worried over their safety. They knew that. Once the Arabs came to Ayrivank, they would destroy everything and would put why they urged the Catholicos to leave then the Catholicos together with his loyal followers descended to the inner chapel of the Monastery to say their prayers and to take his leave of the fraternity. They tasked the Catholicos to delay departure by one hour in order to dine with the fraternity for the last time. The Catholicos cheerfully agreed and sat with the brotherhood at the dinner table. As customary, a young *Vardapet* by the name of Movses ascended the platform and read the Holy Bible, taking his theme from the Book of the Apostles. When the dinner neared the end, he opened the Gospel of John and began to read out loud the following passage:

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is a hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth; and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.”

The *Vardapet* had not yet pronounced the last words when the Catholicos dropped his napkin, and pale, rose from his seat and exclaimed:

“Go ahead and finish it, O fathers of Ayrivank. Say that I am a hireling. I am fleeing from the wolf, yes, but not in order to betray you, but to spare the sacred relics which have been entrusted to me.

But if my precaution will earn the title of hireling for me, I abandon these sacred treasures from this moment, leave them to your care, or to the whim of fate. I will not desert the fraternity.”

The good Abbot who had never expected that the young *Vardapet* would take such an audacious step was utterly confounded. Confounded even more by the Catholicos's words, the poor man threw himself at the feet of His Majesty:

“Majesty,” he begged, “this *Vardapet* is known among my fraternity for his modesty and virtue, but the Tempter has misguided him. Command me this minute to defrock him and expel him from the fraternity whom he has disgraced by his indiscretion.”

“No, beloved Brother,” the Catholicos replied, “this *Vardapet* said nothing disrespectful. He only repeated the words of the Gospel. He reminded me of my duty, ringing in my ears the command of the Brave and Immortal Shepherd. God summoned the guilty leaders of Israel to the true path by the mouth of the prophets. Who knows but God wanted to raise a prophet among us? Let us not condemn this man who had the courage of speaking the truth.”

Movses *Vardapet* was standing at the moment before the pulpit, silent and motionless, his face tranquil, and his gaze steady. The whole brotherhood standing at the moment, was looking at him, transfixed; yet the young father was not disturbed by their looks. He knew why he had read the Gospel of John, and was convinced that he had done his duty. After that he did not care whether they would reward or punish him.

But the Abbot, still uneasy lest His Majesty ascribed the whole affair to a premeditated plot, asked the *Vardapet* loudly:

“My brother, who told you to read that particular passage from the Gospel?”

“The invisible Sitter who at this moment is guiding our hearts and minds,” the *Vardapet* replied calmly.

“Of course it was He who commanded,” the Bishop added. “If it is true that no leaf moves without His will, then it was His power which inspired the speaker. It is God’s will that His Majesty should remain with his brotherhood and share their joys and their griefs. Who can oppose His will?”

“I do not oppose,” the Catholicos said. “It is true that I wanted to take advantage of the night and escape from the enemy unseen, but by virtue of this very night I was prevented from my journey. Therefore, I shall stay. Those holy relics which I wanted to save from the enemy, let them save themselves. If it should please God that I should escape, He will make the brightest of day into a night for me.”

Saying it, the Catholicos retired to his rest room, while the Bishop sent new messengers to notify the Fortress of Garni not to wait for the arrival of the Catholicos.

Early the next morning the Catholicos called the leaders of the brotherhood to a council, to consult with them as to what they should do in resisting the attackers and how to save the patriarchal riches of the Monastery. First of all, it was decided to hide the precious articles, the church vessels and the holy relics in the distant inaccessible caves. Next, there would be a procession of the entire

brotherhood. And lastly, the remainder of the day would be spent in prayers and watchful waiting, so that God would spare the defenseless brotherhood and deliver it from the enemy.

And indeed, this brotherhood had no other weapon of self-defense except to hide and pray. The King was busy fighting the rebellious princes, while those princes who had troops had fortified themselves in their castles. The mob fleeing from the enemy, undefended by the King or the princes, could only turn to the monasteries, further complicating the society's position, since the panicky multitude not only had to be defended, but had to be fed as well.

It was a beautiful autumn morning. The sun was gliding over a clear, cloudless sky, it seemed more brilliant and shiny than other days. The slopes and the heights of the Village mountain, where the pastures and the verdant foliage had faded, were burning with iridescent colors. The cliffs, the pyramids, and the encampments which surrounded Ayrivank, pressing it tightly, as it were, were slowly shed the sweet morning breezes which, caressing the slopes of Gegha Mountain, swept into the Valley of Ayrivank to kiss the waves of the Azat River, had a cooling effect of the sun's heat which was beginning to make itself felt everywhere. Among the trees which surrounded the Monastery, among the bushes which sheltered the banks of the gurgling river, the birds had begun their early warble which, mingled with the swish of the gentle river, inundated the entire space with their music.

Presently, from the gates of the rock-hewn temple, there emerged the white-robed scribes, singing the melodious hymns of the fields, followed by standard bearers, the deacons, the company of the monks and *vardapets*, and lastly, the high-ranking bishops, surrounding the Majestic Patriarch. Right before him, facing each other, walked two deacons, holding in their hands the holy censors, incensing the Catholicos. From the priest to the bishop, they all were clad in black cloaks, because the golden tasseled chasubles, together with the other precious vessels, were hidden in the caves. Only the Catholicos wore a white, golden-tasseled chasuble which lent a unique, majestic grace to his tall, handsome stature, and to his kindly face which was adorned with a white, flowing beard, reaching down to his breast.

Reaching the center of the Monastery the brotherhood fell into line in order to start the procession. But scarcely had the initial prayers been uttered when, presently, there appeared on the sky the signs of a miracle about to be performed. The bright canopy of the sky was curtained by a dull, green colored shadow in which, on various spots, one could see shining stars. The air was suddenly chilled and there was a steady whistle of a cold wind. The birds, who until then had been filling the air with their warble, suddenly fell silent, and frightened, started to scamper around for shelter. The brotherhood preparing for the procession was suddenly seized by an instinctive fear, and the *Vardapet* who was reading the Scriptures, felt that his eyesight was dimming.

Suddenly the Catholicos raised his hands to heaven and exclaimed:

“O Thou Almighty God, what is this miracle which Thou art showing unto Thy creatures?”

Terrified, as they were, by the Catholicos’ voice, everyone looked into the heavens and saw that half of the sun’s disk was eclipsed by a shadow. A few moments later the sun was completely eclipsed. They all stood there rooted to the ground and one could hear only exclamations of wonder and awe on all sides.

Suddenly the Bishop came forward and exclaimed in a loud voice:

“Illustrious Lord, by this token God has clearly shown His will in regard to the brotherhood of Ayrivank which wanted to keep you, and with you to protect the holy treasures of the Armenian Church. You did not oppose that wish and you said: If it is God’s will that I should leave here, He will turn the bright sun into midnight darkness for me.’ And now, God has heard your prayer. His omnipotent right hand has darkened the sun and has turned the day into night. It is His will, therefore, that you should leave the society and save your person and the patriarchal treasures from the impending danger. Leave at once, Illustrious Lord, leave this place, because that is God’s inscrutable will.”

“Leave at once, leave at once; our blessing with you,” exclaimed the monks from all sides.

“I obey the will of God,” the Catholicos said, and kneeling down, he began to pray.

The entire brotherhood followed the Patriarch’s example. When the eclipse was over, the monks finished the procession with an easy heart and returned to the temple. But Movses *Vardapet* whose reading of the Gospel had upset the Catholicos’ journey, was terror-stricken, and falling at the Patriarch’s feet, he implored his forgiveness.

“I have sinned against Thee, Illustrious Lord,” he begged with tears. “It seemed to me God had inspired me to stop your withdrawal, but now I see that it was the Devil’s doing. Forgive me, and pray for me that your humble servant may be released from the Tempter’s chains.”

“You acted by God’s dictate, beloved son,” the Catholicos consoled him gently. “It was God who inspired you to do what you did, in order to show us His mighty power. Go in peace and pray to Him that He made you worthy of this gracious deed.”

Comforted to the soul, the *Vardapet* bowed his head and withdrew.

A little later the Catholicos, together with his faithful followers, took his leave of Ayrivank and headed for the Fortress of Garni.

After the departure of the Patriarch the monks became even more frightened. It was their belief that, through the miracle, God had revealed the imminent arrival of the enemy. Therefore, all the weak-hearted fled to the mountains or sought refuge in the caves. They were followed by the multitude

who fled to the security of the Monastery. The Monastery was deserted by all except the old Abbot and a few courageous and devoted *vardapets* who preferred death inside the Monastery walls, in front of the holy temple, rather than to seek safety for their persons and leave the monastery in the hands of the barbarians. And although they could not even dream of resisting the Arabs, but because they knew that those barbarians, once they saw the monastery was deserted, would not hesitate to desecrate and ruin it in order to smart the anguish of the deserters, therefore they decided to stay, hoping perhaps to restrain the excesses of the barbarians.

Among those who stayed behind was Movses *Vardapet* who, after helping the deserters to their hiding places, had returned to the Abbot and his loyal companions in order to take part in their coming actions.

In the evening a messenger came to announce the news of the enemy's coming attack. "The Emir sent a contingent here to arrest the Catholicos and to massacre the brotherhood," he said to the Abbot. "The overseer of the Catholicosate sent me here to bring you the sad news. "

"God sent us the news from heaven much earlier, son," the Abbot replied: "the Catholicos and the greater part of the brotherhood already are saved, but we stayed here to die at the gate of the Monastery."

When the messenger was gone the Abbot assembled the remaining *Vardapets* and: entered the temple to pray and to watch. They were still kneeling in prayer when the arches of the rock-hewn temple rang with a terrible cry. The Abbot sprang to his feet and started to recite Christ's words in a low voice: "Arise and go, for the hour has come ..." He could not continue the words, but proceeded forward with steady, fearless steps. All followed him. When they reached the courtyard, he again turned to the monks and said in an agitated voice:

"We are dedicated to our people and the service of this holy temple; we have taken an oath before God and men and we have no right to forswear that oath. Let us go to the sacrificial altar where we ourselves shall be the sacrificial offering. Let us go cheerfully, and without murmur, and let us have faith that, by sacrificing our lives in this passing world, we shall recover them in the eternal kingdom."

"Let us fulfill our sacred duty," they all said in unison. "We have nothing to lose. Sooner or later we all would die; our lives are not eternal. Let us bless God who had made us worthy of a profitable death like this. If the foundations of this temple will become stronger with the sprinkling of our blood" — cheerfully added Movses *Vardapet* — "coming generations will continue to pray here, and their prayers will bring down the blessing of Eternity. We are happy indeed that we have become the 'chosen vessels' who lived in this passing world wisely, preferring the eternal to the transitory."

“Let us go, the enemy cannot terrify us. Let us go fulfil our duty,” exclaimed the other *vardapets*, and the company came out into the open.

The Arabs had already arrived and had surrounded the Monastery. They had been infuriated, finding the gates closed. They had not expected such audacity on the part of a company of spirituals. They figured that the Monastery must have defending troops, and they raised the roof with their angry shouts. They issued commands, swore, and threatened. They rolled huge rocks from the heights to batter the gates of the Monastery, while the advance guard set up ladders to scale the walls.

The small company of the monks stood there, unarmed and defenseless, like a herd of deer which is surrounded by the attackers’ wild cries and the thumping against the iron gate struck terror into their hearts, and although they were ready and willing to sacrifice their lives, nevertheless they were terribly afraid, the man of flesh and blood in them was subdued, the instinct in them was more powerful than the spiritual vigor, and each of them was praying to God to “remove this cup from them.” Only Movses *Vardapet*, it seemed, was insensible to what was happening around him. The soldiers’ wild cries, the crackle on the gate, the huge rocks rolling from the mountain slopes neither confused nor terrified him. He looked upon it all quite calmly, eagerly waiting, as it were, for the quick end.

“We are needlessly infuriating these men,” he said to the Abbot. “Better we open the gates and take them in. Sooner or later they will crash in.”

“No. no! Perhaps God will save us, perhaps this hour of temptation will pass,” replied the Abbot who was pale from fear.

Just then the soldiers scaled the walls and were astounded to see that there was no one inside except a company of monks. There were no resisting forces nor any kind of preparation for a defense. The revelation broke the force of their fury somewhat. Only a few of them swung their bayonets, and that, to chase away the monks rather than to massacre them. But when the gate was crashed and the howling soldiers rushed in, the monks fled to the inner court. Hot on their heels, in a moment the bandits surrounded them, and drawing their swords, would have massacred them on the spot were it not for a company commander who shouted: “There will be no killing; this is the General’s command.”

This was like plucking the prey from the mouths of raving wolves. The soldiers started to grumble; to swear and to threaten the monks. They clamored for the order to kill them all. But soon there arrived Beshir the General, mounted on a huge Arab steed, and put an end to the tumult. He was a powerfully-built man with a large, dusky face, fiery eyes, and a grayish beard which reached to his waist. He wore a white turban with a gold tassel. Over a tunic of costly wool he wore, a bronze armor; a gilt bow-shaped sword hanging from his side, and holding in his hand a small shiny shield.

“Who is your chief?” he asked, approaching the monks.

“I am your humble servant,” the Abbot stepped forward.

“Where is your Catholicos?” asked Beshir.

“He went to Garni.”

“How did he dare go to Garni?” Beshir roared. “Did he not get the summons from Dvin to appear before the Emir?”

The Abbot hesitated, but Movses *Vardapet* was prompt. “Of course they brought the summons,” he said.

“Why did he disregard the Emir’s command?”

“The Catholicos may be asked, but never commanded.”

“How dare you speak to me in that tone?”

“Every tongue has a right to speak.”

“And are you not afraid that I will cut off your tongue from the root?”

“We already were expecting to die.”

“It seems you are tired of life, you scoundrel”

“When a man is forced to cringe before his enemy, that kind of life not only is tiresome but it is degrading. We deem death preferable to that kind of life.”

“Command me, Sire, and I will crush the head of this impertinent monk,” one of the soldiers stepped forward, brandishing his sword over the *vardapet’s* head.

“Of all his companions, let this man alone live,” the General commanded, “so that he shall linger in his sufferings. Where are the treasures of your Monastery?”

“We have no treasures,” the Abbot replied.

“Don’t dare lie to me.”

“I am not lying because I am afraid of you, but because our religion forbids it. We have no treasure because we are dwellers of the wilderness. We are not supposed to have property. We preserve the sacred deposits which have been entrusted to us by our people when need be.”

“All right then. Tell me where those deposits are.”

“I have no right to do that.”

“I command you.”

“I shall ignore your command.”

Beshir was furious. “Tie them all up,’ he ordered, “and throw them in a corner. Search the place and bring out everything you find.”

The General had hardly finished his command when the soldiers fell into a Hurry. They all were eager to seize the loot. But the General, knowing the greed of his soldiers, forbade them to enter the Monastery, and entrusted the search to a few picked men whom he could trust.

The searchers went through the rock-hewn temple, the small chapels, the monks’ cells, the caves on the slopes, and every cranny and corner. They upset the entire compound but found nothing except some old clothing and furniture which they piled in the courtyard.

“So, you have hidden everything from me,” Beshir roared, beside himself with his discomfiture.

“We have hidden everything which belongs to this Monastery, that which does not belong to you,” the old man said calmly.

“You will tell me the place this minute, you abominable old man,” Beshir roared, as he struck the old man on the head with his whip.

The blow of the whip which was made of animal skin flicked across the old man’s face like the tail of a snake, causing an instantaneous grayish blue blister. The old man swayed and leaned against the church wall.

Shocked by the spectacle, a young Priest stepped forward and shouted at the General: “The man who will strike a defenseless old man is not worthy of the name General. God will punish you some day. Have respect for His vengeance.”

Before Beshir could answer, a heavy sword descended on the Priest’s head and he rolled to the ground soaked in blood. The General commended the soldier for his brave deed. “This is what will happen to you all unless you tell me where your treasure is,” Beshir threatened. “Tell me truthfully and I will spare your lives.”

“We will not betray either our brothers or our sacred relics. Do with us as you please,” challenged another monk.

‘You repeat the same thing, young monk?’ Beshir turned to *Movses Vardapet*

“Yes, Sire. Betrayal is an abominable thing. We will betray nothing. The hidden men are our brothers; the hidden articles are our sacred treasures, the property of the people. We have no light to deliver them to you. What we own is here, our bodies, you can destroy them, but to subdue our spirit, never!”

“Take them away and torture them with the most excruciating of tortures until they tell you where he treasures are,” Beshir ordered. Somehow he was sure that the Monastery had treasures which he wanted to seize. The stubbornness of the monks only served to intensify his appetite. But the latter were stubborn chiefly because many of their companions were hidden with the treasures. They were determined to save them by sacrificing their lives.

The soldiers started to torture the monks but the latter stood firm. Finally, seeing that torture was useless and somewhat conscience-stricken at sight of the bloody spectacle, Beshir ordered his soldiers to cut it short and put all of them to the sword. The General’s command was instantly carried out. All the monks were beheaded. Only Movses *Vardapet* was spared in order to prolong his suffering, as Beshir had ordered. He was given a terrible beating and his disfigured body was sent to the Catholicos in Garni with a threat that he would share the same fate unless he returned to Dvin and swore obeisance to the Emir.

After this Beshir ordered his soldiers to loot the Monastery. Thus, having wreaked their vengeance, and having looted the place, the soldiers were satisfied and refrained from desecrating the remaining chapels. The sacrifice of the monks was not without its benefits. The architectural magnificence of Ayrivank remained intact.

Chapter 2 New Appeals

The sun’s eclipse had made a profound impression on the inmates of the Castle of Garni. The princesses, assembled around the Queen, made various predictions in regard to the mysterious phenomenon which they believed presaged an imminent peril or the beginning of a series of misfortunes. As to what that peril was, they knew nothing. That was the reason of their predictions.

“The King will be defeated and that defeat will open the gates of our misfortunes. That’s the meaning of the eclipse,” concluded the Queen.

The princesses did not agree with her, not because at heart they did not believe it, but because they wanted to spare the Queen’s feelings.

“The sun shines on many lands but all those lands do not meet with disaster at the same time,” observed Princess Mariam of Syunik. “If the sun’s eclipse presages a disaster, why then, in the same land, the King will be defeated and Tsluk Amram will be victorious? This proves that the sun’s eclipse is not always a bad omen. It brings in its wake both the good and the evil.”

“Perhaps, we will be the lucky ones this time,” added Princess Marzeptuni.

“Perhaps,” the Queen replied half-heartedly. At heart, she knew that God would punish the evil and reward the good. She knew that her husband had wronged Amram, and consequently, the latter would be victorious. Yet she said nothing about it because she could not divulge her secret.

A few hours later Catholicos Hovhannes arrived at the Castle and was met by the whole of Garni and its clergy. Mushegh, the Commander of the Castle, met the venerable Patriarch with banners and the entire garrison under his command. The Queen met the Patriarch at the gates of the Castle and together with him entered the church. After the Patriarch had uttered his prayers and felicitations, the Queen invited him and his retinue to their quarters in the castle. Garni was jubilant at the arrival of the Catholicos but inside the castle everyone was dejected.

The Catholicos had told the Queen the reason for his arrival. Presently, the news of the Emir’s arrival in Dvin spread inside the castle, causing the inmates to indulge in fearful speculations. But Young Prince Gor calmed the princesses and their daughters. “Garni is invincible,” he said. “Not only Nusr, but even the chief Emir cannot take Garni. Even if our garrison does not put up a fight, again our castle will be safe. Our rugged rocks, our walls and turrets which were built by Trdat, will withstand all the assaults of the enemy.”

The commander of the Castle, Mushegh, however, did not join in the women’s conversation. He did not even wait to listen to the Catholicos’s holy words, much as he would have liked to. He was a man of duty who realized that this was not the time for idle conversation. The minute he learned the bad news from the Catholicos, he returned to the task of fortifying the castle’s defenses.

Being a man of war with years of experience, Mushegh knew that often the enemy would strike when least expected. He had charge of the safety of the most precious heads of Armenia — the Queen and the Catholicos. Therefore, he did not want to be caught unawares. Having armed his entire force, he divided them into companies, some to defend the towers, some to watch the walls, and others to do the fighting. In certain spots he constructed huge rock piles from which to assail the enemy when trying to scale the walls. He stored up huge quantities of fats, pitch, and other inflammables to pour on the attackers. In short, he made all preparations for any sudden attack.

Two days passed and still there was no news of the enemy, but Mushegh did not relax his vigilance. He was with his warriors day and night. And one evening he spotted a company of riders who were descending from the heights of Gegha Mountain. This was a sign that the enemy would attack the castle from several sides. He sent out scouting parties to ascertain the enemy’s force. And yet, days passed and still the small cavalry was not reinforced by fresh companies. The riders slowly descended to the Plain of Azat and wheeled about toward the Castle of Garni.

Great was the joy of Mushegh when he recognized Prince Marzpetuni in the company of the riders. His arrival was a heavenly aid in this critical hour. The Queen was instantly notified of Marzpetuni's arrival. The company, led by the prince and *Sepuh* Vahram, consisted of a few dozen Vanandians who had hastened to the King's aid in Aghstev. Prince Gevorg (Marzpetuni) left the company with the Keeper of the Castle, and together with the *Sepuh*, he hastened to present himself to the Queen.

The arrival of the Prince, however, instead of cheering, further dampened the Queen's spirits. Only a few days before she had been anxiously waiting for him. For hours she had sat at the canopy of Trdat, watching the road which would bring Marzpetuni. At that time she was willing and anxious to see him, to open her heart before him and to solicit a remedy for her grief, because in him she saw the only loyal friend of the royal family.

But now that Seda had told her everything, when she knew that Marzpetuni knew long since her secret, she no longer felt like meeting him as an intimate friend. She thought that the prince too must have laughed at her naivete, as had done the ladies of the court, and this thought was very distressing, humiliating to her.

"What? Will he meet me as his Queen? As the spouse of his King? Does he not know that I no longer have the right to that title, when the King has scorned me?" These thoughts laid to rest any desire the Queen had to meet the Prince.

On the other hand, was this possible? Had she not been counting the hours and the minutes for some news from Utik? Was she not anxious and duty bound to learn the result of the King's expedition, whether he was victorious or defeated? Either event vitally involved her person, as queen, and as wife.

When the chambermaid told the Queen that Prince Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram awaited her permission to present themselves, she became confused as to which of the two she should receive.

"Let them come in," she said to the maid, but immediately stopped her. "No, no. Let the Prince come alone." The maid withdrew. The Queen's heart started to beat faster, she became uneasy, and the calm expression on her face vanished. Rising from her seat she looked into her mirror of polished silver and was shocked to see how she had changed. Her lips and cheeks had paled and her eyes were bleary.

"What has come over me?" she asked herself, and yet she could not answer the question. At that moment two conflicting rival and mutually exclusive emotions were awakened in her heart: the Queen's vanity, and the woman's ego; both claimants and both dominant. Naturally, one or the other would win, but until then no one knew how much she would suffer.

She was wondering what news the Prince had brought and the very thought made her shudder. She was eager to hear that the King had been victorious, had suppressed Amram's rebellion, and that his

army had reoccupied the land of the Utik and the Sevordis. Such news would cater to her queenly vanity, because by such a victory the King's power would rise, and his name would be glorified, the Armenian army would be encouraged, and the enemies would withdraw. Such a victory would rally the vacillating princes around the King, would inspire them with fresh hope, would create a new force to fight against the Emir, reoccupy Dvin and save the Catholicosate. All that was true enough.

But when she recalled the real reason why Amram had rebelled, when she reflected that by his victory the King would persist in his disloyalty, after conquering the land of the Sevordik would often visit the Princess Aspram and she herself would be forsaken, then she really wished that Marzpetuni would tell her the King had been defeated, the royal army had been destroyed, that Tslik Amram had finally conquered the Utik and the Plain of Sevordik, and that *Ashot Yerkat* would never be able to set foot there and visit his beloved Aspram.

"Oh, perhaps at this price I shall recover my priceless loss ... perhaps he will think God punished him for his guilty love, and repenting, perhaps he will come back to me, his spouse and queen, to that heart which once loved him so fiercely and which still beats in the hope of recovering its lost half ..."

She was in the midst of these meditations when the chambermaid came in to announce the Prince's presence. Prince Gevorg who was standing at the entrance, seeing the Queen, saluted her bowing low, then came forward and kissed her hand.

His calm and earnest look reassured the Queen.

"We have waited long for you, Prince. You bear us glad tidings, of course," the Queen smiled frostily as she took her seat,

"Glad tidings? Yes indeed. I certainly would not want to be the bearer of bad news. Yet God ..."

"You do bring us bad news then," the Queen asked uneasily, fixing her eyes on the Prince.

"The King is safe, thank God."

"What do you mean, Prince? Then the royal army was destroyed? Was Amram victorious?"

"Amram was not victorious, but we suffered a shameful defeat."

"I don't understand you."

"Amram besieged us in a pass, the King escaped, but there was no fight."

"Tell me all about it," the Queen commanded. The Prince related the whole story, leaving out of course all that was irrelevant to her as queen and wife. When he was through, the Queen took a deep breath of relief, as if she was completely satisfied.

“Then there was no bloodshed, and yet the King fled, confounded and crestfallen. Was that it? Thank Almighty God. He was judged righteously.” And the Queen’s face lit with a smile of profound satisfaction, not altogether untinged, however, with a trace of bitterness.

“Your Majesty astounds me. Is it possible that the King’s defeat should cause you such happiness?” the Prince asked, bewildered by the Queen’s words.

“Yes indeed, Prince Marzpetuni.”

“But the shame of that defeat clings to the royal throne and ...”

“And the Queen, is it not so? Isn’t that what you mean, Prince?”*

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“The Queen no longer wants glory but the tranquility of her soul. Gone are the days when I found the realization of my fondest wishes in Ashot’s victories, when my spirit soared around his victorious banner. At that time, yes, I sought my happiness in glory because I was young and inexperienced. But now that glory is hateful to me, for, because of it I lost my happiness.”

“Has some sort of misfortune befallen my Queen?” Marzpetuni asked doubtfully.

“Misfortune? Oh no. I am very happy. You know that, Princess Marzpetuni knows it, all the ladies of the court and my maidens know it. Yes, you all know it and yet you wanted to hide it from me. Isn’t that true, Lord Marzpetuni?” The Queen smiled ironically.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Majesty.”

The Queen fixed her gaze on the Prince and after a moment’s silence said gently, It’s already too late, Prince. Don’t worry about the peace of my heart. I could have carried the burden of my grief if only I knew that the world knew nothing of it. But since the world knew it before I did, hiding it longer will do no good. Don’t be surprised that the news you bring has made me happy. That joy was the last ray of parting hope which illuminated my face, perhaps for the last time.

“But what could you hope from the King’s defeat, Majesty?” the Prince was curious.

“I will tell you. Until now it was the king whom I sought in my husband, I rejoiced in his successes, boasted of his glory. I thought these were the things which would bring me happiness. But now I see how I have been mistaken, how the tumult of victory, the luster of the laurels, the splendor of the court and the royal luxuries have drained the source of my happiness; how in all this I have lost my husband Ashot, the only one I loved in the whole world. And now I see how fate has turned its face

from him. When I see that God has shamed him for his guilty love I rejoice because I believe that perhaps in the defeated king, the disgraced sovereign, the husband I have lost, I shall be able to awaken his conscience, shall perhaps be able to revive his dead love.”

“I never hoped, Majesty, that you would remember your grief in the midst of our common calamity,” observed Marzpetuni, trying to interrupt the Queen’s sad conversation.

“Oh, then you are surprised, dear Prince, that I should be engrossed in my person and mourn my misery in the midst of our misfortunes. Are you surprised that the peril of the fatherland as a result of the King’s defeat does not terrify me; that the misery of a leaderless people does not storm my heart: Do not be surprised. There is nothing unnatural here. I had a heart which once was devoted to Ashot the hero. He shattered that heart by betraying my love. After that I became insensible to what happened; instead of a living palpitating heart, there is a dead corpse under my breast. Can you demand that that corpse should breathe and feel? I used to love my people, yes, I used to love my fatherland passionately, boundlessly; for its sake I was willing to sacrifice everything, everything which was precious and irreplaceable to me; I was willing to sacrifice even my life. But at that time Ashot was with me, his breath inflamed my love for the fatherland, his soul supported and sustained me. And now he no longer exists; Ashot is dead for me, and with him my world is lost Oh, do not insult my misery, and especially, spare me. Expect nothing, nothing from a miserable, forsaken and humiliated woman.”

The Queen suddenly burst into tears. The Prince was looking at her, silent and sad, feeling the enormity of the poor woman’s grief, her intense suffering, and yet he was unable to comfort her.

After a long suspenseful wait, the prince finally remembered that *Sepuh* Vahram was waiting for him, and that the two of them had something to tell the Queen. The urgency of the matter as well as the shortness of time would not permit spending more time with the Queen’s personal problems, therefore, coming a step closer, he began to talk to the Queen gently.

“Your affliction, Majesty, was known to me long ago, but I did not dare speak to you about it because, in the first place, propriety forbids me, and secondly, mere talking is not the remedy. If such reasoning was a sin, punish me to the limit; if not, listen to the counsel of your humble servant... .”

“What is it you wish to tell me?” the Queen asked, removing the moist handkerchief from her eyes.

“To mull over and to grieve over one’s sorrows is superfluous now, Majesty. He who can endure courageously can conquer fate. The past is past. The past is irrevocable, you know that very well. Now is the time to think about the future.”

“What? Do you think I shall be able to return the King to the bosom of his family once again?” the Queen interrupted.

“Precisely.”

“How? In what manner? He does not love me...”

The Prince was taken aback. He began to watch the Queen wondering what was in her mind.

“Perhaps you know something else. Perhaps he has confessed to you that he has repented. Speak, Prince, hide nothing from me.”

“We did not understand each other, Majesty.”

“How not? Are you not talking about the King?”

“Yes.”

“So?”

“I said we should think about the future when you interrupted me. I was about to say we have many pressing problems about which we should think.”

“You said we should return the King to his family... “

“Yes, Majesty, that is what I said. But has not God extended the limit of his family? The King’s family is the entire nation. The King must return to his nation.”

The Queen made an uneasy gesture and returning to her seat, asked sullenly: ‘

“And isn’t the King in the bosom of that family now?”

“No.”

“How come? Didn’t you tell me that he ran away from Amram and is now in Kakavaberd?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Is not Gakavaberd in Syunik? And is not Syunik a province of Armenia?”

“That is so, Your Majesty. But the King does not want to return to Vostan. He will not move from Gakavaberd.”

“What kind of novelty is this? I do not understand.”

“The King is terribly discouraged. He feels humiliated by his flight from Amram. He claims he will never raise his sword again, never will ascend the throne. He thinks his princes have deserted and disgraced him, therefore they should be responsible for the ruination of the land.”

“Really? Did the princes shame him?” the Queen asked bitterly.

‘Who else? If they had been united Tslík Amram never would have rebelled nor the natives of Abkhaz would have joined him.’

“How short is your memory, Prince,” the Queen interrupted, “don’t you remember the immediate past? Were they not with the King only two months ago? My brother-in-law Abas and *Sparapet* Ashot were reconciled to each other, the princes were friends. It was because of this unity that the King succeeded in capturing Dvin and chasing the Arabs. You even celebrated the event in Dvin. And yet, it was at that very juncture that Amram rebelled. What was the reason?”

The Prince looked down dejected.

“If you don’t answer I will. The real reason was that the King had departed from the path of virtue, he had behaved atrociously, he had wrecked the home of his companion, and right then when he thought he was all powerful and mighty, when he was secure from his enemies and free to commit all kinds of evil with impunity, God punished him.”

“All that is true, Majesty. But what shall we do now? Shall we fold our hands and sit? Our country is in a crisis.”

“Do what you can.”

“We will do what we can but you must help us.”

“I help you?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“And what can I do? I told you that I am a miserable woman. Expect nothing from me.”

“And how can I act alone? The King will not move from Gakavaberd; *Sparapet* Ashot is fortified in Bagaran; the King’s brother Abas has withdrawn to Yerazgavors; the Lord of Mok and the Patriarch of Artsrunis are defending the mountains; Gagik Artsruni recognizes no Armenians beyond Vaspurakan; the Catholicos, instead of remaining at the citadel and rallying the princes, has taken refuge in Garni. And now you refuse any cooperation while the Nusr has seized Dvin and is spreading terror all around. What else shall we think about? Shall we destroy the royal throne and bow the knee to the Arab?”

The Prince was so impetuous that the Queen was momentarily taken aback. Her answer was humble.

“What can I do, Prince?”

“You can set them a good example.”

“My heart is so heavy and my mind so troubled that I can think of nothing I can do. You tell me what I can do.”

“I have come here together with *Sepuh* Vahram, the commander of Gardman. He is the most loyal of all the princes who have remained with us. In view of the situation, we have decided to appeal to all the fortified princes, to solicit two companies of each, to form an army and take the field. As you know, those who are entrenched in their fortresses are safe from enemy attack, but the unfortified cities, the villages and the towns are defenseless. We must hasten to their aid.”

“I am not stopping you. Go in peace and God be with you.”

“God will bless us. He will assist us. But first of all the Queen will be deprived of a few regiments.”

“What? Would you deprive Garni of its garrison?”

“As long as the aim of our army is to attract the enemy, Garni needs no defense.”

“The enemy’s power is great. He can fight you and lay siege to the forts at the same time.”

“He cannot do it; we will not let him,” the Prince replied confidently.

The Queen fell silent. She was debating in her mind whether to agree or not. After a few moments’ pause she asked: “Who else might give you aid?”

“*Sparapet* Ashot, Abas, the Lords of Syunik and Andzev.”

“And if they refuse?”

“If the Queen sets an example no one will dare oppose.”

“I will not refuse. Vacate the whole of Garni,” the Queen replied resolutely.

The Prince bowed low and thanked her. Then he asked permission to invite the *Sepuh* in, whom the Queen received cordially. Immediately the three set to work about their future plans. In the midst of their deliberations the chambermaid came in to announce that the Catholicos wanted to see the Queen.

“Let the Holy Father bring in his benediction,” the Queen commanded, then turning to the princes she said, “Of course His Majesty can help us with his counsel.”

“Of course he can,” added *Sepuh* Vahram. But Marzpetuni was silent. He had noticed that the chambermaid was pale when she came in. Manifestly, the Catholicos had some sad news which was apparent to the outsiders. The Prince was uneasy not for himself but for the Queen. He was afraid the Catholicos might have something to reveal which should not be told to the Queen.

“Command us, Majesty, to meet the Patriarch,” the Prince volunteered, rising to his feet. He was in a hurry to meet the Catholicos before he came in.

“Go, meet him,” the Queen commanded.

But scarcely had the Prince and the *Sepuh* reached the door of the salon the staff bearer, the senior deacons and the Catholicos himself entered in, followed by Bishop Sahak and a few *Vardapets*. They were accompanied by a monk whose face and hands were bloody, and his raiment was torn. His pale sad face made a dismal impression on the observers.

Prince Marzpetuni was shocked at the sight of the shattered monk. “What’s this?” he shouted trying to prevent his entry.

“Don’t stop him, Prince; let the Queen see his plight,” the Catholicos pleaded.

“What’s this? What has happened?” the Queen exclaimed in shock.

“The beastly Arabs have ruined the Monastery of Ayrivank, they have tortured and murdered the inmates, and have spared only this hapless *Vardapet* to bring us the news,” the Catholicos spoke as he approached to kiss the Queen’s hand. After the salutation the Catholicos sat down on his throne.

“How come? Why should the Emir leave alone the fortresses and attack the monastery?” the Prince asked.

The Catholicos did not answer. He looked at the Queen hoping her question would be more gentle.

“How did it happen: Tell us the whole story,” the Queen commanded the wounded monk.

“Tell it, Movses *Vardapet*. Tell the Queen what those beasts did to the monastery,” the Catholicos ordered deeply agitated.

Movses *Vardapet* stepped forward, and regardless of his pitiful condition, with his unique vigor, told the whole story of the massacre of the monks, not even leaving out the last words of the martyrs which deeply moved the listeners.

When he was through, the Prince approached the Catholicos and begged for a little privacy, retaining only Bishop Sahak and the *Vardapet*. His Majesty granted the Prince’s request and his followers retired. When they were gone, the Prince rose to his feet and addressed the Queen in following words:

“These holy fathers, Majesty, have done such a deed which none of us had a right to demand of them. They gave their lives in defense of their brethren and the holy relics of the monastery. These defenseless spirituals have given an example of self-sacrifice to all the world, proving that they are brave shepherds who lay down their lives for their flock. In doing this, they have exalted the glory and honor of the Armenian church. All this is very good and well. But what are we, the leaders of the

people, doing? We who are the leaders, we who have been endowed by God with a sword and the right to govern and to defend?”

The Prince looked at the Catholicos, and then the Queen. Both were spellbound.

“We are doing nothing,” the Prince continued with animation, or we are doing what will bring shame and dishonor to the Armenian name. We have fled to the safety of our castles, surrounded by our garrisons, safe from the enemy, while the people and the churches lie there defenseless, utterly at the enemy’s mercy. Do you call that the right of a leader?”

In saying this he was looking straight in the eye of the Catholicos. The latter, surmising the hidden meaning of the words, hastened to ask: “And where is our King? He is the one to head the troops.”

“You want to know where the King is?” Marzpetuni exclaimed, “I will tell you. He is sulking in Gakavaberd, deserted by his princes and persecuted by the rebels. He will not come out of his hiding place, will not unsheathe his sword, will not raise his banners. He is done, finished. But where is the Catholicos, the Patriarch of the Armenians, the majestic head of our spiritual militia?”

“Prince, you see him right before you,” the Catholicos replied in a subdued dignified voice.

“Yes, right here in Garni. But why here?”

“Where else would you have me be?”

“In Dvin, the seat of our Catholicosate.”

“But the Emir is thirsty for my blood. He will kill me.”

“He is pursuing you simply because you are running away from him. You would not dare harm you had you retained your dignity on the Patriarchal throne and had acted as mediator between him and the people. By your cowardly flight you have provoked his anger and forced him to revenge himself upon the defenseless monks.”

“I would not have left the Monastery of Ayrivank but God commanded me.”

“God commanded you?” The Prince was astounded.

“Yes, God himself commanded me. Everybody knows it. The Queen knows it. I told her.”

The Bishop of the Court confirmed the Catholicos’ assertion by relating the whole story of the miracle. When he was through, the Prince was mollified. “I believe in miracles and I bow before the power of God. But you, in turn, should believe that if God spared the life of our leader. He did so in order to use him for the people’s benefit. In the massacre of Israeli children God spared the baby

Moses by a miracle and preserved him in Pharaoh's place so that later he could save his people from the slavery of the Egyptians. Is it not so?"

"That is true, Prince," the Catholicos replied, "but God endowed Moses with the power of working miracles. That is how he saved his people. I have not that power. I cannot work miracles."

"You can, Majesty. Moses converted his rod into a serpent; you can do the same. Where power is important, discretion, the tongue, and wise counsel can prevail. Leave Garni right away, return to Yerazgavors, go to Bagaran, then to the lands of Aghdznik and Mok, enter into Vaspurakan, speak to Abas, Ashot, the Artsruni brothers and the rest of the princes, advise them, exhort them, persuade them to assemble their troops and rally around the King. You can unify and save the country."

"The Prince speaks wisdom, Majesty," assented Bishop Sahak.

"And it is essential that you follow the advice," the Queen added.

But the Catholicos was silent, his eyes fixed on the salon door. Finally he turned to the Prince and said: "No one will listen to me; none of the princes will leave their castles."

"Let His Majesty do his duty and if they will not listen to him, then let their blood be upon their heads," observed Marzpetuni.

"The Emir's bandits have seized the roads to Shirak. How can I go to Yerazgavors, Bagaran and the land of the Aghdznik?" the Catholicos objected.

At this, *Sepuh* Vahram who until then was silent, flew up and exclaimed: "I will accompany you, Majesty, with my Vanandian warriors. No Arab will dare raise hands against you."

The Catholicos looked at the *Sepuh*, and unable to object further, agreed to go. "Let the will of Her Majesty the Queen and the princes be done," he said. "Only give me a little time to think. This mediation is a heavy responsibility, I cannot assume it without thinking "

"Take your time, Majesty, just as long as you carry out our proposal," Marzpetuni said. "The salvation of our country now depends on the unity of our princes. That must be won at all costs."

"I will try," the Catholicos promised to give his decision soon, rose up from his seat, saluted the Queen and the princes, and withdrew with Bishop Sahak. *Sepuh* Vahram followed him as far as his sanctuary.

"I have no doubt that His Majesty will carry out His promise," the Prince assured the Queen when they were alone.

"You are quite right, Prince," the Queen said. "He realized that his flight from Dvin has displeased us. He will do his best to make amends for his error."

The Catholicos, who had brought the bruised monk to prove the enormity of the risk in saving himself, was very dejected now seeing the turn of events. He had thought the massacre of Ayrivank would justify his flight and ensure his stay in Garni, and now they were practically commissioning him to face the enemy. Would not the Arabs arrest him on the way? What could *Sepuh Vahram* do with a band of Vanandians: Of course nothing. After he was arrested the Catholicosate would be seized and everything would be lost.

These thoughts weighed heavily on the Catholicos. He immediately invited his counsellors and told them that he intended to refuse the Queen's request because in doing so he would jeopardize the safety of the Catholicosate. The counsellors did not dare oppose the Catholicos after they had seen the miracle. But since he could no longer remain in Garni, it was decided that His Holiness should retire to Sevan where a brotherhood of monks existed. There, he would be with his spiritual soldiers, no one would dare impugn him. Besides, being an impregnable fortress with ample provision of water, Sevan would be inaccessible to the enemy.

Great was the Queen's surprise when she learned the Catholicos' decision. *Sepuh Vahram* was so furious that he did not even bid him farewell. But Prince Marzpetuni, together with Mushegh, the Commander of the Castle, accompanied His Holiness as far as the Bridge of Azat. Before parting, the Prince had a last word. "You who are concerned only with the safety of your person," he said to the Catholicos, "can save only yourself. But the throne of the Catholicosate will remain the inheritance of those who are capable of defending it."

"I am going away only to protect that throne," the Catholicos replied.

"No, Majesty. From now on you will be defending only Catholicos Hovhannes, but never the throne of the Illuminator. You lost it the day you ran away from Dvin."

The Catholicos naturally would not believe the Prince's prediction and went his way. In Sevan he was received with great rejoicing. But Prince Gevorg returned to Garni and once again consulted with the Queen. He clearly saw that the only way of meeting the crisis was to unify the princes and this he was determined to do at all costs. The Catholicos' desertion, far from discouraging him, on the contrary made him all the more determined. Consulting his counsellors he decided that the Queen should still remain in Garni but Vosdan should at least nominally be regarded as the seat of the kingdom. The latter was essential for the cause of unity, because if the princes thought Vostan was in the hands of the Arabs they scarcely would consent to join forces against them.

It was finally agreed that the Prince would appeal to the King's brother Abas and *Sparapet* Ashot, while the *Sepuh* would assume the responsibility of winning over the princes of Aghdznik and Mok. After obtaining the consent of these princes, they would appeal to the lords of Vaspurakan.

The day after the departure of the Catholicos, the Prince and the *Sepuh* departed from Garni on their respective missions.

Chapter 3 A Green Shoot Beside The Old Tree

After the departure of Prince Marzpetuni the Queen was seized with a strange feeling of lassitude. She who had vigilantly watched over the castle's fortifications, had personally inspected the garrison, had attended their drills and watched their military preparations, suddenly lost all interest and withdrew into her shell. The ladies of the court naturally wondered what happened to her, and they had a right to wonder because that woman who had been so paintaken about the castle's safety at a time when there was no threat, when the King as yet had not met with defeat, how could she be so indifferent now that the Emir was in Dvin and could attack her position at any moment?

The reason was very plain. Her woman's soul was simply crushed. Until then she had been hopeful of the King's return, thinking Amram's rebellion might bring him to his senses. But the news of Marzpetuni had shattered these hopes. If Ashot *Yerkat* was discouraged and had gone into retirement, who was she to stand the staggering burden of her misfortune? At this moment she was like a drowning man who, having fought in vain against the lashing billows, tired and exhausted, surrenders himself to the current.

It is true that, while Marzpetuni was in Garni, she had surrendered to his counsel and had promised her cooperation, but she had done all this without giving an account to herself. Her heart had not been in it. By this time life had lost its meaning, no longer attracted her; why then should she carry this insufferable burden? Let come what it may, what was destined for her. The human hand cannot change the fate which the Eternal has mapped out.

Submerged in these contemplations, and having surrendered to a sort of total apathy, the Queen had confined herself to her chambers or to her solitary amusement under the canopy of Trdat. Meanwhile, Mushegh, the Commander of the Castle, and young Prince Gor were feverishly busy preparing the castle against any possible attack. The Queen watched their activity with a cold, indifferent eye, sometimes wondering about the futility of it all since in the end all would die.

One moonlit evening, while she was seated under the canopy of Trdat, suddenly she heard a rustle near the steps. She rose from her seat and looked below. She saw there a little mountain track, dug through the rocks, which descended to a small natural terrace which was covered with vegetation the greater part of the year. The terrace was surrounded by a cluster of ancient willows which formed a beautiful canopy under the sun. From the side of the terrace gushed a spring of clear waters which, gently flowing, irrigated the willows, then gurgled along the rocks, precipitated down into the roaring water of the Azat River below. Due to its beautiful position, even from earliest times, the terrace had been the object of tender care. Who knows but the spot might have been cultured at the order of Princess Khosrovadukht, the first Lady of the canopy, as her amusement resort. Perhaps she

spent her solitary moments of ecstasy there, or her tortured days of a banished love, a love which doomed her to perpetual virginity.

Queen Sahakanush, herself, often loved to sit here and to chat with the ladies of the court, sometimes to enjoy an open air repast.

As the Queen watched, she saw someone, skirting the base of the canopy then shifting to the trail which led to the terrace. The Queen was surprised to notice that the night prowler was a young girl, assuredly one of the inmates of the Castle and in all probability a princess because she was covered with a silk veil and an embroidered headdress through which, under the moonlight, she could see the shining golden comb. Who she was, and why she was going to the terrace all alone, the Queen could not tell because she fled before her like a mountain deer.

“She must be someone like me who no longer can stand her grief and is going to throw herself down the precipice,” the Queen thought. She had an impulse to call her maids and order them to follow her, but thought such a step might precipitate the calamity. Therefore, she decided to follow her. She hastily descended the steps of the canopy and headed straight for the terrace.

Although the season was autumn, the air was mild and even warm, rendering the evening a pleasant one. The sky was clear and starry, the moon had bathed the ridges of Mount Gegha and the Valley of Garni in a pool of shimmering light, preventing the rocks and the escarpments to cast a shadow over the current of Azat. It was a beautiful enchanting evening, but the Queen was not interested. At that moment her sole concern was the young girl who glided over the rocks like a shadow and was hidden in the darkness.

The Queen scarcely had reached the middle of the trail when she heard a whispered conversation. “Then she was not going to throw herself down the precipice,” the Queen thought as she slowed her steps. It was plain that she was to be the witness of a secret rendezvous. She hesitated whether she should proceed or return.

“Let us see who they are and what they are saying,” her curiosity dictated. She was more cautious now in her pursuit lest they discovered her. When she reached the trunk of a thick willow, quite safe from discovery, she sat down on a boulder. To her great surprise she saw that the clandestine couple were young Prince Gor and Princess Shahandukht. The Queen knew that the two were in love, as well as the inmates of the Castle. But she never dreamed that they should date at such a clandestine place. Her curiosity was so aroused that she decided to listen to their conversation.

Princess Shahandukht was the granddaughter of the King’s aunt, the daughter of Vasak, the Grand Prince of Syunik. She had lost her father in previous civil wars, and the King, grateful for the services Vasak had rendered him, adopted his orphan daughter, and together with her mother, Princess Mariam, took her under his care. Thereafter Shahandukht lived in the King’s court as his daughter.

She was loved both by the King and the Queen as their own child, and likewise, she was the fondling of all the princesses.

Among all those lovers, however, there was one who worshipped her, young Prince Gor, the son of Prince Marzpetuni. How their love started, no one knew, not even themselves. Gor first met this black-eyed, curly-haired beautiful princess in the court of Yerazgavors, when they had just come from the land of Syunik, and liked her as a sister. From the start he called her his sister. Shahandukht, who had no sister, liked the idea very much and, in turn, accepted the handsome Gor, the only child of his parents, as her brother. Thereafter, as brother and sister, the two were the delight and the adornment of the court.

No matter how the original love was innocent and childish, nevertheless it was the prediction of the court that some day the titles of “brother” and “sister” would give way to much sweeter names. The prediction delighted the two mothers because neither Princess Gohar could have chosen a better fiancée for her Gor nor the Lady of Syunik could have found a better son-in-law.

On the other hand none of the mothers wished that the two youngsters would fall in love before they came of age. Prince Gevorg, in particular, was very strict about this. Before becoming a bridegroom, he wanted his Gor to be a soldier, a servant of the fatherland, in short, a proper man. For this reason, aside from a strict training which he had assigned for his son, he made him work hard, often took him along on his expeditions, and in his absence, he turned him over to the care of a responsible officer, so that he would not get used to indolence which is the mother of all evil. Gor carried out his every assignment manfully, without murmur. He obeyed his father’s commands as the voice of God.

Therefore, he was never at a loss for want of something to do.

Nevertheless all these precautions did not prevent the two from coming closer together and learning that they were made for each other. Long since their glances had ceased being the glances of brother and sister; long since they had been burning in the deep recesses of their hearts. And yet, no one in the court had noticed the transformation. But when, due to adverse circumstances, the royal family moved to Garni and Prince Gevorg went to Utik, broad horizons of freedom were opened for the two lovers. They both lived in the same castle now and had plenty of opportunities to see each other.

Although Gor was kept busy most of the day, he did not deprive himself of those opportunities when he could see his sweetheart or at least to exchange some silent glances. He often called on the Queen or the Lady of Syunik for no reason at all. His object was to meet Shahandukht, and when he did not succeed, he was very sad, unable to tell them the real cause of his inner feelings.

The Queen saw all this and was immensely amused. At times she mentioned the name of Shahandukht jokingly. At such moments Gor would blush like a girl and would hang his head. He did not dare confess his love openly because it was a different kind of love now, that he had no right to talk about it.

This was the reason why the Queen was so surprised when she heard their conversation at the terrace. The thing was so strange and so unexpected that she could not repress her curiosity.

What were the two lovers talking about?

“My knees are shaking; how shall I go back?” Shahandukht was saying to Gor. “This is the first time I’ve been afraid.”

“Afraid? Why? You talk as if you had committed a crime.”

“Of course. Is not everything which is clandestine really an admission of guilt? I sneaked by the canopy so the Queen would not see me.”

“What’s that? Was the Queen in her canopy?”

“Yes, she was seated on her throne, so thoughtful and sad. Why is the Queen so sad, Gor? My heart bleeds every time I see her.”

“I don’t know. They say she is suffering from some sort of affliction but they never tell us what it is.”

“There’s nothing secret about it, Gor. The Queen is grieved because they blinded her father and brother, and because of her mother’s death. What else can be more bitter than that?”

“That’s terrible, Of course there can be nothing more bitter than that.”

The conversation of the two lovers drove through the Queen’s heart pang who was listening to them tensely. “Oh, you innocent, happy, lovely children,” she whispered to herself. “I pray God that you shall never know the pain which is mine,” pressing her hands on her heaving breast.

“Meeting you here has filled my heart with infinite joy,” Gor continued. “All the glories of the world could not have brought me the joy which is mine at this moment. But if doing me this favor has made you uneasy, it is my wish that we never meet here again.”

“Never meet again. Oh, how could I? I could never bear it. Ever since the day you left the garrison and have been working in the passes, I have not seen you. You leave the Castle early in the morning, work all day and return late in the evening all tired out. Where and when can I see you? Each day I ascend the high tower and for hours look at the passes where you work. I strain my vision trying to see you, but I can scarcely see the tip of your helmet shining in the sun. O, how I wish then I could fly to your side and wipe the sweat off your brow. And yet, it is only my soul which takes flight, it cannot bring you my heart. My heart is always locked up in this tower like the caged bird which is not permitted to soar in the air. It is hard to bear, my Gor, is it not? Speak, why are you silent?”

“Go on, my sweet, my peerless Shahandukht. You do the talking. Your voice sounds sweeter to me than the gurgle of the brook, sweeter than the morning melody of the spring nightingale.”

“Yes, I could stand it no longer. I saw that if I were left to my fate it would torture me no end. Therefore, I decided to take this audacious step. Oh, forgive me my Gor. If I sinned against my modesty, you don’t know how much I have suffered.”

“Forgive you? Is it a sin to love? You have obeyed the dictate of your heart.” Gor opened his arms to embrace his lover but she held the youth’s hands and gently pushed him aside smiling. “No, my darling Gor. That’s not the way princely youths defend the ladies of the court.”

“Shahandukht!”

“We are alone. You must defend me against yourself.”

“Oh, how severe, how terrible you are!”

“I came only to speak to you because we have no chance to meet alone. As long as I cannot say it in the presence of a third person I must return immediately”

“Ah how I wish mountains would grow up on your path at this moment.”

“One word more. I came to ask you to return home hereafter one hour before sunset so that I can greet you from the tower and receive your greeting.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all. That will be more than I need, until...”

“Until what?”

“Until your work is finished and you return to the Castle.”

“My job will not be finished as long as

“As long as what?”

“As long as Shahandukht is in the Castle of Garni.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means I am terribly worried over your safety.”

“As well as the safety of all who are in the fort.”

“I have provided for them otherwise. But for you? How shall I say it?”

“Go ahead, say it.”

“Yes, my priceless Shahandukht. If the enemy bandits surrounding the Castle fail to scale the walls, if their ladders and wooden fortifications crumble down, if the flow of flaming pitch devours the would be attackers, if the Arabs lay siege to our castle for months and fail to rob the obscure peasant of his morsel, or fail even to disturb the customary amusement of the ladies of the court, know then that all this will be accomplished because of you. It is the Lady of Syunik who shall render the Castle of Garni invincible, and that all the inmates of the Castle shall owe their lives to my future bride.”

“What do you mean, Gor? I don’t understand.”

“It means, as long as you are in Garni, Gor shall have no rest. These gigantic rocks discovered by Patriarch Gegham seem fragile to me. These solid walls built by Trdat are weak, the deep valley which surrounds us is but a meadow, easily accessible to all. Finally, I find that the number of our warriors is small, their zeal is not sufficiently strong, the energy of the Commander of the Castle is almost spent. For this reason I have had no rest day or night. I have been working hard, and have been making the Commander work hard. The thought of your presence in Garni, the thought of protecting your precious life has lent me courage. When I rise in the morning, I feel inside me an invincible power, an inexhaustible source of energy. I watch, I examine, I explore all the passes which may be accessible to the enemy, and I try to convert them into death traps. I want to double the strength of the walls, double the strength of the pyramids and the towers, to render each spot inaccessible, invincible. If you should make a tour or inspection of our fortifications, you would see how much we have accomplished, as this is for you and you alone, my priceless, my peerless Shahandukht.”

Saying this, the youth seized the lady’s hand and reverently pressed it to his lips. Shahandukht did not resist.

“For you alone, my peerless Shahandukht. Oh, how happy you must be!”

“But why for me alone? What about the Queen, your mother, my mother, the ladies of the court? And lastly, is not Garni full of people?” Shahandukht asked.

“Quite true. All their lives are precious to me, even the last peasant girl shall have my protection as my own sister, but none of them inspires in me the same courage which will make me invincible to the enemy, the same strength which converts the obscure soldier into a hero. To my Queen I could be a devoted subject; to our mothers a sacrificing son, to our people and the fatherland a fearless soldier. But for you, I do not know what name to give myself. For your sake I will give my very life, and yet, I do not want to die, I want to live so that I can protect you and care for you. The entire Arab army shall not be able to take you away from me. When I think that Shahandukht is in Garni, relying on me for her safety, a new lion is born in my heart and my arms turn into steel. I want to live only for you, and I love all the rest of them only for your sake.” The Queen had heard enough.

Somewhat remorseful for the liberty she had taken, she rose and headed for the canopy. From here she went to the Castle all by herself and secluded herself in her chambers.

She still was under the spell of her eavesdropping for the passionate avowals of the two youthful lovers had opened afresh her old wounds. Her glories of the past, her fond memories, her passionate love for her husband — all these looked like a withered tree now. Life had no meaning for her any more. And yet, in the love of the two young lovers, she saw the beginning of a new sprout which she hoped would blossom and grow. She wished them well. Who knows, they might succeed in accomplishing what fate had denied her.

She looked around her, and seeing she was alone she sighed deeply. A few moments later she walked to the window and peered outside. The slopes of Mount Gegha were bathed in the moonlight. She again remembered the two lovers, their conversation, Shahandukht's confession of her love, the young Prince's animation, and it seemed she was infected by their youthful spirit.

“No, this will never do,” the Queen soliloquized. “One still can live, or at least can make others live. We have no right to spread death around us and to drag the rest with us. What right have I to deprive my Shahandukht of her tender love, or the lad Gor of the benefits of life? I saw with my own eyes, and heard with my ears. They love each other and they are happy. Why shouldn't I help ensure that happiness for a long, long time. They are our loved ones, our children. And yet, are they our only children? How many others like them are in this world who want to live and enjoy life's blessings. Why deprive them? Why not help them? And here we are, sulking in our own private grievances, the King in Gakavaberd, while I am cooped up in this Castle. Let the enemy do what he will. Let him strike, persecute, turn the earth upside down. Who cares? If we are unhappy, let the rest be blighted with us. That is what we have been thinking. But is this not a crime, worthy of heaven's vengeance?”

These new thoughts so stirred the Queen that her temerity gave way to a new, and hitherto unknown inspiration. She was resolved now to take an active hand in the defense of the land. What she could do, as yet she did not know but she kept thinking about it.

Suddenly her face brightened and a broad smile shone on her beautiful lips. “I will go to Ashot and take him to my heart,” she said to herself. “I will warm his heart with my fiery kisses. I will remind him of our past, and will fire him with the memory of his former exploits and glories. I will take him out of Gakavaberd and will return him to Vostan. Again he shall head his warriors, again he shall thunder and terrorize his enemies. When we have won the victory and the peace, then the sprouts of love will grow and flourish once again. Let the youthful hearts of our land enjoy the sweet fruits. Yes, I have decided, I shall go. No one shall stop me. Each man is led by a mind. Prince Marzpetuni is wrapped up with the love of the fatherland; he is working for its integrity, for the solidarity of the throne, and consequently, for the welfare of the people. His son Gor is enthused with all this only for the sake of Shahandukht; it shall be my mission to work for those hearts who love.”

The Queen rose to her feet and called her maids. “Go tell Seda to come here at once,” she commanded. A few moments later the foster mother presented herself to the Queen.

“Seda, get ready. Tomorrow we shall be off?”

“Where are we going, Majesty?” Seda asked, surprised.

“To Gakavaberd?”

“Gakavaberd? You are going to the King?”

“Yes?”

“Why, my Lady?”

“I am going to my husband and King. Is there anything strange in this?”

“Mercy me. God’s blessing on your wish and your journey. I only wished to know why so sudden?”

“We shall discuss that later. We shall have plenty of time later.”

“What is your command now?”

“Order two carriages with twin mules to be ready in the morning. We shall take along two maids and two servants. My guards shall leave one hour earlier and shall wait for us on the way. Princess Gohar shall be in charge of the Castle during our absence. No one in the Castle shall know of our departure except the Commander.”

Seda bowed to the Queen and went out to carry out her orders.

Chapter 4 The Capture of Byurakan (Arak29 translation)

Dawn was just breaking when the brethren of the Sevan Monastery left the Church of Holy Apostles after the morning service and dispersed to the cells located on the hill.

Catholicos Hovhannes, who had arrived in Sevan four days ago, was also praying with the brethren. After the service, instead of returning to his chambers, he and Bishop Sahak climbed to the top of the hill. Despite the cold, he wanted to watch the sunrise, which was one of the magnificent views from the island. He stopped in front of the old church of Sevan, the Church of the Holy Resurrection, which was built on the top of the hill and started looking eastward. The blue lake surrounding the island was calm and monotonous, like a crystal. Only minor waves came and crashed against the

cliffs. White and blue ribbons stretched across the water surface in different directions, like long tapes, constantly changing their color and shape in unison of morning rays

The first rays of the sun splashed out from behind the Aytsemnasar mount, and a brilliant disk, like a fiery vessel, began to rise above the horizon. Its life-giving rays gilded the coastal mountains, the hills on the island, the rocks and the grassless plains. But the most wonderful picture was represented by the Lake of Nahapet. The dark blue of it gradually turned into a blue color and the ribbons were gradually decreasing or vanishing. The surface of the water at places was lit up with a bright red color and at other places, it looked silvery. Thousands of small waves, raised by the breeze, flashed in the sun like diamonds or twinkling stars.

The Catholicos looked at this picture with admiration.

“How beautiful, how wonderful is our country!” he exclaimed suddenly. “What is it? Why can't we live in peace? Why does an unfair fate haunt us? ...”

And he was carried away by the thought to the times when Patriarch Gegham still owned these places with his sons, relatives and confidants; then only native speech was heard here, people were not aware of aliens, foreign yoke and abuse.

He remembered the happy time when the powerful Trdat ruled the whole country; when the Enlightener visited this shore with his cross; when the newly minted soldiers of Christianity, entering the fortress of Sevan, pursued a group of pagan priests from there and, when they made the Syunik patrimonial estate the house of the true God, and gave it the name “Holy Resurrection.” He imagined the moment when, the enlightener of Armenia placed Christ’s cross on top of the ancient pagan house, and handed over to it the pastoral care of the Geghama blissful sea with its mute and peaceful inhabitants, its colorful shores... And now?... The lake and the island were the estate of the Syunik princes, who were under the patronage of the Armenian king. But if the Arabs surround the island, if their wild and ugly hordes break into the monastery, plunder its shrines, exterminate the clergy, take the Catholicos himself as a prisoner, who would be able to resist them?...

These thoughts disturbed the heart of Catholicos and a sudden fear took upon him.

“Are we safe here from the enemy’s assault?” he turned to the bishop.

“We are safe if the God’s grace is upon us,” answered the bishop. “But is it upon us?”

“We mortals don't know anything. We can only hope that among the numerous brethren, there will be sinless ones, thanks to whom the Lord will save us from troubles.”

“If ten are found there, I will not destroy even ten for the sake of it,” the angel of God said to Abraham when he went to destroy Sodom. But will there be ten righteous people among us?”

Before the patriarch could utter the last words, he noticed a raft floating to the island from the direction of Tsamakaberd.

“Who are those who came to us at such an early hour?” the Catholicos asked the bishop.

“Probably worshippers,” answered the latter.

But the Catholicos, who was worried about any movement around the island, immediately returned to his chambers, instructing the bishop to send somebody to find out who was arriving.

Half an hour later, the Dvin Catholicosate deacon Theodoros, who was the chief of the group arriving, told the Catholicos that commander Beshir is coming to Sevan with a large army and is going to siege them at the isle.

The Catholicos turned pale.

“And here too they don’t let me in peace” uttered he in fear and then turning to Bishop Sahak, said: “Do you see, Holy Father? There are not even ten righteous people among us!”

“Maybe. But it seems to me that “God destroys the righteous along with the wicked,” the Bishop cited the words of Abraham.

“Who is this impious man?” asked the Catholicos.

“Who knows? Maybe I am, or maybe someone who considers himself a righteous person,” answered the Holy Father. “Perhaps all these disasters have been sent down on us because of one Jonah”...

“But who is this Jonah? Tell us where he is, and let us catch him and throw him into the lake. Perhaps by this we will humble the wrath of the Lord.”

The bishop did not answer.

“Why do you keep silent, Holy Father?” the Catholicos asked.

“I don't know where this Jonah is and every man, looking back at his own deeds, can tell how far he is from being a Jonah. But I know one thing: the Catholicos must leave Sevan, so that the local clergy will not suffer the fate of the fathers of Ayrivank.”

The Catholicos understood the bishop Sahak’s hint and took a deep breath.

“So there is not a corner in my country where I can lay my head... and be in peace,” said Catholicos to himself, and turning to the deacon Teodoros, he asked, “What do they say about me in Dvin?”

“No one considers your decisions unwise, Your Holiness, but they say that if you had stayed in your residence city, the *Vostikan* would not have dared to persecute you.”

“In my residence city? Good. I'll be there in two days... We'll get there in time; don't you think so, Holy Father? the Catholicos addressed the bishop.

“To Dvin?”

“No, to the Byurakan Fortress. Isn't it also my residence? Being there, I'd be close to the Katoghike Church. The *Vostikan* certainly knows that Byurakan is my estate; that I have built a church and a castle there, where I spend most of the year.”

“We can arrive in Byurakan in two days.”

“Then let's leave today. Send a messenger to Dvin with the message that the Catholicos has left Sevan. And the enemy is sure to leave this place alone.”

On the same day, in the evening, the Catholicos and his entourage left Sevan for his Byurakan fortress. A few days later, the Catholicos's envoys headed by Dran Bishop arrived to see Nusr and submitted to the *Vostikan* patriarch's handwritten message and presented him valuable gifts.

The Catholicos congratulated the *Vostikan* on his arrival and prayed for his prosperity. While offering his presents, he asked the *Vostikan* for a letter of protection for himself and his throne. This was advised to the Catholicos by those close to him in Byurakan. Beshir kept after the Patriarch so persistently, that only Nusr's interference could stop that persecution. That's why the Catholicos didn't reject the advice of those close to him and, indeed, all this has had a favorable outcome.

The *Vostikan* moved not so much by the courtesy of Catholicos's message, as by the gifts he sent, delivered to the patriarch a letter of protection, allowing him to stay wherever he wished. Knowing that the word and letter of the Mohammedan emir would not provide him with security in Dvin, the Catholicos chose the Byurakan estate for his residence, to wait and see what the Lord intended for the Armenian king.

But Beshir got angry when he received an order from Nusr to leave the Armenian Catholicos in peace. He realized that the reason for Nusr's favor towards the Catholicos was the gifts he had received. However, Beshir wanted his share, too. Returning empty-handed from Ayurvank, Beshir decided to take revenge at Sevan, and if this wouldn't work, then at Byurakan. However, the *Vostikan* was on his way. Beshir wondered what could be done. He turned immediately for support

to the head of the Arab clergy in Dvin. The latter had great influence both on his people and on *Vostikan*. Hence, he promised to Beshir to annul Nusr's letter and return the right of revenge to Beshir again.

While in Dvin, they were busy with those issues and the Armenian Catholicos was peacefully spending the winter in Byurakan, our two missionaries: *Sepuh* Vahram and Prince Marzpetuni went from fortress to fortress, from castle to castle of the Armenian princes. However, their mission was fruitless, and their exhortations did not bring the desired results. For example, the prince of Aghdznik promised to give his troops to the royal army if *Sparapet* Ashot and the king's brother Abas did the same thing in advance. The prince of Mok set a condition that besides the above mentioned, the King of Vaspurakan would participate in the war. Ashot the Tyrant promised to join the alliance if five Ararat regions were annexed to his principality by a royal charter. The king's brother Abas did not want to participate in the alliance, which would fight under the banners of Ashot *Yerkat*. In his opinion, King Ashot was already dejected and disengaged. So he suggested leaving him in peace to have a rest at some fortress and to hand over the throne to the rightful heir, that is, to himself. "Then," he said, "there will be no need for Prince Gevorg and *Sepuh* Vahram to beg for an army from the princes and try to unite them, since all the warriors will join the brave king."

These negotiations lasted for months. Autumn and winter passed; the beautiful Armenian spring arrived.

However, the princes who were mediating did not achieve their goal of creating an alliance. Still the Arab religious leader in Dvin kept his word. No matter how stubborn and autocratic the *Vostikan* was, the mullah managed to convince him that he had caused a great insult to the Mohammedan religion by granting a letter of protection to the Armenian Catholicos.

"God gave you a sword to spread our religion among the unfaithful and make the world aware of the truths professed by Muhammad, to destroy and extinguish its opponents. However, you, on the contrary, are protecting and supporting the enemy of our faith, the detractor of Muhammad, a person who does not honor and who reviles the holy Koran."

Such conversations continued until they either convinced the *Vostikan*, or bored him. He ordered Beshir to pursue the Catholicos again, and bring him back to Dvin. Beshir was just waiting for this. In Dvin over the winter, he had grown restless. The desired order of the *Vostikan* came to him in the first days of the beautiful spring. Beshir had only to gather an army and move to Byurakan.

He did so. In a few days, he gathered a large army and saying farewell to the *Vostikan*, he headed for the gray-haired Aragats. It was the beginning of spring. Despite the fact that Aragats, Mount Ara and even Yerablur were still covered with snow, the Amberd region was already turning green.

Its beautiful fields and valleys, mountain heights and slopes were full of wonderful flowers. Full-flowing streams ran down from the mountains, the flow of the rivers became faster. The shepherds, finishing their winter rest, climbed the slopes of Aragats to graze their flocks on its cool pastures. In the Ararat Valley, it was still peaceful and the peasants had already started fieldwork.

Suddenly, news came from the capital that a large Arab army was marching on Amberd. Again the escape and hiding started. Meanwhile, the Catholicos lived quietly, busy with the improvement of his estate. After he received the protection letter from the *Vostikan*, not only the clergy but also lay people took shelter in Byurakan, as a place that was under the aegis of the Catholicos.

It was a beautiful April morning. From the terrace of his castle, the Catholicos admired the wonderful surroundings of Byurakan. In the north, the four-domed Aragats stretched with picturesque slopes and mountain ponds; in the northeast, Mount Ara towered with its green slopes. From the west, the horizon was covered by the snow-capped peaks of Bardogh, and from the south, there was a valley that, starting at the foot of Yerablur, crossed the Kasakh River and reached Masis itself. Numerous villages and settlements were scattered in this valley, among which the picturesque Oshakan stood out, where the relics of Armenia's second enlightener, Saint Mesrop were kept.

A little further away were the mother of cities, Vagharshapat, and near it the queen of the Armenian churches, the mother see of Etchmiadzin, the monastery of Saint Gayane, the temple of the virgin Mariane, Shoghakat, and, finally, the magnificent church of the beautiful St. Hripsime, who rejected the love of a powerful king. Above this wide plain, like a formidable and invincible ruler, towered the majestic Masis with a snow-white head covered with eternal snow and ice.

The view of the beautiful surroundings had always inspired the Catholicos with lofty thoughts, but today they seemed especially enchanting to him. He was pleased that he had chosen such a beautiful place for his estate; he was going to erect new buildings, strengthen the fortifications and increase the number of brethren in the monastery.

At this time, a messenger arrived in Byurakan. "Beshir is coming!" The terrible news spread like lightning around the entire fortress and terrified everybody. The gates of the fortress were slammed shut. The soldiers of the fortress and men capable of carrying weapons were put on alert and given weapons, including the young monks.

But was it possible to resist the Arabs with such weak forces? It was a preparation for a desperate resistance.

The news that arrived one after another confirmed that Beshir was not going to take Byurakan, but was coming to arrest the Catholicos. So, the question of the patriarch's flight arose again. Those close

to him who were afraid for their lives advised him to leave Byurakan. But Bishop Sahak, *vardapet* Movses and the leading members of the local brotherhood opposed this.

“No need to sacrifice many for the sake of one person,” they said. “The Catholicos may find shelter anywhere, but his flight every time is the cause of the death of many people. If God has prepared death for the patriarch, then he must accept it without hesitation. Wherever he takes refuge, death will overtake him. And if he is not destined to die, then Beshir will not be able to harm him.”

Nevertheless, these conversations did not dispel the fears of the Catholicos and his entourage. A secret council was held, which decided the fate of Byurakan. It was decided to persuade the Catholicos to go to Bagaran, to *Sparapet* Ashot and to be spared the threat to his life. The *Sparapet* not only had a large army, but also enjoyed the favor of the *Vostikan*. Having entrusted himself to this Prince, the Catholicos could be safe.

When the Catholicos informed Bishop Sahak of his decision and suggested that he “avoid the wrath of the Lord” with him, the bishop replied: “I will not leave my people. When they fight, I will pray. If they die, I will die with them...”

The same decision was made by the *vardapet* Movses, deacon Theodoros, two priests, Movses and David with their lay brother Sargis, and some others. However, on the same night, the Catholicos and his timid entourage left for Bagaran.

The next morning several detachments were moving towards the fortress. The defenders of Byurakan seeing them from afar thought that those were the advanced detachments of the enemy, and rushed to the bastions with unease. But when the detachments approached, they recognized with amazement the banners of the Armenian regiments and were extremely happy. The arriving soldiers were not the enemy, but the Armenian army, although no one could determine to which prince the detachment belonged.

When the detachment reached the walls of Byurakan, the defenders were surprised to see that this detachment of several hundred soldiers, had no commander nor a chief, but was led by a man in a sackcloth with a flag in his hand that had the sign of cross. The gates were opened to let in those who had arrived to help, and Bishop Sahak approached the standard-bearer:

“What do I see, Father Solomon? The hermit has become a warrior?”

“Yes, Your Holiness, the army defending the church should be led by hermits,” said the man in a sackcloth and told the story of how he brought together that detachment. The hermit Solomon was an Armenian priest exiled to Sagastan. By chance he escaped, he had returned to his homeland and lived in monasteries in asceticism.

After hearing about the massacre in Ayrivank and the persecution against the Catholicos, his desire to protect his compatriots resurrected. Wandering from village to village, he urged the people to take up arms and defend themselves, since the princes did not want to defend them. The hermit was joined by several freemen warriors, from whom a detachment was gradually organized. They came to the aid of the peasants when they were attacked by the enemy. As soon as the rumor spread that Beshir was going to Byurakan and wanted to capture the Catholicos, the hermit suggested that the detachment hurry to the aid of the patriarch, since the latter was as abandoned and helpless, as the lay people.

This suggestion was accepted with joy.

Other free warriors in various villages joined the hermit. They said: "Until now we have been fighting for the princes of our country, but now we will fight for the prince of the church." Saying this, they joined the flag with the cross and headed for Byurakan. The newcomers anticipated the Catholicos to come out and bless them. This was a natural and righteous desire for the warriors who have volunteered to come and defend their church and its head. But how sad Father Solomon was when Bishop Sahak told him that the Catholicos had left for Bagaran.

"My squad will disperse if they learn about this," he told the bishop. "They have come here to protect the Catholicos. If it is announced to them that the Catholicos saving his own person, abandoned the brotherhood, they may go back right at the moment.

"What should we do then? We really need the help of the warriors." asked the Bishop.

After thinking for a little while the hermit answered:

"We must tell them that the Catholicos is ill and cannot get out seeing them. This innocent lie will help us."

"No, Father Solomon. Every lie is a sin, and for every sin, there is a punishment," the bishop said. "I cannot deceive this pious army. It's better to tell them the truth, and leave our defense on their conscience."

"It's the same as if we surrender Byurakan to the enemy with our own hands."

"So, what should we do then?" the bishop asked in confusion.

"We have no other choice. I'll take this sin on my soul, if it is really a sin ... " said the hermit. Going out into the courtyard of the castle, he announced to the soldiers that "the Catholicos was ill and sent them his blessing through him."

The warriors, of course, believed the monk and many of them decided that the news of enemy's assault has scared the Catholicos.

This belief even burned in them the fire of revenge.

On the same day, all the troops in the fortress were brought into battle order. Both the warriors who were in the fortress and the newcomers were divided into several detachments and placed at different points: some on the towers, some on the walls, some behind the gates and in hiding places.

The command over the local army was assumed by Deacon Theodoros, who was an experienced warrior, and over the newcomers, the hermit Solomon.

Everything was already ready when the enemy appeared, coming from the direction of Vagharshapat.

The warriors immediately took their places.

Bishop Sahak ordered the clergy, who were not carrying weapons, to gather in the church for the vigil. As long as the siege of the fortress lasted, the service of vigil should go on. At the sound of the bell, the church was filled with worshippers. There were the priests who exercised the vigil and women and old people who could not be of assistance to the warriors. The service was performed by the bishop himself.

The enemy army, approaching the fortress, immediately launched an attack. Beshir, thinking that the Catholicos was in the fortress and defenseless, decided to frighten the patriarch with an unexpected blow and force him to surrender. The arrogant Arab considered it superfluous to even negotiate. He considered himself entitled to capture the Catholicos as the last slave. What need there was for implementing courtesy?

Great was Beshir's amazement when he saw that he was greeted differently in Byurakan than in Ayrivank. A hail of arrows flew from the walls and towers. Hundreds of spears and javelins pierced the chests and backs of his attacking forces.

That wasn't all. From the tower over the fortress gate, streams of boiling tar poured down on the warriors trying to break down the gate. Many were burned right there on the spot.

“So we're not dealing with a defenseless Catholicos, but with an armed fortress” Beshir told his entourage. “Let's retreat, set up a camp and prepare for a regular battle.”

He ordered the signal to retreat to be blown, and the army withdrew from the walls. Cheers rang out in the fortress. The Armenians, having climbed the walls, began to mock the Arabs, calling them “cowards and lousy warriors.”

The enemy was silent. They were just gnashing their teeth and threatening revenge. On the same day, in the evening, hundreds of lights were lit on the walls of Byurakan. The army and the people rejoiced.

But in the enemy's camp, they were busy with something else. The craftsmen prepared battering rams, artillery and other battling machines. They even built a turtle siege engine and a mobile wooden tower. The warriors made ladders. Beshir personally supervised these works.

The next morning, the defenders noticed from the fortress that the enemy had been strengthened overnight and their continuing work was getting to turn into a real threat.

Meanwhile, the fortress defenders were not afraid of this and started preparing for defense. First, fuel reserves were increased. Secret passages were punched under the walls, through which it was possible to set fire to the turtle and destroy the mobile tower. The blacksmiths were busy forging iron hooks and crushing devices. The women prepared rag balls and dipped them in tar and boiling lard. The soldiers dragged all this to the walls and towers. Everywhere the work was in full swing and everyone participated in some work.

Three days later, the enemy again approached the walls of the fortress, pushing their military equipment forward. About a hundred soldiers moved a wide flat turtle on skids, and another hundred rolled a three-story tower on wheels. Others dragged battering rams, ballista and water skins to extinguish the fire. The rest of the enemy soldiers were surrounding the fortress.

At this time, Bishop Sahak served a solemn mass in the Byurakan church. Together with the people in the church, there was also the army. The warriors had come to be part of the mass for the last time, to listen to the ancient spiritual songs for the last time and to receive communion with the vivifying body and blood.

Only the guards at the fortress gates who monitored the enemy's movements were absent.

Before giving communion to the soldiers, Bishop Sahak said to them from the pulpit:

“Four hundred and seventy years ago, O my beloved children, the warriors of Vartanants prepared to fight with the enemy. They, just like you, first turned to God for help and then to the might of their hands. They, just like you, fought not for worldly glory, but for the freedom of the fatherland and the church. Now, as then, the enemy wanted to take away freedom and make the Armenian people slaves. The warriors of Vartanants did not allow this.”

“It is better to die free than to live as slaves,” they said, and entered into battle with an enemy who was twice as strong as them. “Don’t be afraid of the number of pagans and the terrible sword of mortals,” Vartan told his soldiers. “If God helps us, we will destroy them, and the truth will prevail,

and if the hour of our death has come, it is better to die in a sacred battle and let us not adulterate our bravery.”

They fought bravely, destroyed many enemies and themselves died honorably with a sword in their hand and wounds in their chest... But their names are still preserved in our memory and will remain immortal for centuries. Who would have known about the Vartanants if they had stayed alive out of cowardice? After all, millions of people lived before and after them, and does anybody remember their names? The brave men of Vartanants are not forgotten, because they fought and died for the most sacred cause for the freedom of the motherland. You now wish to become like the warriors of Vartanants. You, like them, have prepared to defend the freedom of the church and the motherland. And you wish to earn eternal glory. Do not be afraid of the enemy and its preparations. Your cause is fair, and your war is just, and God helps the right. Even if death overtakes you in this battle, accept it with joy, for in heaven you will inherit eternal life, and on earth an immortal name. At this solemn moment, before the table of the Holy God, I repeat the words of St. Ghevond, which he uttered to the brave Vartanants warriors: “Brothers, we do not weaken or perish, but with a firm heart and firm faith we are preparing to attack the enemies who are attacking us. Our hope is doubly visible to us. if we die, we will live, and if we cause their death, then our current life continues...”

“So approach the body and blood of the Savior, who died for the truth and holy cause; take communion with him, and let this communion strengthen your hearts, give strength to your hand and victory to your sword...”

Then the bishop stood in front of the altar with the cup of the holy communion in his hand, and the soldiers began to receive communion. They were followed by everyone, from young to old. The people were preparing for mortal battle.

After a short time, the soldiers were back at the walls and bastions.

By noon, the advanced enemy detachments surrounded the fortress and began to throw arrows towards the Armenian warriors on the walls. The latter responded in kind.

Then, gradually, regular regiments armed with shields came up. The shields protected them and those behind them. The latter being protected by the shields fired arrows constantly. The warriors at the walls were being protected by the battlements of the fortress walls.

For a while, the opponents fired arrows at each other. But then the enemy dragged a battering ram to the wall. It was a huge log, hanging on heavy chains under a movable cover mounted on wheels. An iron point was attached to the end of the ram. Dozens of people pulled the log back and let it go. The iron point was hitting the wall. In this way, they loosened the stones of the walls.

From other sides, catapults were being rolled up. Huge stones were placed on them, which hit the walls with monstrous force. Numerous warriors were scurrying around the battering machines. Some of them were dragging the devices, others were protecting the soldiers by shields and the rest were protecting the devices from the defendants of the fortress.

As soon as the first battering ram hit the fortress, streams of burning tar poured from the walls and oil-soaked sheaves of hay flew. They set fire to the ram's cover. Despite the fact that the Arabs were trying to extinguish the fire with water from wineskins, the flames burned the cover, and the damaged ram fell to the ground.

It was replaced by another, the cover of which was protected by wet felt and rawhide. But the Armenians could handle it. Against the catapults, the defenders had only one countermeasure: they lowered huge sheaves of hay from the walls on ropes to cushion the blow of the boulders against the walls. But the enemy set fire to the hay with long torches. Then the defenders, cutting the rope, dropped the burning hay and replaced it with another.

While the enemy tried to destroy the walls and towers with their weapons, the bolder soldiers put ladders against the walls and towers and tried to climb up. With shields over their heads and swords in their hands, they climbed ladders with amazing dexterity, trying to break into the fortress.

But the Armenian soldiers did not let up. With long iron poles, spears and javelins, they pushed and threw the attackers down, or, plunging toothed hooks into their bodies dragged them up and mercilessly killed them. In many places, they were overturning the ladders and dropping down the climbers.

The enemy attack continued without stopping. Both from outside and inside the warriors were acting fiercely. Neither side was inferior to the other. Arrows rained down from above and up from below. Spears and javelins flashed in the air, ladders broke, pikes crumbled, shields broke.

A huge flame engulfed the walls and towers.

Beshir, seeing that the resistance of the Byurakan defenders caused great losses to his army, ordered a retreat. There were a lot of dead people lying under the walls. The enemy gathered the dead and wounded until the evening. The corpses were buried in a common grave.

The situation infuriated Beshir, who was gnashing his teeth with rage, but could he do? The besieged were doing their duty and were heroically defending themselves.

For a moment, he thought to abandon the idea of taking Byurakan by force and to offer peace negotiations to the Catholicos. Beshir was sure that the Catholicos was in the fortress and that sooner

or later he would seize the fortress and take the Catholicos prisoner. But, fearing that the defenders might not accept his proposals, ridicule and insult him, he abandoned this idea.

“I will take this fortress by force of arms and level it to the ground!” And he ordered the troops to prepare for a new fierce attack.

The next morning, before dawn, Beshir’s army again moved to the fortress. Shooters and battering rams began their work. In addition, the defenders noticed that the Arabs were bringing the towers and turtles, which had been at a distance before, closer to the walls and bastion, as their hope of breaking into the fortress using lighter weapons had failed. The Byurakan defenders were not so concerned about the blows from the turtle and towers, but were anxious that these weapons be deployed in places where they had set traps. Therefore, on this day, as on the previous day, the Armenian soldiers deliberately left these places unprotected wishing to mislead the enemy. The latter had already observed those segments as convenient places to use their mobile towers and had noticed that there were no defenders there. They decided that in these areas the wall on the inside has no protrusions and that’s why there are no soldiers there.

Hence, the three-story tower, swaying on wheels, was dragged closer to that part of the wall. The joy of the besieged was indescribable. The tower was moving just to the place under which the tunnel was laid, hidden by a boardwalk. This flooring was supported from the inside by pillars. Under it were stacked brushwood and hay, filled with oil.

If the tower was brought to the exact place, the defenders would pull off the pillars. The tower in that case would collapse and the defenders would put it on fire. The hopes of the besieged were fulfilled. The wooden tower was installed just above the flooring. The Arab warriors started their job. Those who were on the lower floor of the tower used axes and crowbars to dig up the foundations of the wall, while others from the second floor destroyed the edges with small rams. The Arabs were protected from the arrows of the besieged by a rawhide-covered plank shield thrown from the top floor of the tower to the wall.

A large detachment of Armenian soldiers immediately arrived at this place and started fighting the enemy soldiers on the second floor of the tower, who were trying to throw an iron bridge over the wall.

A desperate struggle broke out. Spears struck, fanged pikes grappled with each other, but neither side gave in. Suddenly the iron bridge from the height of the tower, creaking, came down on the wall. The Arabs ran through it one after another. Here, on the wall, the battle began to boil. The besieged heroically resisted and the attackers were acting boldly. Spears crumbled, shields broke, swords flashed and flew in different directions, and soldiers fell down from the bridge and walls.

The fallen Arabs were constantly replaced by new ones. They climbed up from the lower floor with devilish dexterity. Meanwhile, the number of Armenians was decreasing. Those who fought at other points could not come to their aid: each unit had its own opponents. But still these few warriors fought desperately, surprised and indignant that the tower was still standing in the place.

A little more, and the Armenian warriors would be defeated. The Arabs would have stormed into the fortress, but suddenly there was a crash, and the wooden tower, rocking like a giant ship on the waves, began to sink. It was the boardwalk that finally broke, the upper floor of the tower collapsed, and the lower ones were engulfed in flames.

Seeing this the Arabs got desperate and the Armenian warriors rejoiced. Although a detachment of fire extinguishers immediately surrounded the burning tower and began to pour water from goatskins on it, it was still not possible to extinguish the flames. The fiery tongues, incessantly rising from below, within half an hour turned the tower into ashes, along with weapons and warriors in it.

The same fate befell the turtle, which was brought to the main fortress tower to destroy its basement. It was a wide square boardwalk, reinforced at a height of several cubits on eight large wheels and upholstered on all sides with rawhide to protect it from fire. When the turtle crawled up to the wall, several dozen people climbed under the flooring, who began to destroy the foundation of the fortress wall with picks and crowbars, not being afraid of the defenders as they were protected from above.

But the defenders had thought of another trick to put it on fire. As soon as the Arabs broke a small hole in the wall, the Byurakan defenders poured a huge amount of sawdust filled with oil into it. The liquid, having leaked out, gathered under the turtle. Then the Armenian soldiers set fire to the oil near the hole. The flame penetrated under the turtle. The Arabs ran away, many were burned, and the turtle was left standing, engulfed in flames. A hail of arrows flew from the tower at the brave men who approached the turtle with hooks on ropes to save it from the fire. They failed, and the turtle soon turned into a pile of ashes.

The rage of the Arab commander knew no bounds. On horseback, with a sword in his hand, he rushed from side to side, shouting menacing and encouraging words to the soldiers. He cited the example of the Armenians, trying to raise the morale of his troops. But it was all in vain. Arrows and fire caused huge damage to the Arab army. Many fled in fear. The threats and orders of the chief had no effect. Finally, after several hours of desperate fighting, Beshir ordered the army to retreat and return to the camp. And so they did.

Meanwhile, Byurakan people mocked them with shouts of joy. That night, the enemy camp was in mourning. Meanwhile, Byurakan, illuminated by torches and lamps, celebrated the victory. The enemy did not attack for two days and was preparing for new battles, organizing new detachments.

On the third and the following days, the enemy tried to advance several times, but each time it retreated, losing hundreds of soldiers.

Thus seven days passed and Beshir was unable to take the Byurakan fortress. On the eighth day, Beshir was about to lift the siege, when suddenly an unexpected event turned the wheel of fate against Armenians.

Two soldiers from the hermit's squad, who were on guard, argued with the guards of the patriarch's chambers. The argument turned into a fight. The Byurakan warriors beat the newcomers. Then, not listening to the requests and exhortations of their chief, the victims went to the castle to complain to the Catholicos. Bishop Sahak met them and tried to calm them down. But the warriors remained adamant. They wanted to see the Catholicos.

In the end, the bishop was forced to tell them that the Catholicos had left Byurakan. The warriors froze in place.

“How can this be?! So we weren't protecting the Catholicos, but some pathetic Byurakan inhabitants?” they said to the Bishop. Then without listening to the Bishop's admonitions, they returned to their posts.

That same evening, those two Armenians planned a dirty deed. Unfortunately being on guard, they had not attended the mass, which served the Bishop and had not listened to his preaching. Their hearts were not softened in those hard days. On the contrary, the blood streams of the war and the insults of the guards of the patriarch's chambers have made them fiercer and more insensitive.

“The Catholicos fled to Bagaran, leaving his people in the power of the enemy. Is this right?” one of the warriors asked the other.

“Of course not.”

“Why are we then putting ourselves in mortal danger? Beshir will take Byurakan sooner or later and put us all to the sword. If the Catholicos, the father and defender of the people, abandons his flock and flees, why can't we follow his example? Who will support our wives and children if we are killed? No one, of course.”

“What should we do then? Run away?” his companion asked him.

The first soldier thought for a moment and then whispered.

“We can even take revenge on those who have offended us.”

“How?”

“We can even make ourselves rich...”

“But what should we do?”

“Isn't Beshir going to take this fortress eventually?”

“Yes.”

“And wouldn't he slaughter everybody here?”

“Yes.”

“So, what harm will it be to the Byurakan inhabitants if we stay alive?”

“None at all.”

“Then I will go to Beshir tonight.”

“Then what?”

“I'll talk to him. If he agrees to give us a hundred gold pieces and a hundred fields of land in the Vostan region, we will surrender the fortress to him.”

The second man's eyes lit up with joy. Neither conscience, nor his brothers' misfortune touched the traitor's heart, which was rejoicing in the hope of future richness and happiness.

“Do it and I'll open the little hole in the tower... Who will know at the fortress that we have led Beshir... there are a lot of such holes and guards around...”

So they did.

Late at night, an Arab trumpet sounded in the fortress. The fortress was resting, not suspecting that the defeated enemy would dare to approach again. Suddenly, noise and shouts were heard from everywhere.

The Arabs started a massacre. Despite the fact that the Armenians immediately rushed to arms, despite the fact that Deacon Theodoros and the hermit Solomon came forward with swords in their hands, encouraging the soldiers, yet their resistance did not break the enemy, who kept coming and coming. The large fortress gates were open. Squad after squad entered the fortress.

Several hours passed... the fight and resistance were over... The fortress was covered with blood. The streets and houses were littered with corpses. Almost everyone who was in the fortress was killed, although every Armenian soldier killed several Arabs before his death.

At the moment when the villains, intoxicated with blood streams, broke into the church, Bishop Sahak was serving a prayer service. He was surrounded by old monks, defenseless women and decrepit old men. Prayers and supplications, weeping and screams, mixed together, shook the temple. The Arabs surrounded them with drawn sabers in their hands.

However, neither the flash of swords nor the threats of the executioners frightened the praying martyrs. It seemed that they were ready for this. Some of the people ran out of the church, the others remained in place and were killed. The savage Arabs dragged the bishop and the monks out of the church and put them in front of Beshir.

“Where is your Catholicos?” he asked.

“He went to Bagaran.” was the answer.

“So he slipped out of my hands once again?” Beshir shouted and gnashed his teeth: “Never mind, we will go to Bagaran... but in the meantime you will pay for it.”

Having said this, he ordered the soldiers to undress the prisoners and, having subjected them to severe tortures and shameful insults, to kill them.

The warriors executed Beshir's order. Bishop Sahak was the first to die, and then the rest of the monks.

On this day of April 17, 924, all the monks who, resisting the departure of the Catholicos, remained in Byurakan were tortured and put to death. Among them were the *vardapet* Movses, the priests David and Movses, their brother the warrior Sarkis and the hermit Solomon.

The deacon Teodoros, who was lying wounded among the dead, was killed by a rascal.

Beshir, having destroyed Byurakan, returned to Dvin with a large booty and numerous prisoners. Having presented two Armenian traitors to the *Vostikan*, the commander asked Nusr to reward them. And Nusr truly appreciated the services of the despicable.

“The reward for you will be what all traitors get,” he said to the soldiers, “since you have betrayed your masters and your co-religionists, you will be even more unfaithful to us.”

And Nusr ordered the executioners to immediately cut off their heads.

Chapter 5 The Hero's Decision

A few days had passed since the return of Gevorg Marzpetuni and *Sepuh* Vahram to the Castle of Garni. Their mission to rally the princes around the King had been fruitless. Neither the King's brother Abas, nor Ashot the *Sparapet*, nor Gagik Artsruni had wanted to join the union. The Lords of Aghdznik and Mok had likewise been neutral.

What to do now? It was this question which preoccupied the thoughts of Prince Marzpetuni when news came that Beshir had captured the Castle of Byurakan and put the inmates to the sword. The news profoundly distressed the Prince. "Then the devastation already has started and we were unable to prevent it," he sighed deeply. He kept pacing the floor of his lonely seclusion in the castle, sad and wrapped in his thoughts. He recalled his labor of months, his indefatigable efforts to unite the disrupted, broken forces to save the country from the foreign yoke and to prevent the destruction of the throne. And, remembering his failure, he was on the verge of despair.

Up until now such a sentiment had been alien to Prince Marzpetuni. He had been a firm believer in Christ's saying that "he who seeks shall find; he who knocks, it shall be opened to him." And now he had sought but found nothing; he had knocked but no one had opened the door.

"It follows it is God's will that this nation should perish and its memory should be effaced from the face of the earth," he thought bitterly. "Yes, that's the reason why he has hardened the princes' hearts, has misled the King, and has dismayed the Queen. Let us leave things to their fate, go away, crawl into some corner and watch how God will punish this hapless and doomed people."

The Prince was in the midst of these meditations when the *Sepuh* came in with some fresh news.

"A soldier returning from Syunik has brought more bad news," the *Sepuh* announced.

"It would be strange indeed if he brought some glad news because we are not expecting it," the Prince replied with a sad smile. "What news does he bring?"

"The King has left Gakavaberd and is now in Sevan."

"In Sevan?" the Prince asked surprised.

"Yes, in Sevan. He has squatted there and vows he will not budge."

"And the Queen?"

"She is with the King."

The Prince who until then was seated in his chair stood up and started to pace the floor. He did not speak a word but his face was convulsing with emotion. Finally he stopped, and fixing his eyes on the *Sepuh* he asked:

"Vahram, what do you think we should do now?"

The *Sepuh* shrugged his shoulders.

“What do you think must be done? Answer me,” the Prince repeated.

“If we had troops; if only a few of the princes would join us.”

“We have no troops and the princes will not join us. We already know that. What else do you know? Tell me that.”

“What else can I say? We are alone. You cannot clap your hands with one hand. One flower will not bring the spring.”

The Prince took a step forward, put his hand on the hilt of his sword, and raising his head, he looked proudly at the *Sepuh*. “Can’t you say anything more?” he asked.

“Nothing more,” the *Sepuh* replied.

“And I say you can clap with one hand and one flower will bring the spring.”

The *Sepuh* smiled. “It is impossible, Lord Marzpetuni.”

“Nothing is impossible when there is a will and the devotion to work.”

“We have done everything and yet we gained nothing.”

“The two of us together, yes, we did everything in our power. But I myself have not done everything. I have many debts to pay yet”

“What else is there left for you to do?”

“I will tell you about that tomorrow, and publicly, in front of the garrison and the fugitive nobles.”

Knowing the Prince’s tenacity, the *Sepuh* pressed no further and waited anxiously for tomorrow’s statement.

The next morning, at the Prince’s command, all the garrison of Garni and their commanders were assembled in front of the canopy of Trdat, including the clergy and the entire population of Garni. There were also the princes’ families and the young people. In short, the whole of Garni was thronged in the square, while the inmates of the Castle were in the canopy.

When all had taken their places, the Prince, now clad in his resplendent military armor, ascended the top of the stairs of the canopy, and standing there, he spoke in a proud ringing voice:

“Noble Lords and Ladies, soldiers, and beloved people. It is now a few months since the King left Vostan. He left here to vanquish the rebellious princes, but because he failed, he withdrew to

Gakavaberd waiting for his princes. None of them budged from his place, none of them remembered his King. It seemed to me that if one of us volunteered the role of mediator to exhort the princes, surely they would have rallied to their King. So, *Sepuh* Vahram and I volunteered for this mission. We traveled a long way, the whole of

Shirak, Aghdznik, Vaspurakan and the land of Mok. We called on all the princes, begging them, importuning them to unite and defend the King and the country; but none of them listened to us; none of them accepted our proposition. Each prince, with his troops and supplies is strongly entrenched in an impregnable castle; each one feels secure in his place. No one gives any thought to the defenseless people, the vacant throne, and the fugitive King. Even the Catholicos thinks only of his safety and runs from castle to castle. He no longer cares about the public welfare. The result of all this is that the Emir has occupied the capital and Beshir has been ravaging Ayrivank and Byurakan, has been massacring the people and the clergy, and is likely to extend the range of his devastations.

“Seeing all this, the King is still more discouraged and retires from Gakavaberd to Sevan. The same hero who once was the terror of the enemy, who never knuckled under any power, who never ran away from any danger has now sought refuge in the cloisters of the clergy because he no longer relies on his princes. Shame on us, Armenians, shame, O fellow soldiers!”

“What shall we do? What can we do?” spoke a few from the audience.

“What can you do? That’s a good question. Listen, and I will tell you. Our present situation is known to you all. The fatherland, the royal throne and the throne of the Catholicos are in jeopardy; you know that too. You also know that I appealed to the princes on behalf of all of you, I begged them, I begged them, but none of them would hear me. What is your verdict about these men? Shall we condemn them?”

“Yes, yes, we condemn them,” they chorused.

“Very good. Now I appeal to you, O soldiers and people of Garni. I offer you the same proposition which our princes rejected. This is my last debt to be paid. Listen to me. Garni is impregnable, as long as our supplies last the enemy can never harm us unless some traitor betrays us. Let us leave one hundred soldiers to guard Garni. That much will be enough for Commander Mushegh. The remainder of the troops and their commanders can join me and tomorrow we shall take the field. I will divide you into companies, to ravage the royal provinces, we shall meet them separately and decimate them. Before one month has passed we shall have a sizable army. The first victory will be succeeded by the second, and the third, until thousands of soldiers will rally to our banners. And our victories will inspire the King with fresh hope, he will again return to his throne, will march at the head of his soldiers, and the princes will join him. We can accomplish all this, O people of Garni. Onward then! Let us get to work.”

The Prince stopped and swept the audience with his eyes to see who would respond to his words. His audience, however, remained silent and motionless. Only two persons fixed their fiery gaze on the Prince, astonished by the abysmal silence wishing to fly to his side, as it were. One of these was young prince Gor who was standing beside the captains; and the other was Shahandukht, standing with the ladies of the court.

But it was not these two Prince Gevorg was looking for. He was waiting to hear from the old soldiers and their commanders. But when he saw that they were silent and even tried to avoid his gaze, he continued in a mild voice:

*T had not expected that here in Garni, too, I would meet cowards. Is there not one hundred among you who want to prove that they are the sons of warriors?"

"Lord Prince, what can one hundred do? Let him who can muster one thousand take the field and we all will join him," a young captain spoke up.

"He who seeks support in numbers proves that he too is a coward," the Prince barked. "No soldier, if he is a real soldier, will wait for his companion when the fatherland is in danger. He who has the strength to fight, who can strike a blow at the enemy, who can drive an arrow at his breast, but who hides himself under the protection of the walls or shrinks from the fight is a traitor. Do you want to live? Do you want to enjoy life? Good and well. Why then do you carry arms? Why do you dishonor the sword? Throw your weapons aside, pick up the cane of the beggar and go stand in front of the doors of the Emirs. They might pity you and adopt you as their slaves."

The soldiers and their commanders were astonished at these insulting words while the princely heirs scarcely could believe their ears. Until then no one had heard such offensive words from the lips of the Prince. What could have happened? Why was he so excited? They did not know. Many of them began to exchange glances, some even tried to come forward and express their displeasure, but the Prince's withering look nailed them to their places. He paused a moment, then turning to *Sepuh* Vahram he thundered: "Lord *Sepuh*, yesterday you told me that one cannot clap with one hand, nor one flower will bring the spring. These men who should have been monks but who by some error have become soldiers have confirmed your words. I want to prove to you now that you are all wrong."

Saying it, the Prince unsheathed his sword, and stepping forward, shouted:

"Behold, I shall go against the Arabs all by myself. Who is the brave among you who will dare join me? Let him come forward."

"I will join you, father," the young prince

Gor shouted, and drawing his sword came forward.

“My valiant son,” murmured the Prince proudly, and embracing his son kissed him.

“You can count on me too, Lord Marzpetuni,” seconded *Sepuh* Vahram.

“The noble *Sepuh* is worth a regiment,” the Prince replied, extending to him his hand.

“Count me in too, my Lord,” Yeznik humbly stepped forward.

“And we too,” the four guards of *Sepuh* Vahram.

A few more volunteers from the freemen of Garni and Basen raised the number to nineteen. Finally Mushegh, the commander of the Castle, took off his helmet and stepping forward addressed the Prince:

“Lord Prince, I have been waiting out of deference for those who are more worthy than I. Now I see that the number of the warriors is completed. Accept me. I pray you, as your last servant, to join this brave band which shall fight under your banner.”

“Rise to your feet, my brave and loyal Mushegh, give me your hand. Your support is precious to me because you are seasoned in battles. As long as the likes of you join our ranks God will help us to vanquish the enemies of our fatherland.”

The number of the warriors was now twenty. “You are enough for me, with you I can vanquish thousands,” the Prince said to his volunteers, and turning to *Sepuh*, he said, “Now let us go take the oath.”

“You are going the wrong way, my Lord. The Church is this way,” *Sepuh* observed.

“No, the altar of our oath is this way,” the Prince replied as he approached the tomb of Mashtots which was in the east corner of the canopy. When they were assembled the Prince pronounced the oath:

“My beloved warriors. By right this oath should have been administered by the Patriarch of the Armenians. He should have been the one to bless our swords were he not a wanderer and a fugitive for fear of his life. But he was not loyal to his calling. He was no loyal shepherd of his flock. Therefore we are not his fold. Here rest the relics of the most virtuous and devoted shepherd of them all. Place your swords on this sacred shrine and swear that you shall be faithful to your oath to fight and to die for the salvation of the fatherland. May Saint Mashtots bless your swords and may his holy relics be a witness to your oath.”

The soldiers unsheathed their swords and, placing them on the holy tomb, swore eternal loyalty to the Prince, the King and the Fatherland.

When the ceremony of the oath was over the Prince stepped forward and addressed the soldiers in following words:

“My beloved warriors, I have heard your oath, and now you shall hear mine. I swear before you, I swear in the name of the Eternal, I swear by the sun of the fatherland and this holy grave that I shall never return to the bosom of my family until I have chased the last Arab from the borders of our land. May God destroy me, may the Christian call me a Judas, and the patriot call me a Vasak if I ever forswear my oath. I will prove that the fatherland's strength does not reside in the fortresses nor the princes' power. I will prove that twenty devoted volunteers who sacrifice their lives are worth more than an army of twenty thousand. Onward then! Forward! May the God of the Armenians be our helper, and the Cross of the Armenian our keeper.”

The Prince decided that before his company took the field, they should first meet the King and receive his blessing. Accordingly, that same evening, armed and ready, the little band of volunteers left Garni and headed for Sevan where the King was in hiding.

Chapter 6 The Heaviest Weight of All

The brilliant disk of the moon emerged from behind Aytsemnasar and bathed the somber sea of Gegham in a pool of shimmering light. The eastern skirts of the waving fields slowly kindled with a dark, blood red color and the tiny, gentle sinews started to roll a myriad balls of light. The whole of Sevan was wrapped up in profound silence, motion had come to a standstill and the lights were extinguished. Tired from their countless devotionals, the monks of the monastery were deep asleep, cuddled in the dank cells. The chapels and the churches likewise seemed asleep lulled by the ripple of the waves which beat against the shores of the little lake.

On a rising hillock to the east of the island where stood the Church of the Holy Resurrection (Harutyun), amid a scattering of moss-clad crosses, a lone tall man was pacing the ground. It was difficult to tell whether he was a layman or a clergyman because he was dressed in a long flowing robe and a monk's hood. Only his tall figure and his proud prance gave indication that the man was a stranger to the monastery.

After pacing back and forth for a long time the stranger came to a stop on the tip of the promontory where the cliffs, rising from the midst of the lake, piled upon one another and forming powerful fortifications protected the island to the east and the south, making it inaccessible not only to rafts and ships but even to the swimmer.

At that moment the moon was slowly making its ascent and the dark red of the lake was gradually being transformed into an iridescent silver, slowly spreading to the remotest shores which were surrounded on one side with green fields and verdant woods. All nature was suffused with the

tranquil, mellow moonlight. Seated on the towering ledge, the stranger was watching the scene so delightful, enchanting and mysterious. It seemed to him at this moment when the whole world was peacefully asleep the evil spirits emerged from their hidden cells, or the good angels descended from heaven to dispense to some good fortune and happiness, while to others, sorrow and affliction. It seemed to him it was just such a mysterious moment that had fated him his chain of misfortunes. Presently, there flashed on the screen of his mind the whole panorama of his past memories, images of his early happiness and the mental tortures which has followed.

“How did I ever fall so low?” suddenly he exclaimed, grasping his forehead, as if trying to repel the dismal thoughts which, like dark clouds, were crowding his mind and rocking his soul. And yet his thoughts would not leave him, the torturing images lingered on. On the contrary, it was the enchanting scenery — the lake with its silvery wavelets, the mountains with their proud peaks, the moon with its soft dim rays which took flight. Even the gentle breeze which caressed the weeds and the flowers of the shore brought him no refreshment, he did not even hear the roar of the surf beating against the rocks at the base of the island, because his soul was not here in Sevan. It had taken wings and was flying far, far away, in distant provinces.

Presently he heard some soft footsteps a few feet away. It seemed some mysterious power emanating from the stranger newcomer shook his soul. He who had heard nothing suddenly woke up and, raising his head, saw the woman approaching him, covered in a veil.

“Who is it?” He suddenly recognized the newcomer and flew up from his seat.

“Queen, is it you?” he asked in a gentle voice.

“Yes, my beloved King,” the latter murmured.

“Here, all alone, in this hour of the night?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Isn’t King Ashot with me?”

“But how did you come as far as here? Where are your maids?”

“I wanted to come here alone. I wanted to see you by all means. I went to your rooms, your bedchamber but could not find you. Your door keepers told me you come here every night and spend a few hours relaxing. I did not know it”

“Oh yes. It’s beautiful here at night. But why is it that you wanted to see me so urgently? Have you by any chance brought me some news?”

“No, I have no news.”

“Then why did you come?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to talk to you for a few moments.”

“I don’t understand. You see me every hour in the daytime, you can speak to me any moment. Why should you disturb your comfort at night to come and see me?”

“My comfort and rest? Do you think I have any rest? Do you think I can have any rest?”

“Queen!”

“I have long since lost the hours of my rest.”

“In our land no one has any rest these days.”

“That’s true. But once the enemy is expelled from the land all will recover their rest.”

“And you with them.”

“Me? How I wish that were true.”

“Are you afraid of future attacks? No danger threatens you even now. Sevan is impregnable and inaccessible.”

“The enemy has seized my fortifications long since. My peace and rest are lost forever.”

“What are you talking about? Are you opening up the old wounds again?”

“O let me speak to you this once. Let me open my heart to you. Let me weep boldly before you.”

“Queen, you are excited. You need rest.”

“Permit me, I beg of you, let me be excited and suffer. I can find rest only in my suffering.”

“But what has happened? Has someone hurt you anew?”

“A new hurt? Oh no. It is the old hurt which keeps languishing, torturing my heart, and alas, there is no hand that will apply the salve to my wound. I am forsaken. I am all alone in this world, all alone. Oh, you don’t know how heavy this is, how hard it is to be lonely.”

Saying it the Queen burst into tears.

“What’s this, Queen? You are crying. That’s childish. What will people say when they hear it? Come now. Be brave. I will lead you to your rooms. You must rest.”

“Let me stay here, and you, my beloved King, don’t leave me. Stay with your Queen, your misfortunate spouse for at least one hour. She wants to speak with you. Do not deny her this trifling request.”

“My dear Sahanush.”

“Did you say ‘My dear Sahanush?’ My God! Did you call me by that name? Are my ears playing tricks on me? You said ‘dear’, did you not? Oh how I am thrilled by that trivial, that poor word, that crumb of love. Why, Oh why has God made us so weak? And you, of course you are pitying me. Isn’t that right? Tell me. Don’t hide it from me. You are pitying me as if I were a beggar. Oh if only you knew how heavy that is for me, how infinitely insufferable!”

“And yet, dear Queen, you are exciting yourself. You may hurt yourself that way. Come, let us go from here.”

“Oh no. I cannot leave here now. I cannot leave my dear Ashot. Oh forgive me, let me call you by that name. I am all right now. I can speak calmly now. I am no longer excited. Only give me your hand and promise me that you will listen to me patiently.”

The King extended his hand to her without saying a word. The Queen seized it and pressed it with trembling hands. Then she continued:

“Thank you. Do you see how easily I am satisfied? After losing the heart of my peerless hero, my august King, I am happy that I am permitted to grasp his cold, unresponsive hand. I can tell you this much. It is I, the proud Sahakanush who is making this confession to her King. Oh why did I fall so low?”

The Queen again started to sob, and unable to restrain herself longer, she opened her arms and clung to the King.

“Sahanush, dear Sahanush,” the King pressed her to his breast.

“Pray that I shall die at this moment. I want to die in your arms. This is my only wish,” the Queen murmured, choking with tears.

Deeply moved by the Queen’s sobbing and tears the King hesitated, not knowing how to comfort the hapless woman. He pressed her more tenderly to his breast, feeling, as it were, that this was the only means of calming her. After a long pause, the King finally broke the silence: “Why did you get so excited, my dear?”

Although the King spoke very tenderly, almost in a whisper, nevertheless his words sounded crude to the Queen’s ears who suddenly disengaged herself from his embrace.

“You ask me why I am so disturbed. Don’t you know why? Have not my tears told you everything?”

The King said nothing for fear of agitating her further. He walked to the ledge, sat down on a boulder and began to gaze at the shore.

“Don’t you want to listen to me anymore?” the Queen asked in a broken voice.

“Speak, my dear, whatever you like, but don’t remind me of the past.”

“I will not remind you of anything,” the Queen hastened to reassure, as if content with the King’s request in which she saw an admission of his guilt. She sat down beside him on the rock.

“It is some months now, dear King, that I have the courage to speak openly. I only beg of you not to interrupt me even if what I say is unpleasant to you.”

“Speak, I am listening.”

“While in Garni I thought I was reconciled to my fate, therefore I decided to forget my personal plight and to dedicate myself to the common cause. The only way I could accomplish this was to join you, to comfort you in the face of your misfortunes, the desertion of your princes, and to urge you to return to Vostan, your throne and the court. After that it would be easy to resume the broken thread. The people and the troops awaited you. You could take advantage of their assistance.

“Animated by these thoughts I came to Gakavaberd, but your cold reception of me grieved me. You thought I had come over to taunt you for your defeat by Tslik Amram, and your suspicion of me was enough to upset me and renew my old wounds. Your cold indifference toward me intensified the fire of jealousy which was raging in my heart. So, I wanted to impress you by deliberately hurting you. I told the people that the whole world knew about your guilty love affair, how the people and the army have risen against you, how the princely families have turned their faces from you, and how the clergy has condemned your conduct. I thought I could bring you to your senses by these disclosures, but, alas, I was badly mistaken. I confess that I acted like a feeble woman, one who is dictated by love. I could not bear your chilling indifference and forgot my vow and my original aim which kept ruthlessly gnawing at my heart. The result of all this was that, instead of returning to Vostan, you left Gakavaberd and came to Sevan in despair.

“I recognized my error, saw the result of my thoughtless behavior, and was badly sorry, but it was already too late. The only way I could atone for my sin was to follow you, to endure your cold indifference, and to suffer. Oh, how many times I wanted to come to you, speak with you, confess my error and beg your forgiveness! And yet you always avoided me, would not meet me alone to hear my voice and to see my tears. Oh, if only you knew how much I have suffered. Months passed and yet I could not find a moment to be with you alone. But when the messenger brought the news of the capture and the massacre of Byurakan I became frightened as if struck by a heavenly lightning,

remembered my vow, and remembered my error. If it were not for my insane jealousy, I thought, Ashot would be seated on his throne now surrounded by his soldiers, the princes would rally around him, and he would take the field against the enemy. I was so distraught I was almost ready to drown myself in the lake. But I thought better of it, decided to see you alone and make a clean breast of it. This is how I came here tonight to disturb your solitude. Perhaps you are displeased with my persistency, but I had to do it because danger is close and further delay would be disastrous “

“What do you want of me?” the King asked.

“That you return to Vostan, sit on your throne, restore the luster of the court, rally the princes, organize the army, meet the enemy in the open field and save the land from the present crisis.”

“In short, you want Ashot *Yerkat* to be king again “

“Yes, just as before “

“Your wish is good, but I cannot carry it out.”

“Why?”

“The reasons are many.”

“Tell me those reasons if you think I still don’t know them.”

The King did not reply. He was pensive, ' gazing at the lake.

“Is it possible that those reasons are stronger than Ashot *Yerkat's* will?” the Queen prodded, wishing to appeal to his pride.

“The will of Ashot *Yerkat*? How ironic! The will of Ashot *Yerkat* is now like the reed which sways in the breeze.”

“Why do you drive me to desperation, my Lord, my King?” the Queen murmured, deeply moved.

“God forbid that I should cause you to despair. I am telling you the truth.”

“But there was a time when you were strong like the lion of the jungle.”

“Whose roar was the terror of the wild beasts,” the King finished the sentence.

“Yes.”

“And yet even the lion gets weak and dies.”

“Of course. But that happens when he is ripe with age.”

“But when the hunter's arrow pierces his heart?”

“Who is the invincible hunter who could give you such a blow?” The Queen's question was cryptic.

The King smiled sadly, merely moving his lips.

“Don't you want to speak?” The Queen was persistent.

“I do not want to hurt your heart,” the King replied, gazing at the lake.

“My God!” exclaimed the Queen. “Are you still thinking about my heart? That really is too much. I will go mad from joy.”

“Ah, yes indeed. There are truths which, no matter how bitter, nevertheless a man can hear and bear it patiently, but which no woman's ear can endure.”

“Go ahead. Test my courage.”

“Very well, Hear me then.” The King faced the Queen and continued. “A little while ago you asked me who is the hunter who pierced the lion's heart so mortally. I will tell you who it is. (The Queen was listening tensely). That invincible hunter was the love of a woman.”

“What woman?” the Queen suddenly interrupted.

“You see? You already have lost your courage,” the King observed.

“Keep on, I won't interrupt you anymore.”

“We mortals, dear friend, are pitiful playthings in the hands of mighty nature,” the King went on. “In vain men pass laws and ordain rules of conduct in order to control that which only nature can control. I am talking about the human heart. You love me, don't you?”

“Why do you ask that question?”

“Answer me. Do you love me, or not?”

“I love you boundlessly.”

“Good. Now tell me, what can human laws avail against a love like that? Can they order you to cease loving me?”

“The laws, on the contrary, consecrate my love, because I love my lawful husband.”

“That is a mere accident. What if you suddenly should love someone else?”

“Christian virtue, which I have always followed, would not permit me to think of an illicit love. And when a person does not think about a lawless deed he can never commit that lawlessness.”

“To define a limit for thinking also is impossible. What can the heart avail when nature dictates it to love someone who does not lawfully belong to him?”

“That is the same as saying: What can the thieves and bandits do when their hearts dictate them to steal and rob that which does not belong to them?”

“Can you justify the robber when your despoiled subject drags him before your justice?”

These words pierced the King’s heart because the blow was aimed directly at the sore spot. He was silent for a few moments.

“Have you anything else to say?” the Queen gently asked.

“How not? I have plenty to say.”

“Speak up then.”

“Listen. Should the judge be biased or unbiased?”

“He should be unbiased, of course.”

“Should the thief be punished or rewarded?”

“He should be punished, of course.”

“Why then do you wish to reward him when the impartial judge wants to punish him?”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand? But I have spoken plainly.”

“Who is the thief and who is the judge? For whom are you demanding a reward?” the Queen asked.

“I am that thief, and I myself, as the judge, have punished myself by renouncing the throne and seeking refuge in this wilderness. Why do you want to take me out of here and return me to Vostan?”

“You are exaggerating.”

“Exaggerating? Never.”

“You are exaggerating, my beloved King.”

“Don’t call me either beloved or King. I am a criminal cursed by God and men; why do you keep on loving me? Why do you think of restoring my glory?”

“I will love you always. Can you command me to forget my husband?”

“Your husband? Oh, do not torture me. I cannot bear that insult.”

“Do you think being loved by me is an insult?”

“No, Illustrious Queen. The insult lies in the fact that you should requite my disloyalty with such a boundless love. I am a proud man. I cannot bear the good which is being accorded me for the evil I have done.”

“I have never received any evil from you.”

“Such words cannot comfort me. I am not such a coward as not to bear the punishment commensurate with my crime. If you really wish to allay my pain, then hate me with all your might. Only your hatred, only the severity of the suffering can bring relief to my heart.”

“I cannot hate you.”

“Hate me, because I do not love you.”

“Oh, don’t say that.”

“I cannot lie to you. I do not love you.”

“You are cruel.”

“The only woman in the world I love...”

“Oh please, do not give her name,” the Queen almost shrieked.

“Yes, the only woman I love is Princess Aspram, the daughter of the Patriarch of Sevordik.”

“You heartless ... you cruel ... Have you no pity for a forsaken woman? Was I not once your wife?”

“I want to cut up your heart, I want to engender an infernal hatred in you. That alone can soften my anguish.”

“Never hope for it. I can never hate you. Do not torture your soul in vain. Tell me only what is your heaviest affliction and I will find a way to lighten it.”

“So much the worse.”

“Don’t be stubborn, my beloved King. Each ailment has its cure, and each affliction its remedy. All that is needed is a healing hand and a loving heart.”

“Who, for example, can heal the soul which writhes from the pangs of conscience? Who can comfort the man who realizes the magnitude of his crime and yet is helpless to redress that crime?”

“All men are fallible in this world.”

“And all men can be forgiven.”

“Therefore, you too can be forgiven.”

“Do not interrupt me. All can be forgiven except those who are called upon to direct the destinies of men, who are called upon to be the shepherd of the flock, to be an example of virtue, to watch over the welfare and the happiness of the people. I was a man of such responsibility. God ordained me as the head and the leader of this people. Was I true to my calling? Did I not scorn my sacred duty? Was I not the cause of countless evil? Who can forgive me? Why should I be forgiven?”

“You can gain nothing by remembering the past,” the Queen interrupted. “Forget the past and try to improve the present.”

“How can I forget the past?” the King exclaimed. “I would rob the stars of heaven to reward the man who could make me forget my past, the man who could find a way of blunting my memory. To forget? Yes, I want to; that is my only wish and desire. But who can convert that desire into reality? Oh, how happy I would be if I could only forget what is done. The memory of which gnaws at my heart like a devouring serpent and tortures my conscience. Can I forget that I ruined the home of Sevada, my good father-in-law, by blinding the father and the son at the same time? Can I forget how I ruined the home of Amram, my faithful ally, by converting his peaceful abode into hell? Can I forget that I poisoned your life, spuming your tender love, destroying your happiness? How many of these can I refuse to recollect? How many can I forget? Or perhaps forget that, by my evil conduct alienated my princes and destroyed their unity, or that, by inciting Amram’s rebellion I lost the northern provinces, or, lastly, that by weakening my military forces I enabled the Arab to entrench himself in the heart of my country? Tell me, my beloved, how many of these shall I forget? How many of them shall I refuse to remember? How can I forget that all these came about because of my guilty love, my single departure from the path of virtue? No, I am not worthy of forgiveness. Don’t try to make me forget my sinful past. I am a Christian, I have a conscience, and that conscience is torturing me. Its voice is dinning the voice which my soul should hear. It commands me to run away from the royal throne, from its glory and splendor, and to retire into the wilderness, to weep alone and to atone for my sins. And now I am here, in Sevan, my purgatory. In vain you think I left Gakavaberd because you, embittered by my indifference, divulged to the world that the people, the princes and the clergy have deserted me because of my guilty love. I ran away from Gakavaberd because despair chased me out. As to my heart, my conscience? If my conscience were easy, if my deeds were righteous, not even the might of the whole world could have vanquished my soul. But this thing we call conscience, I could not fight against it. It was too much for me. On top of this, I

could not stand your accusing eyes, your sad, grief-stricken face, your disconsolate soul. I was running away from you, yes, not because I hated you, but because every time I saw you my heart was shattered. My shame and my conscience persecuted me. Finally I came here to hide my grief and to weep over my crimes. I thought this would make you leave me and you would go to Vostan where you still have many faithful followers. But you disappointed me. You followed me like a faithful spouse and you proved for the hundredth time that I was not worthy of your love, that fate had in vain tied us together. Realizing all this, dear Lady, it is impossible for me to reenter the world from which my conscience chased me out. Leave me in my purgatory. Perhaps I may be able to atone for my sins, perhaps I may be able to save my semi from hell.”

“Don’t you think God would be more pleased if you atoned for your sins by doing good unto others?” the Queen asked.

“How not? That would be more pleasing to Him, because it is better to do good than to shed futile tears.”

“Well then, return to your throne, take the helm of the government and save your people from the imminent dangers.”

“I must do that as King, is it not so?”

“Of course.”

“But I no longer consider myself worthy of the throne of Ashot the First and virtuous Smbat. Sevan is my worthy place. Here I shall live and here I shall die.”

“And the royal throne?”

“Let Abas be king, he is my legal heir.” These words struck the Queen like a bolt. It was the first time she had heard anything like it. True, she often had pondered over the loss of her love but she had never given any thought to losing her queenship. If Abas became king then Gurgendukht would be queen, and proud Sahakanush would be reduced to the stature of a common subject, confined in the seclusion of Sevan. She would be the slave of the daughter of Abkhaz, to watch from a distance the homage and the adoration which the subjects showered on the new queen.

This was too much for the proud daughter of Sevada. Caught in the clutches of woman’s ambition on the one hand, and the vanity of the rival on the other, she even forgot her personal affliction, the sense of humiliation subordinated the intense love in her, with typical woman’s perspicacity she at once weighed the abysmal rift between her internal grief and the external humiliation, and was convinced that it was better to endure all manner of suffering inwardly than to submit to open degradation.

“No, my Illustrious King, you shall never go through with this decision. You shall not remain in Sevan. The people and the throne are waiting for you. You shall return to Vostan,” the Queen said with positive finality.

“That is impossible. To do that I must first wrench my heart from my breast, and my brain from my head. With this heart and mind, I can never ascend the throne.”

“No. You will take pity on your people which just now is like a flock without a shepherd, scattered in the four corners of the wilderness, persecuted on all sides by wolves. The mewling of the mothers and the lambs resounds in the valleys.”

“Abas will gather that flock. He will be a better shepherd than I am.”

“Don’t say it, please. Don’t give the name of Abas. The King of the Armenians is still alive.”

“No. He has been dead long since. He died the day when he shamelessly ran away from Tslik Amram.”

“Don’t say those words. Don’t remember the past, I beseech you.” The Queen grasped the King’s hand and looking in his eyes which were staring at the moon, softly murmured: “Ashot, my Illustrious King, my beloved spouse, I beseech you. Don’t let the daughter of Abkhaz mock the pride of your Sahakanush. Let the Queen of the Armenians die like a queen.”

“Ah, how little you know of my anguish!” the King moaned, turning his face to the lake.

“Speak. If you have other troubles, open your heart to me.”

The King was silent. He kept staring at the lake. And indeed, how could he answer? How could he unveil his heart? How could he unfold the heaviest pang of all which lay hidden behind that veil? Could he confess that he still was thinking of the Princess of Sevada, the hapless victim of his illicit love; that he was familiar with her family misfortune; that each moment he could hear the curse of her weeping heart, her heart-wringing sobs? How could he return to his former throne, resume the life of luxury, glory and success, with her mournful sobbing ringing in his ears each moment. How could he watch her tears and yet say to himself: “The whole world is singing my praises, my return is being crowned with frantic acclamation, there is exultation all around me, joy and dancing, and yonder, in the mountains of Sevordik, in the dark recesses of Tavush, there is a shattered heart, forsaken and alone, cut off from world, whose only companion is her humiliation and disgrace. What right have I to return to a life of glory, to enjoy the benefits of life while the woman who has given her all to me lives in oblivion?”

These thoughts which had been torturing the King for a long time, so shook him at the moment that, forgetting himself, he exclaimed: “No. It is impossible. I cannot live when she dies.

“Who are you talking about? Who is dying?” the Queen asked bewildered.

The King was shaken. Rising to his feet he extended his hand to the Queen. “Let’s go, the moon is sinking,” he said imperiously.

“But who were you talking about?” the Queen repeated the question.

“About the one who dies in obscurity,” the King said abruptly as he led the way.

The Queen followed him, no longer daring to speak.

Chapter 7 One Flower Brings the Spring

It was the noon hour. The fishermen of Tsamagkaber (fort on the mainland) had cast their nets into Lake Gegham when Gevorg Marzpetuni’s company of riders arrived at the place. The fishermen were doing their fishing around the shores without the use of fishing boats or rafts, because the King who at the time was on the island, as a measure of precaution against surprise attack, had issued strict orders against their use. On the other hand, the fishermen were reluctant to launch their boats for fear of incurring the King’s displeasure. Finally, the Prince asked to signal the island to launch some rafts to transport his riders.

The fishermen built a huge bonfire by which signal the islanders immediately understood what was wanted. Thereupon, two men in black descended from the island castle’s walls and launched one of the rafts into the water. Meanwhile the fishermen regaled the Prince’s company with the delicious, freshly-caught fish from the lake for breakfast.

The midday liturgy on the island was just over when the Prince and his riders arrived. The King was amazed seeing Prince Marzpetuni before him. “Have you come here to share the hermitage of your king?” he asked with a smile.

“No, Lord King. This is the time to commit crimes and not to repent,” the Prince replied.

“What is this? You mean to tell me there is a definite time for committing crimes?”

“Yes, Lord King. One of the Ten Commandments says ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ the time has come to violate that commandment; we shall kill all the time.”

“I trust you will not make me a sharer in your crimes.”

“If the King would lead my troops I would feel twenty years younger.”

“Your troops? Have you an army?” the King asked surprised.

“Yes, your Majesty, I have.”

“Where is this your army?”

“Right here in Sevan.”

“In Sevan?” The King could hardly believe his ears. The Queen who was present at the conversation, interrupted: “I was watching from my watchtower when the raft approached the island. I only saw a small company with you, scarcely twenty. When did the rest of the army get in?”

“My army consists of these twenty souls. I could not rally more,” the Prince replied.

“Are you ill, Prince Marzpetuni?” the King asked, looking at him intently.

“Perhaps you think I have gone mad,” the Prince smiled back serenely.

“You are quite right,” the King rejoined seriously. “You say your army consists of twenty, and at the same time you want your King to lead such an army. Is this a joke or irony?”

“Far be it from me, my Lord, that I should dare to be so impertinent,” the Prince was deeply moved.

“What is this army then in whose name you speak?”

“Just those twenty which I have mentioned. They are my entire army.”

The King and the Queen looked at each other in great amazement, as if wishing to ask each other if this man had not gone mad.

“You have a right to call me a madman. In these days of crisis, when the mighty princes with thousands of their troops are locked up in their forts, it is madness, of course, to take the field against the enemy with twenty men. But I am doing it to confound those princes who speak in the name of the Armenians, who pride themselves in their tribes, but when the fatherland is in a crisis, they don’t lift a finger to help her. I am doing it to put the stigma of shame on their foreheads once and forever.”

“You might be able to do that if you vanquish the enemy. But what can twenty men do against such a formidable enemy?”

“Each of my twenty is good for one hundred Arabs. If we can’t give battle to armies, at least we can whittle down their power, we can always confuse their ranks.”

“You can do very little for your fatherland by such methods.”

“Every noble enterprise has but a small beginning.”

“Then you really hope that you will eventually triumph?”

“One of the two. Either I will come out victorious, or I shall perish with my small company. I cannot sit still in my castle and save my skin at a time when the King, having abandoned his throne, is a hermit in Sevan; when the Catholicos has lost his throne and has become a wanderer; when the people are perishing by the thousands at the hands of the enemy. If my brothers are dying, why should I keep on living? Only to mourn their loss? Such a behavior might do for womenfolk but never for a man like me whose arm still can wield a sword.”

The King was staring at the Prince who was speaking as the embodiment of patriotism. His heart was so stirred that he wanted to embrace and kiss that brave. He wanted to say to him: “How happy you are, Prince Gevorg, to be able to fight for the fatherland as a common soldier while I am deprived of even that much consolation.”

But the King suppressed his emotion. “Why then did you come to Sevan?” he asked simply.

“I came to obtain my King’s command and blessing before I started on my campaign.”

“My brave and loyal Prince! You are so modest that you would not even enjoy the glory which is your due without your King’s approval. You have proved yourself a worthy companion-in-arms of mine, but I, alas, am your unworthy King.”

“Don’t say it, my Lord King. Fate might chain the lion in a cage, but it can never shackle his heart and strength.”

“My brave noble Prince, you don’t realize that they have forged the cage.”

The King wanted to say more. He wanted to say his cage had been forged by such hands which if the Prince shattered, he would grieve his King eternally. But he never finished the sentence and abruptly stood up.

“Where are your warriors? Let us go meet them. It is I who should go to their feet. Those heroes are worthy of the honor.” Saying it, the King led the way while the Prince followed him. The King’s gatekeeper took a short cut and hastened to advise the Prince’s company of the King’s coming.

At the command of *Sepuh* Vahram the company came out of their cells and, in full armor, stood at attention on the flat plain of the arborescent island. The King, accompanied by the Prince, was coming from the hillside. When they reached the Church of St. Astvatsatsin and headed for the plain, the soldiers of the Covenant shouted in unison: “Long live the King.”

The soldiers’ salute moved the King deeply. It was such a long time since he had heard such an ovation that he had almost forgotten that he was the King of the Armenians, the chief of the princes of Armenia. And to think that there still were loyal men in the land whom he could command. His life of hermitage on the island, his association with the monks, his constant presence at their services, the quiet peaceful life of the island, together with his insupportable grief, had obliterated all

memories and had killed all vitality in him. It seemed to him all the world was asleep like Sevan, that there was no life anywhere, and that death had spread its wings over all Armenia.

But the shout of the soldiers of the Covenant seemed to arouse him from his stupor for a moment, a delicious and lifegiving tremor shook his body, and his heart and soul were filled with an ecstatic feeling, reminiscent of his royal breeding.

The King had some hundred guards on the island, all elite and skilled in arms, all valiant and fearless, but these too, having been accustomed to a life of worship like their King, had cast aside their armor and had lost a considerable amount of their military ardor. The King had Watched them each day seated in their cells, or wandering in the island with their fishing nets in their hands, and he had become reconciled with their new life. But when he saw the Prince's volunteers, so resolute and determined to face all obstacles, he was infected by their spirit and accelerating his steps he joined the soldiers.

"God bless you, my warriors!" And the company responded in unison:

"Long live the King."

Sepuh Vahram stepped forward, and removing his helmet, bowed low to the King. The latter extended his right hand and greeted him warmly. Then followed Mushegh, the Commander of the fort, whom likewise the King received with pleasant words. Thus, the King had a kind word to each soldier. After the interview, the King offered the Prince the services of half of his guard on the island but the Prince declined the offer, reluctant to weaken the King's guard.

"In case of a peril we can escape," the Prince said. "But the King has no place to escape from this island. We cannot afford to take away even a single soldier from this place."

The King praised the Prince's precaution, then turning to him and to *Sepuh* Vahram, he added: "My princes have deserted me, they have left me alone and shame-faced. This is the reason why I came to Sevan voluntarily. If you succeed in your venture and efface the stain on our banner which the perfidy of our princes has planted there, then I will come out of my seclusion and will crown your effort with success. From this day I deliver my banner to your company. Let it serve as an inspiration to your warriors and as a constant reminder that their King is a prisoner in Sevan."

Saying it, the King commanded his guards to produce the royal banner. There was a profound silence in the company. The soldiers of the covenant eagerly awaited the return of the guards. When the banner finally appeared, they all removed their helmets and shouted in unison: "Long live the King!"

The King took the banner, and handing it to Marzpetuni, said, "With this banner I authorize you to move and act freely everywhere in my name. This flag will serve you in my stead, as your leader and companion-in-arms."

The same day the soldiers of the covenant were entertained by the King and the Queen. The next day the company departed with the blessing of both the King and the Queen.

Having arrived at Tsamakaberd, the soldiers of the company mounted their horses and headed for the Plain of Ararat. Their aim was to meet Beshir's marauders who, divided into companies, were ravaging and looting the defenseless villages and towns. The capture of Byurakan and its ruthless massacre had sharpened the appetite of the barbarians who advanced freely, without fear of the Armenian princes, because they were sure the princes would not emerge from their castles to defend the life and the property of the peasants.

And now, Prince Marzpetuni wanted to meet these very marauders, hoping that, by isolating them, he could destroy them by companies. His mounted company scarcely had crossed the River Hrazdan when they came across a multitude of refugees who had vacated the Fort of Gegh because they had heard that Beshir, the Arab Commander, was about to attack it. It was with great difficulty that the Prince succeeded in persuading the refugees to return to the fort, promising them that he would personally take charge of their defense.

Determined to stick around the Fort of Gegh, the Prince and the *Sepuh* headed their company toward Urtsadzor and finally ascended a mountain slope covered with a thick forest. Here they found a good hiding place shaded by trees and camped for the night. Some of the soldiers who had come out of the thickets in search of food and water, spotted on the opposing slopes a large number of tents. This was the Arab camp. The scouts immediately returned and reported their discovery.

"Their objective must be the capture of Gegh," the *Sepuh* surmised.

"No doubt about it," replied Marzpetuni.

"What do you propose to do now?"

"Don't you know?"

"I know. We will stop it, but..

"Exactly. Now let us enjoy our dinner and start to work," the Prince said with an air of satisfaction as he sat down on the grass. It was a simple table and a simple repast. They all sat around the table without any distinction of rank. There was no longer any prince or servant among them. Were they not all brothers, the soldiers of the same banner and the same cross? Their food consisted of some fish from Lake Sevan, a few chunks of boiled meat and some of the choice cheese of Gegharkunik.

During the meal no one spoke, not because they were intent on satisfying their hunger but because they all were thinking of the task on hand — a most daring and risky venture.

After the repast Prince Gevorg rose to his feet and addressed his soldiers: “My warriors, God has delivered the enemy into our hands and we shall make the most of our opportunity. In the morning, before dawn, we shall attack the enemy. That is settled. You may lie down now and rest. You shall need your energy for tomorrow. *Sepuh* Vahram and I will scout the enemy positions, then we will ascend the fort of Gegh to enlist the aid of the inmates.

The plain where the enemy army was encamped was surrounded by three slopes: the heights of Gegh on the north, the slope where the soldiers of the Covenant were encamped to the west, the towering hills to the east, while the south opened to the Plain of Vedi where the river of the same name meandered.

“If we attack from this side,” the Prince said pointing to the north, “we can force the enemy to flee to the south. All we have to do is to surprise him. Therefore, we must do everything to confuse and confound the enemy, to prevent him from reforming his broken ranks, and to prevent him from a frontal attack, because even his slightest resistance may frustrate our task.”

“The main thing is to get hold of some torches. Once we set fire to a few tents they will be panicky,” the *Sepuh* suggested. “But that is the peasants’ job. The soldiers must be restricted to the attack.”

After completing the scouting, the Prince and the *Sepuh* returned to the soldiers who by this time were deep asleep.

The plan of battle was as follows. The Prince was to rally the men of Kegh while the *Sepuh* was to try to enlist the men of Vedi, a little town to the south, and if he failed here he would try the same with the men of Jermanis. These recruits were not intended as fighting soldiers but rather a noise-making mob to terrorize the enemy in the night. Near the stream of Jighin the two separated.

Having arrived at the Castle of Gegh, the prince picked up a heavy rock and pounded on the iron gate. “Open the gate, this is no time to sleep, you fools! The enemy is at your gates.” As the gate-keeper opened the gate, the Prince commanded him to sound the bugle and rouse the people of the castle. In half an hour the entire populace of the castle was in the courtyard, with the exception of the women and the children. Many of them were even armed with swords and javelins. These were joined by the guards of the castle. The Prince ordered them to light some torches so they could see each other. Then, rising on the crest of a rock he addressed the crowd:

“Today I returned here with a large company of fugitives. They must have told you that we have come here at the King’s command whose army is encamped in the plain of Vedi. Thinking the enemy was not so close, we separated from the main force (the Prince deliberately lied in order to brace up their courage), but since the enemy will attack you tomorrow, I decided to confound his camp this very night with my company. I intend to take the enemy by surprise and you all are going to help me in this operation, being sure that victory shall be ours. I ask neither fighters nor arms of you. All I ask

is that you follow me, stand on the hills which surround the plain of Vedi and join your shouts to those of my soldiers when I order the attack. If there are a few warriors among you who want to merit the King's and the Queen's gratitude, they may take the risk of setting fire to the enemy tents. Once the enemy hears our shouts and sees the fires he will flee in panic. That will be the signal for the attack. My soldiers will do the massacring while you shall have the loot “

The Prince's words impressed the people. Immediately they organized themselves into companies, those who were without fighting arms procured their weapons, many of the guards rustled up a supply of torches, and some of them assembled clay utensils and bagpipes filled with inflammable pitch. Some of the men armed themselves with spades and pickaxes, and thus equipped, silently they came out of the fort and followed the hoofbeats of the Prince's steed.

The first condition was to proceed without noise, something which the party observed with utmost caution. As to the Prince, he took his time, thinking he surely would make the rendezvous before the *Sepuh's* arrival. But when he arrived, he saw that the Sebouh already was there, together with a great force of auxiliaries which he had assembled from Vedi and Germanis.

They immediately started to make their dispositions for the coming battle. The crowd was divided into three companies, each assigned to a slope overlooking the valley. The torch-bearing guards furtively worked their way toward the tents. Marzpetuni was to give the signal for the attack while the *Sepuh* was to set the first fire. This would be followed by a great tumultuous shout, joined in by the three companies. The slaughter would be started by the soldiers of the Covenant, always giving the enemy an avenue of escape.

It was late in the night, the morning star had already risen, and the dusk of the east was fast giving way to the light. The Arab camp was deep asleep, the fires had been extinguished long since and all motion had come to a standstill. One could not hear even the footfall of the guards. Apparently, they had no fear of the Armenians, and indeed, who could have dared disturb the peace of a thousand men? Even the guards of Beshir's tent were snoring sweetly, no doubt dreaming of the loot of tomorrow.

Suddenly, the vast valley resounded with the echo of Marzpetuni's voice: "Forward, my warriors! God is our helper!"

"Long live the King!" shouted the soldiers of the Covenant as they launched the attack.

On the hill and the surrounding slopes the crowd took up the shout, the echo of which filled the valley. The torches started the conflagration of the tents. The terror-stricken Arabs flew out of their tents in utter confusion and panic while the soldiers of the Covenant started the slaughter. Presently, the light of the burning tents illuminated the surrounding hills, bringing into sharp relief the auxiliary crowd who, with their shouts and gesticulations, looked like a huge army descending from

the heights. Thinking they were surrounded on all sides, the Arabs began to rush pell mell into the plain of Vedi, jostling, trampling on one another, every man for himself. The horsemen fled on their horses; the footmen on their feet; and although all of them had bared their swords, none of them wielded it, nor struck a blow, but protecting their heads with their shields, they all were scurrying around for a getaway.

Beshir flew out of his tent in a rage of fury, mounted his horse, shouted orders and was trying to reform his broken ranks but no one would listen to him. In the confusion of the fire and the darkness no one could distinguish the Arab from the Armenian. It seemed to Beshir that his army was being constricted in the coils of a huge power. He nearly lost his life in the ensuing struggle but finally managed to seize one of his guard's horse and thus made his escape.

After Beshir's flight his army was completely demoralized and all resistance ceased. Each man was intent now on saving his life. Seeing the panic, the mob on the hills raised a huge cry and started to give chase to the fleeing enemy. Those who had escaped the sword of the soldiers fell victim to their spades and axes.

It was an uncontested and complete victory for the Armenians. Toward morning the pursuers returned to the camp and were surprised to see that the whole plain was covered with corpses. They could hardly believe the extent of the slaughter.

The Prince's first task was to reassemble his soldiers in order to check his losses in this unequal fight. He counted them one by one and was grieved to see that three were missing. Nevertheless, the victory was so great and conclusive that the loss of the three warriors caused no serious grief. The dead heroes were given a fitting burial, after which the Prince ordered the crowd to gather the loot.

While the mob was busy gathering the loot, the Prince turned to the *Sepuh*. "Do you remember, Vahram, what you told me at the Castle of Garni?"

"What did I say?" the *Sepuh* asked.

"You said that one flower will not bring the spring."

"Yes, I remember."

"Now tell me, did we bring the spring with one flower or not?"

"Blessed is God, the spring has come," the *Sepuh* replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Chapter 8 Battle on the Water

After his victory Prince Marzpetuni set to work to consolidate his position. He was certain that Beshir would not rest until he had avenged his humiliating defeat, therefore, without losing time, he started to make preparations not only against future attacks, but himself to take the offensive. After dividing his loot equally between his soldiers and the people, he withdrew to the Fort of Gegh in order to organize his forces.

The adage of nothing succeeds like success rallied many new recruits to the Prince's banners. All the guards of the Fort of Gegh, the peasants of Vedi and Germanis who could bear arms, the fugitives of Urtsadzor came to Gegh in companies and enlisted under his banner. Additional aid came from the defenders of the Fort of Garni. Thus, altogether, the Prince had about five hundred trained and well-equipped troops who could take the field.

But Beshir had no intention of meeting the Prince in open battle. He was so infuriated by his shameful defeat that meeting and dispersing Marzpetuni's "bandits" could no longer satisfy his insulted vanity. He had decided to direct his attack against the Island of Sevan, to capture the fort and its defenders, including the King. Only such a feat could wipe off the stigma of his defeat.

At this time, Nusr the Emir had marched to Azerbaijan to quell an insurrection of the Capavonians. He had appointed Beshir as his lieutenant governor in Dvin, a circumstance which infuriated him all the more as he recalled his humiliating discomfiture at the hands of the Prince. Accordingly, he recalled all the Arab troops, the garrisons of the forts, and even those Arab marauders who were harassing the villagers to Dvin where he assembled such an army whose very sight would terrify the Armenian King. When his preparations were completed, he emerged by night from Dvin and headed for Sevan. And since he was still afraid of a surprise attack by the Prince, he avoided the mountains of Gegha, and taking the route of Mazaz he entered the Kotayk.

Meanwhile, Prince Marzpetuni was waiting for Beshir's return. Three days later, the Arab army reached the shores of Lake Sevan and pitched camp. But Beshir was not familiar with this terrain and when saw himself surrounded by water on all sides he was at a loss what to do next.

The Beshir's counsellors made various suggestions about landing on the island. Some suggested the construction of a flotilla of rafts, others thought they might construct a bridge by filling the space between the shore and the island with rubble and dirt, while a veteran warrior advised draining the water into the Hrazdan river. Finally, the latter advice was adopted, but to play safe, Beshir commanded the construction of a large number of rafts in case the project of draining the water failed.

Meanwhile, on the island, some of the monastery fathers had noticed the Arab encampment on the shore. This news caused consternation among the people of the island who could not figure out who the invading army might be. As far as they knew, Beshir had been defeated by the Prince. But the

King quieted their fears. "It is Beshir," he said confidently. "He has come to revenge his defeat by attacking us."

"What are we going to do now?" the Queen asked in dismay.

"Nothing," replied the King calmly. "If the Arabs try to come close to the island, we will slaughter them and we will sink their rafts."

"But with what?" the Queen asked fearfully. "All told we have one hundred troops on the island."

"We also have one hundred monks," the King rejoined. "He who eats the nation's bread must also fight for the nation."

"We are willing to fight, we are not running away from the battle, but we have no weapons," the Abbot volunteered.

"You have many weapons," the King replied. "Thank God, this island is protected on all sides by high cliffs. Second, one needs no sword nor javelin to fight against rafts. Tell your monks to build up a huge pile of rocks on the shore. I guess our holy fathers are capable of throwing rocks. When my soldiers are busy with the arrows and hooking the rafts, you can do the rest."

During this consultation a messenger came to announce that an enemy boat was making for the island. The King ordered his men to let the boat come in, meanwhile he assembled the garrison and the inmates of the monastery and arrayed them on the walls and the entrance of the island, to give the Arab messengers the illusion that the island was bristling with soldiers.

The boat was being rowed by an Armenian from the mainland. Inside were seated two Arab princes and a few guards. When they landed, they announced that they bore a message from Beshir to the Armenian King. At the King's command the messengers were led to his outer mansion, because he did not want the strangers to see the inside of the island.

"What is your message?" the King asked with a faint smile.

The messengers bowed low and replied: "Commander Beshir extends his felicitations to the Armenian King and wishes to tell him that he comes at the command, and with the flag of the Supreme Emir, to take possession of the island and to take the Armenian King a prisoner. But, insofar as Beshir at heart is a friend of the King, he proposes that the King come to his tent where the two can sign a treaty of peace and friendship, while the island must be surrendered without a fight, as an estate of the Emir. In the contrary event, the messengers added, the Commander will not spare either your person or the inhabitants of the island."

The King, although deeply wounded by this insult, controlled his emotion and replied calmly:

“The land of the Armenians is the property of the Emir. No one can deny this fact. Therefore, there is no need for fighting in order to enter the island. Its gates are open to you. As to what pertains to my person, you may tell Commander Beshir that I am deeply touched by his solicitude. Tell him I will meet him in his tent tomorrow morning. I make this delay of one day so that I may be able to meet the Commander with due dignity and honor.”

Deeply impressed by the King’s extremely humble and polite answer, since they did not penetrate his real intention, the messengers returned to the boat and headed for their camp.

When Beshir heard the King’s answer he was very pleased, thinking the King was very impressed by the magnitude of his army and purposely postponed the meeting in order to bring him a fitting gift. But the King lost no time. Immediately after the departure of the Arab emissaries, he turned to those around him and told them to make ready to attack the enemy on the morrow. Having ascertained from the superintendent of supplies that the island had twenty rafts, besides the boats for common use, he ordered them all to be taken out of storage and made ready to launch early in the morning.

Apparently, the King’s plan was a foolhardy venture. His forces were too meager to venture an encounter with Beshir’s formidable army, and the risk of giving battle from floating rafts to an army which was entrenched on solid land was a risky procedure, nevertheless the King was determined in his intention for two reasons. First, he had been deeply insulted by Beshir’s brazen demand for surrender. Secondly, psychologically he was too depressed by the consciousness of his guilt, his failure to live up to the dignity and the honor of his rank as King. He wanted to atone for his failure by rendering his people and his land one last service, hoping that, in the encounter, he might lose his life. At this moment he was so hopelessly caught in the conflict between his better nature and the sordid manner in which he had conducted his life, that he was eager to meet death as the only solution of his insupportable burden. He revealed all this in an intimate conversation with his Queen who in vain pleaded with him not to despair.

The next morning, early at dawn, the rafts were ready on the water and the soldiers were having practice with the bow and the arrow in the presence of their King. Of the entire garrison of one hundred, the King selected seventy, all bodily strong, fearless, and excellent marksmen. These he settled on ten rafts, assigning to each raft seven warriors. The rafts were to be rowed by the monks who were very adept at the art.

Next, the King selected for himself a light boat which, in addition to the rowers, would carry his select guards. As to the remainder of his troops and the monks, he ordered them to wait for his signal, all armed with lances and ready on their rafts, to advance on the enemy. This was to be a mere demonstration, to make the enemy think that new aid was coming from the island.

When the sun, rising from behind the Aytsemnasar, was a league high, the King’s light boat slowly advanced toward the enemy camp. The King’s boat, decorated with his banners, was leading the

small fleet of rafts which followed it in rows of two's. The soldiers, although in full armor, had hidden their lances and their shields in order to make the enemy think

that they were disarmed. The small flotilla had scarcely advanced a score of yards when Beshir's regiments rushed to the shore in order to watch the coming of the King's entourage. Many of them were unarmed, and some even were barefooted and half-clad. None of them expected an attack.

The Beshir himself who at the time was in his stately pavilion, when he heard about the coming of Ashot *Yerkat*, commanded his guards in their resplendent armor to surround the pavilion. By this display of might he wanted to impress the Armenian King. Then he put on his commander's uniform, decorated with costly jewels, and having hung from his side his jeweled Damascus sword, he sat upon the sofa waiting for his guest. He had decided to give a royal reception to the Armenian King for a few hours until he delivered his gifts, after which he would have him chained, and after capturing Sevan, would take the prisoner King to Dvin. He was going to show the King, and his Prince who had humiliated him, what it means to cross swords with a commander of his rank.

He was in the midst of these meditations when the King's flotilla approached the shore. At this the Arab troops crowded all the closer to watch the rafts and the armored soldiers in them as if they were a delightful show for their amusement.

Suddenly, the King snatched the silver bow from his arms bearer and shouted:

"Now, my warriors, shower your arrows." In a flash the soldiers seized their shields, and stretching their bows, hurled their missiles, volley after volley.

Pandemonium broke loose on the shore. Taken by surprise, and shocked, the Arabs started to scurry to their tents, jostling and trampling one another, but the Armenian bowmen pursued and laid them low with their arrows on the sandy bank, the cliffs, and in front of their tents. Not a single arrow missed its mark, not a discharge without a victim.

Beshir was still immersed in his beautiful dreams when he heard the terrible outcry in his army. He instantly flew to the entrance of the pavilion and in a glance saw the entire confusion. "To arms!" he shouted in a voice ringing with rage, and drawing his sword, he rushed forward. But the flight of Iris terrified troops pushed him back into his guards. Nevertheless, the Commander did not lose his presence of mind. He mounted a powerful horse, and raising his sword shouted: "Arab warriors! Don't be panicky. Follow me. Forward swordsmen, forward lancers! The enemy is small in numbers. At them! Slaughter them!"

But few followed the Commander. His guards kept shouting: "They are on the water, Sire. How can we use our swords and lances?"

"Forward, my bowmen. Show these infidels the might of your arms. Sink the scoundrels?"

At this, the bowmen rallied around him, formed a solid phalanx, and started to advance to the shore. They started to hurl their arrows but nature came to the aid of the Armenians. Blinded by the sun's rays which shone directly into their eyes, the Arab bowmen mostly missed their mark, whereas the Armenians' missiles wrought havoc among the enemy. The seashore was gradually being covered with the corpses, and yet Beshir fought furiously, always hoping to break up the force of the attack. But the Armenian flotilla continued to advance grimly, to the amazement of the Arabs.

Suddenly a red flag was hoisted in the King's boat which began to flutter in the air. This was the signal to the force on the island. Instantly there was a rush of new rafts being launched into the water, advancing on the enemy. The Arabs could plainly see the huge multitude in the rafts, armed with long lances, bronze shields and various kinds of armor.

At sight of the new reinforcements the Arabs were dismayed and many of them decided to retreat or seek safety in flight. They thought the new reinforcements were even more formidable than the actual attackers. In vain Beshir implored, swore, threatened, fumed and foamed at the mouth. The tide of the frightened mob swept him off his feet and carried him away, making his troops think he was taking flight. From then on, it was a general panic. The retreat was complete.

The flight of the enemy gave the attacking Armenians renewed courage. Soon their rafts had reached the shore and the King's soldiers were chasing the enemy on land. Before long, they were joined by the second flotilla. The King's stratagem had indeed succeeded. Heartened by the sudden turn of events, the villagers of Tsamakaber, Varsar, Gomadzor and Grakdzin rallied to the King's banners and greatly enlarged his army. They put to the sword the greater part of the enemy's scattered companies while the remainder fled to the shelter of the mountains and the valleys.

Returning to the camp, the King ordered his warriors to gather the booty which was indeed rich. Having gathered the weapons of the fallen, the booty in the tents and Beshir's rich pavilion, the victorious army returned to the island. With the exception of a few wounded, the Armenians had no casualties in this encounter. The victory was duly celebrated in a special thanksgiving service at the church, and later with general dancing and merrymaking.

But the King was sad and pale, and without joining in the festival, he retired to his quarters. Perplexed at the King's behavior the Queen hastened to him to find out the reason.

"I am wounded," the King said in a low voice.

"Wounded?" the Queen exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell us? Where is the surgeon? Call him in at once."

"Leave him alone. I don't want to interrupt the soldiers' enjoyment. We can take care of this wound later," the King said.

“But you are pale. Your wound must be deep.”

“I am sad that I returned alive.”

“My God! Are you still brooding over the same thing?”

“I am sorry that my wound is not mortal.”

“Spare me, I beg of you “ the Queen pleaded.

“The enemy was retreating when an arrow pierced my side. I was so happy, thinking the victory would be crowned with my death, and for this reason I pulled off the arrow, hoping I would pass out. But, alas, the Arab arrow was not strong enough to kill Ashot *Yerkat*.”

“O how cruel, how heartless you are,” the Queen murmured, and no longer able to control herself, she rushed out and ordered the door-keeper to call a surgeon at once.

The latter examined the wound and carefully administered some first aid. “Thank God, the wound is not mortal,” he told the Queen reassuringly. But when she was gone, he confided to the King. “The arrow, Lord King, was dipped in poison. The inflammation may cause serious complications.”

The King’s face was lit with a smile of profound satisfaction to the amazement of the surgeon.

Chapter 9 From the Water into the Fire

Prince Marzpetuni was so deeply immersed in his new preparations that many days passed without any information from Dvin as to what was taking place there. He was sure that Beshir, after his humiliating discomfiture at the Plain of Vedi, was firmly entrenched in Dvin, and that his temporary inaction could be explained only by the theory that he was secretly getting ready to renew his attack.

For this reason the Prince had contented himself with stationing his sentries around the Fort of Gegh, but great was his surprise when news came that Beshir had reached the Lake with a large army and had laid siege to Sevan. He was about to prepare to march on Sevan when another messenger brought the news of the King’s victory over Beshir’s army. The people and the Prince’s soldiers celebrated this victory all day. Yet, at this very moment, Beshir had rallied his scattered troops and was planning to attack the very Fort of Gegh which had been the original cause of his defeat. He knew that Prince Marzpetuni was in Urtsadzor but never thought that he might have returned to Gegh. He reasoned that the Prince would not dare to meet him in the open field but would try to ambush him in the passes. With extreme caution he crossed the Kotayk and camped his army on the bank of the Azat, in front of the town of Yeranos.

From here he sent a messenger to Gegh demanding the keys of the fort. He was sure that the peasants would not dare oppose him for fear of a massacre. But great was his surprise when the messenger returned. "The keys to our fort are very heavy," the peasants had said to the messenger. "You cannot carry them alone. Tell Beshir to come and get them himself."

"You mean to tell me they mocked my command?" Beshir was furious.

"Yes, my Lord. They even swore at you."

"By heaven! I will slaughter the dogs. But tell me, how much of a fighting force do they have?"

"I do not know, my Lord. They would not let me enter the fort. They talked with me from the parapets."

Fearing to attack an invisible force, Beshir's captains advised him to retire to Dvin and give the troops a little rest. After the rest they could return to the attack with renewed vigor. By that time, the captains argued, they could verify the exact force of the defenders of the fort. But Beshir opposed the idea. He could not return to Dvin after two defeats. "I will return to Dvin only when I am victorious," he insisted firmly. His captains finally were forced to yield to his command.

It was a sunless morning of May and the sky was overcast with clouds. Beshir was really happy that nature had intervened on his behalf because the cool weather was advantageous for the fighting soldiers. Accordingly, he issued the order to advance on Gegh immediately.

According to a previous agreement with Prince Marzpetuni, the village chief of Yeranos had warned the defenders of the fort one hour before the approach of the Arab army. But because the Armenians were highly elated after two victories, the Prince decided to take the initiative and meet the enemy while he was ascending the heights. Thus, having set the trap, the Armenians waited for the signal of their sentries. Every soldier was resolved now to distinguish himself with some exploit. Gone was the former terror of the enemy. The powerful voice of Marzpetuni inspired the soldiers with renewed courage and faith in his invincibility.

Having crossed the stream of Dvin, when Beshir started to ascend the slopes of Gegh he saw that the crest of the mountain was covered with a thick cloak of fog, completely covering the fort from view.

This mystery struck him with apprehension but he said nothing about it to those around him. He spurred his horse onward with a show of utter disregard for danger. His troops had advanced as far as halfway up the mountain height and were about to enter the fog when one of his captains again reminded him of lurking danger; however, Beshir urged his troops to push on.

Beshir scarcely had ended his words of encouragement when, suddenly, the silence was broken by a deafening shout. Like a cloudburst, the Armenians broke loose from their ambush and fell upon the enemy with all their pent-up fury. The attack was so unexpected that the enemy lost its head and was

about to make an about face, but Beshir and his captains' shouts stopped the stampede. Without locating the attackers, or gaging their numbers, the Arabs hastily solidified their ranks on the slopes and began to defend themselves; nevertheless, resistance seemed to be hopeless. They fought valiantly as long as their general was with them, but the minute Beshir rushed to another side of the battle, they lost courage and started to retreat step by step. But the fury and the impact of the Armenian attack was so strong and the blows were so many that in the course of one hour the mountain slope was covered with the bodies of the dead and wounded. Many of the Arabs, together with their horses or donkeys, rolled over into the depths below.

Marzpetuni's captains, *Sepuh* Vahram, the young Prince Gor, and old Mushegh fought from their respective positions. Their companies, like a thunderclap in a forest, struck destruction on every side, working havoc among the enemy and steadily pushing him downward. Only Beshir's mounted company valiantly pushed upwards defying the swords and the lances of the Armenians, trying to trample them underfoot.

Seeing Beshir's desperate but suicidal effort from a distance, Prince Gevorg was suddenly seized with uncontrollable fury and made straight for the general. "Where do you think you are going, you dog!" he shouted as he levelled his lance against Beshir's breast. The lance failed to pierce the steely breastplate but dismounted the rider. Beshir's steed rolled down the slope but he himself sprang to his feet like a tiger. Instantly, Beshir's guards surrounded the Prince and would surely have killed him. But just then Prince Gor rushed to the aid of his father together with his company. In the ensuing clash, javelins were shattered against shields and swords against breastplates. Beshir's company could not stand the shock and started to treat, looking all the while for their general. But Beshir was nowhere. Seeing the defeat of his army he had run for his life, heading straight for Dvin.

Seeing the flight of the commander, the remainder of the Arabs retreated to the base of the mountain and from there to the plain of Dvin. But the Prince gave no chase to the fugitives, fearing reinforcements might come from Dvin which was not far away. He gathered his warriors, counted his casualties which were not more than a few scores, and with shouts of victory the troops returned to the Fort of Gegh.

PART III

Chapter 1 The Restless Soul

On the western bank of the Akhurian River, where the merger of the Tegor River forms a triangular confluence, nestled an ancient city. On the south, which offered easiest access, the city was protected by a line of high walls and powerful towers; to the east and the north was the Akhurian Valley where flowed the mighty river of the same name; the west was surrounded by an abysmal canyon between

mountainous rocks and grotesque natural ramparts which extended to the Citadel, perched on a mighty elevation to the north of the city.

Eight centuries before that city had been a mythological sanctuary, the repository of the sacred relics of pagan Armenians, their principal idols and temples, where they held their religious festivals and offered their sacrifices to the pagan gods. That was the famous Bagaran, the handiwork of Yervand II. Besides these pagan gods, there was a magnificent mansion, the residence of royal high priests with their retinue of countless priests and vestals which constituted the greater portion of the city's populace. The pagan people resorted to this city from all parts of Armenia to offer sacrifices to the gods and to bring gifts to the rich treasury of the high-priests. For three centuries here had stood the images of pagan gods to whom the Armenian people prayed, but in those days Bagaran was free from the fear of enemies and its inmates had never been forced to close its heavy bronze gates against attacking marauders. The people lived there to pray and to enjoy themselves.

Centuries passed and in 925 the City of Bagaran presented an entirely different picture. There no longer were any ancient pagan temples, no traces of idolatry; these

had been replaced by magnificent churches and elegant chapels. Instead of the onetime pagan worship one heard the murmur of the devout Christians' prayers, men who worshipped the true god but who no longer were as fortunate as their pagan ancestors. The former freedom and tranquil life were unknown to Bagaran now. The high walls and the mighty fortifications prevented the free access of the people, the somber towers looked down below with awesome and terrifying eyes while the abysmal gulch of Akhurian cast its gloom on the passerby.

At that time the King's uncle, Ashot the *Sparapet*, was firmly entrenched in the city together with his forces and his treasures, from which vantage spot he watched over his estates and his subjects but denied his protection to those who were the King's subjects. Years before, having received a crown from Yusuf the Emir, the *Sparapet* had tried to remove the crown from his nephew — the true king — and to take his place, but, having failed in the attempt he merely ravaged the country for which reprehensible deed he won the infamous sobriquet of "The Tyrant." From that day on he was indifferent to the miseries of those who were not his subjects and gloated over the King's discomfitures.

All this, however, did not prevent Catholicos Hovhannes from seeking refuge with the despicable Tyrant. As had been noted, he fled from the fortress of Byurakan when Beshir was about to attack it with his forces and whose fall he could have prevented by his presence. Instead, he had sought refuge with the Tyrant together with his followers. Since that day the *Sparapet* had taken the Catholicos under his protection.

And now, one beautiful day, a company of mounted troops descended to the Valley of Bagaran, apparently intent to disturb the Catholicos* easy life. The captain of the company was Prince Gevorg Marzpetuni, accompanied by his guards. The Prince apparently was coming on a new mission.

Months had passed and Marzpetuni's victories had brought about decided results. The Arabs slowly had disappeared from the Armenian provinces; Beshir and his troops had been confined to the City of Dvin, without daring to come out in the open. The Armenian princes who had fortified themselves in their castles, now having taken heart from Marzpetuni's victories, had come out of their hiding and were mopping up the Arab bandits from their boundaries. The peace had been restored, the people had taken a fresh breath, and the peasants and the city folk had resumed their former occupations.

Besides, the royal troops who had been scattered in various parts of the land, or had entered the service of various princes, hearing of Marzpetuni's successes who was operating under the King's command, had reformed their ranks and had joined the Prince in their companies. Thus, Marzpetuni's army had increased into thousands.

This sudden turn of events had given the Prince a new and daring idea. He now wanted to take a bold and venturesome step to rid the land from the Arab invader once and forever and to restore the Armenian crown. He meant to attack the City of Dvin itself, seize the city and chase Beshir out before the return of the Emir from Azerbaijan.

But since this was a much more hazardous venture than his former exploits, he wanted to be more thorough in his preparations. To this end he consulted his immediate associates in arms, Vahram *Sepuh*, Mushegh, the Keeper of the fort, and his son Gor. It was finally decided that the army would stay at the Gegha mountains where it could be amply supplied with provisions from the people of Mazaz, Vostan and Urtsadzor, while he himself would proceed to Bagaran to advise the Catholicos to return to his seat in Dvin. From here he was to proceed to Yerazgavors to intercede with the King's uncle Abas to become reconciled with his King and to receive him with due homage should the latter decide to return to Yerazgavors. After this, he was to proceed to Sevan to ask the King and the Queen to be with him when he attacked the City of Dvin and to support him with their counsel.

It was midday. The Prince and his retinue crossed the Akhurian river and started to ascend the heights of Bagaran. Their mounts were racing upwards at full speed and the company insignia was shining in the sun. From their bold approach the guards surmised that the newcomers were friends and they opened the gates before them.

The Prince headed straight for the *Sparapet's* mansion to offer him his respects. The "Tyrant" who still called himself king and was recognized as such in the Plain of Shirak and the Valley of Arsharunik, received him with an homage due to a prince.

“If I had known that Marzpetuni the Conqueror was paying us a visit, I would have sent a company to meet him,” the *Sparapet* said, smiling.

“Your humble servant, my Lord, is already content with this reception, a reception to which he perhaps is not even worthy,” the Prince replied modestly.

“You are too modest,” the *Sparapet* hastened to reply. “To do you justice, you should be crowned with a victor’s wreath and triumphant arches should be erected to your name everywhere. The Beshir is thinking of taking flight while the Emirs of Dvin tremble as they pronounce your name. You must really have terrified them.”

The Prince smiled, hiding his lurking suspicion of the Tyrant’s sincerity. Inwardly he knew that these praises were a mere outward show. He knew that, secretly, the *Sparapet* resented his recent successes on the battlefield.

“I wish I were really worthy of your praise, but I am far, far from it,” the Prince observed seriously.

“Come now, really. My nephew is lucky to have a valiant warrior like you,” exclaimed the *Sparapet*, “I would give the province of Yerazgavors if I only could find a servant like you.”

The Prince fixed the *Sparapet* with a stern look, as if trying to pierce the malice and the envy which hid behind that strong exterior. It seemed to him it was this very spirit which was speaking at the time and the thought distressed him. Before him stood the blood brother of King Smbat, tall of stature, handsome, broad-shouldered and strong-armed. His voice was like thunder, and the ground under him shook when he walked. And this mighty man, instead of being a defender of the King and his fatherland, was really an enemy and a rival. Ambition had closed the eyes of his soul, the perfidy of the foreigner had blinded his vision, and the crown of an Arab Emir had killed in his heart the noblest of sentiments — the love for the fatherland. The emotion of malice had shriveled this mighty giant, and he was reluctant to call Ashot *Yerkat* his King when he mentioned his name. He always referred to the King as his nephew, as if fearful that calling him “King” would deprive him of all worldly blessings. And yet he was very lavish in his praises of the King’s loyal servant and was trying to win him over to his side.

To avoid the Prince’s stern gaze the *Sparapet* hastened to ask the cause of his visit. “I know you don’t like Bagaran, Prince,” he said with a smile, “you must have a compelling reason for calling on us, of course.”

“Yes, I have,” replied Marzpetuni and he explained that he had come to return the Catholicos to his seat in Dvin.

“Why do you want to deprive his Majesty of our protection?” the *Sparapet* asked mysteriously.

The Prince explained to him that should the Emir return from Azerbaijan and find the Catholicosate in Dvin without a master he might confiscate it and thus revenge himself on the Armenians for the defeats of Beshir.

“But what has he to gain by such an action?”

“There are hundreds of monasteries and religious fraternities which are being fed by the estates of the Catholicos. Isn’t that inducement enough to confiscate them?”

“You’ve got a point there,” the *Sparapet* replied with an enigmatic look. It seemed to him the Prince had some other ulterior motives which he hid from him, and yet he could not tell what these intentions might be.

The Prince, finally, expressed his wish to see the Catholicos and the *Sparapet* offered him a guide. At this time the Catholicos was staying at the Citadel. The trail which led to the citadel was rugged, now winding through rocky gulches, now through thick brushes on the higher slopes. The path being too narrow the company was ascending the slope in single file.

When they finally made the fort the gates were opened. The Catholicos received the Prince with joyful patriarchal blessings and making him sit beside him, expressed his satisfaction and his boundless admiration for his recent exploits on behalf of the fatherland.

“I wanted to prove to the princes and to you, Majesty, that it does not take great forces in order to accomplish great deeds, all that is needed is faith. To save the fatherland one does not need to wait for the opportune moment, nor to beg the mercy of the princes. Faith in God and in one’s right arm are enough. I proved the veracity of this opinion and now it is up to you to follow my example,” observed the Prince, taking advantage of the Catholicos’ cheering words.

“And what do you propose that I shall do?” the Catholicos asked uneasily.

“Each of you must do his duty. “

“Meaning?”

The Prince explained to him his plan in a few words.

“You want to capture the City of Dvin?” the Catholicos asked, amazed.

“Yes, and as soon as possible “

“Aren’t you afraid of the Emir’s anger, the mighty Arab armies?”

“Who is the Emir? We have a king of our own,” the Prince shouted angrily.

“But Dvin is his property. He is the master of the greater part of Vostan; He regards Chakatk, Kogovit and even Tsaghkots as part of Turuberan which he now controls.”

“You mean to tell me they are the property of the villainous Arab?” the Prince roared angrily.

“For the present, yes,” the Catholicos was calm.

“No, a thousand times no,” the Prince shouted. “The land of the Armenians belongs to the Armenians. Dvin is the handiwork of King Khosrov; Chakatk, Kogovit, Tsaghkots are the provinces of the royal seat; Turuberan is the property of the Mamikonian dynasty; each province of Armenia has a history, who can deny it? You, who know the history of the Armenian nation, how can you testify on behalf of the base Arab? If at this moment the ghost of Khorenatsi, the father of our historians, should appear, would you dare repeat your testimony before him?”

“I said for the present...”

“Neither now nor in the future,” the Prince interrupted, “the Arab must reign in his land, not in Armenia.”

“Let it be as you say, I am not the one to contradict you.”

“And that is the way it will be, Your Majesty, if you will not delay my request.”

“What is your request?”

“I told you before. You must return to your Seat.”

“To Dvin?”

“Yes.”

“But what is the good of my return? I am not a fighter, nor do I command an army with which I could help you. If you are intent on capturing Dvin, go ahead, liberate the city from the Arab. Then I will return and give you my blessing.

“You may curse me, if you wish, just so you return even now While the Emir is still absent and while my soldiers have not laid siege to the city.”

“But what is the good of my return now? Will you explain?”

“Don't you think telling you my secret will be in vain as long as you stay here?”

“I will leave right now if I am convinced it is necessary.”

“Very well. The good, Your Majesty, is that right now I need some men whom I can trust in Dvin. I cannot infiltrate my men inside Dvin, Beshir will stop them. Whereas, you can return to your Seat freely. Such a step will even flatter the Emir’s vanity. With your monks I will sneak in a few of my men.”

“They will not let any laymen enter through the gates of Dvin.”

“I know, but they will let hooded monks m.

“My God! You are hanging the Emir’s sword over my neck,” the Catholicos exclaimed turning pale.

“Have no fear, Holy Father, I will not permit it. I will not let the Emir bare his sword, not to speak of hanging it over your head.”

“And what about your trusted men?”

“If need be, they will dig a tunnel under your residence to the outside wall.”

“Oh, I could not be a party to such a plan. He who commanded us, ‘Give unto God that which is God’s’ also commanded us, ‘Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s’ . . .” the Catholicos said firmly.

“Who is your Caesar?” the Prince asked, trembling with anger.

The Catholicos did not answer.

“You have a king whom you are duty bound to obey, that is King Ashot,” the Prince continued. “The Arab has no right in this country; he is an invader, a usurper, a bandit. The Armenian who calls him the rightful owner is a traitor to his people and the first soldier who meets the traitor has a right to kill him without sinning against justice.”

“I have been running away from the tyrant’s vengeance,” the Catholicos apologized lamely, “and now you are sending me to meet that vengeance. What have you to gain by my death?”

“You should rather say what the fatherland has to gain. If you think your return to Dvin will mean your death you should rejoice in it. Is it not better to be classified among the martyrs of St. Ghevondiants rather than to perish without leaving a memory?”

The Prince's stern language instead of angering His Holiness, on the contrary, mellowed him. He could not help but see that the Prince was pleading not for himself but on behalf of the fatherland, therefore, how could he get angry with him? Was it not true that he loved the fatherland and its freedom no less? But what could he do? God had not endowed him with the soul of a Marzpetuni; he was afraid of danger, afraid of the Arab sword. He was even willing to sacrifice himself but could not go through with it. Nature had deprived him of the necessary courage.

“You spoke of the Ghevondiants martyrs,” he said weakly, “I really would like to be worthy of the glory, but I doubt if I am capable of it.”

“To be willing is to be capable, and now the right moment has come. Be brave, spurn this transient life, show with your deeds what you have been preaching to your disciples and future generations will bless your memory.”

“What shall be my task at Dvin?”

“It shall be your duty to protect the men who live with you as your spiritual servants. They shall sleep during the day, and work in the night.”

“What if traitors inform on us?”

“In that case a few men may die, including perhaps our Patriarch, but that is inevitable”

“It’s a heavy condition.”

“What is more easy and more desirable than to lay down one’s life for the sake of the fatherland?”

“For a brave man, and for a patriot, yes, it is easy, but...”

“But you are not a brave man, Your Majesty, I know that; still you are a patriot, you cannot deny that.”

“Let it be as you say, dear Prince. If God has willed that I should die, I accept it willingly. They will not classify me among the martyrs, I know, but at least there shall be no blemish attached to my memory,” the Catholicos said firmly.

“God willing you shall be free of all peril, Your Majesty; fate already has smiled on us. It’s impossible that this last attempt shall fail,” the Prince reassured him.

“We shall see. Perhaps God will hear the prayer of the righteous.”

The Prince rose to his feet, kissed His Majesty’s right hand and thanked him for His condescension. Then he wanted to know when His Majesty would depart from Bagaran.

“Tomorrow, if necessary,” the Catholicos replied.

“It is necessary. Each day’s delay may cause us incalculable harm.”

“What if the *Sparapet* should delay me?”

“Ah yes, the *Sparapet*! I completely forgot him. You shall say nothing of this to him, Your Majesty.”

“What excuse shall I give him for my departure?”

“I have already given him the reason. You are going to Dvin to prevent the confiscation of the Catholicosate by the Emir.”

The Catholicos was satisfied and agreed to leave Bagaran on the third day. Meanwhile the Prince was to assign his men who were to follow the Catholicos as his retinue.

The very same day Marzpetuni took his departure of Ashot the *Sparapet* and with his guards set out for the mountains of Gegha.

Chapter 2 The Plan Leaks Out

As soon as Prince Marzpetuni left Bakaran the *Sparapet* hastened to the citadel to learn the true cause of his visit, but since he was convinced that the Catholicos would not divulge it to him, he decided to resort to cunning.

“I don’t like the Prince’s intentions,” he confided to the Catholicos, avoiding a direct question. “You must be careful not to become a tool of this man.”

“What is this? You are already familiar with the Prince’s intention?” the Catholicos asked innocently.

“How not? At first he tried to hide it from me, but when he came to see me I forced him and he told me everything.”

“Really? But he warned me against...” “He warned you to tell me nothing, isn’t that right?” the *Sparapet* asked with a sly smile.

The Catholicos hesitated. He did not know what to say.

“Do not hide anything from me, Your Majesty. He already has confessed everything to me. And don’t think that it was my royal dinner and wine which opened his mouth. I promised to support him with my regiments. His plan needs extra aid.”

“You mean to tell me you really promised to support him, and you will carry out your promise?” the Catholicos asked with enthusiastic incredulity.

“Of course I will. The best interest of the fatherland demands it.”

“Bravo, illustrious Lord. By doing so you will save the Catholicos from a base act. The two of you captured the City of Dvin two years ago, you can do the same now.”

“You will never be forced to commit the base act; I will never permit you.”

“I will pray for you and the Prince. I will pray God to make your armies invincible, but to stage an act of treason inside the Catholicosate, that I cannot do.”

“Did the Prince ask you to do it?”

“Yes. His men were to accompany me disguised as clergymen, and once inside the city, they would dig a tunnel to the outside walls. How could I be a party to such a thing?”

The *Sparapet* learned all that he wanted to know. He was thrilled inwardly. “No,” he said resolutely, “you will not be a party to such a base act. I will not let the Catholicos of the Armenians be disgraced as a conspirator before the world. My arm is still strong enough to protect you. I will join my regiments with the Prince’s forces and the two of us will take Dvin by force. That’s what I told him.”

The Catholicos, who was looking for an excuse to crawl out of his promise, was almost beside himself with joy and recounted the whole details of his conversation with the Prince.

Supremely satisfied with his accomplishment, the *Sparapet* returned to his mansion, and retiring to his private room he called his secretary to bring him a parchment and writing ink. He started to write a letter, apparently top secret and obviously not intended for an Armenian because the script was in Arabic.

Having finished the letter he sealed it with the royal seal. Then he called one of his warriors and commanded him to deliver the letter to its address in three days.

“Sire, it is difficult to reach Azerbaijan in three days,” the messenger objected.

“In three days the letter will reach its destination,” the *Sparapet* repeated.

The messenger bowed low and hurried off.

A few days later Marzpetuni’s men were encamped at the Forest of Tsndots, waiting for the arrival of the Catholicos to accompany him to Dvin. Days passed and yet there was no sight of the Catholicos. A week passed and still there was no news from Bagaran. Some of the soldiers proposed to send a messenger to Bagaran and find out what had happened, but others objected. The Prince had commanded them to wait and they did not want to miscarry his plan by taking a misstep.

At this time Prince Marzpetuni was at Yerazgavors, calling on the King’s uncle Prince Abas to induce his support in the forthcoming venture. At the time Abas was living in the castle built by his father king Smbat. Like his brother he was a tall man, handsome, and powerfully built. Although he was younger than the King, still he was more discreet and circumspect. Besides, he was more honest and devout a person than Ashot and for this very reason he was angry with his brother for having disgraced the family honor through his illicit love. And for this very reason he had even raised arms

against his King. A few months before he had rejected Marzpetuni's intercession to become reconciled with the King.

Prince Marzpetuni was doubtful of his success even now in his second mission of reconciliation. The only thing which lent him a measure of confidence were his recent victories on the battlefield. He felt that these victories gave him the right to speak more freely with the recalcitrant princes and even demanding their cooperation. That was how he had gone to see the Catholicos. But now when he saw Abas he found him completely changed. Abas not only accepted his proposition for reconciliation but he even expressed his willingness to lay his regiments at the disposal of the King.

"Your victories made me feel ashamed of myself," he said candidly. "When I learned that you attacked Beshir with only twenty soldiers, repeated your attack twice more and came out victorious, from that day I determined to join you. Here in Yerazgavors I have an organized and well-equipped army, lead it wherever you will. I extend my hand to the King in a spirit of true reconciliation and will receive him with homage. The question is, will he come out of Sevan?"

"If he learns that you have extended him the hand of reconciliation, he will joyfully return to his capital."

"Yes indeed I forgive him. I forgive his frailties which were unpardonable in a king. I forgive him; however I fear he will be too stubborn to return to Yerazgavors. I really want him reinstated on his throne. The Queen has gone through a lot, she has suffered so much. We must comfort her"

Marzpetuni was surprised seeing so much tenderness and solicitude in Abas' words. What could have happened? Could it be he was truly regretful for his past enmity to his brother, or was it because his conscience was torturing him for having raised arms against his king.

"I will go to the King and intercede with him in your and my behalf," Marzpetuni offered. "I am hopeful that he will not disappoint us."

"I will accompany you," Abas volunteered.

"You will, your Majesty?" Marzpetuni could not believe his ears.

"Why not? Does my desire seem so strange to you?"

"Not strange but very natural. Still, I don't know, why this sudden change?"

"Prince, it is difficult to forget a brother."

"I would say it were impossible."

"The King has written me a personal letter," Abas interrupted, dropping his gaze sadly.

“It’s a sad letter,” he added, “it distressed me profoundly.”

“What did he write which caused you such sorrow?” the Prince was curious.

“He is sick.”

“How come?”

“He was wounded in his fight with Beshir.”

“I did not know,” the Prince added, alarmed.

“He was wounded by a poisonous arrow; his doctors say the wound is mortal.”

“That is tragic news,” exclaimed the Prince. “We cannot leave him at Sevan, we must bring him here right away.”

“We can start tomorrow.”

“What about his letter? Could I read it?” the Prince asked respectfully.

“You are the King’s trusted servant, we have no secrets from you. Here is the letter. Read it.”

The King’s letter read:

From Ashot the unhappy king

To his beloved brother Abas

Greetings.

The right hand of Providence, beloved brother, has laid heavily on me. It has punished me heavily for the crimes I have committed. I saw the devastation of my country, saw my loved ones turning their faces away from me, I saw the diminution of my crown.

Did I deserve all this? That I do not know. I only know that Providence does nothing wrong. Therefore, I bow before its holy will and bless its name for comforting me in my suffering. That comfort is the firm conviction that in a short tune I shall depart from this world, putting an end to my torture.

In the battle with Beshir I sought my death but was only wounded, such a wound which would prolong my torture and to give me time to ponder my sins. No doubt this too was ordained by God, blessed be His will. But since my surgeon has despaired and already has predicted” my death, I hasten to appeal to you, dear brother, that you extend to me the kiss of reconciliation. I have decided to die in Sevan, but I trust you will take my body to Bagaran for its final resting place. All the same I shall

give up the ghost here in my exile. That is my wish. Therefore, listen to my last wish and see to it that it is fulfilled.

I die sonless; you are the heir of my crown and throne. This is rightfully yours. It is my wish that you will assume the crown not as a rival, but as a brother. Bring me the kiss of your reconciliation and in return receive from me your rightful heritage. Together with it, I leave you one last trust whose preservation I can trust only in you as my own blood brother.”

After reading the letter the Prince asked, “When did you receive this letter, Sire?”

“Three days ago,” replied Abas.

“How could you stand it this long?”

“I suffered while waiting. If the King had spoken only of reconciliation I would have gone to him at once, but he also has mentioned my inheritance. How could I become reconciled with him for the sake of the inheritance? I am not a mercenary.”

“If that’s all that is worrying you don’t give it another thought, Sire. I advise you to hasten to the King as soon as possible.”

A few days later the King’s brother Abas and Prince Marzpetuni departed from Yerazgavors for Sevan, accompanied by a joint army of their forces. They deliberately took a longer route in order to pass through the villages and the towns of the south so that the people could see their march, and indeed, their appearance was the signal of great demonstrations everywhere. The people welcomed them with open arms and was thrilled at the sight of the King’s banners.

While Abas and Marzpetuni were setting foot on the northern border of the province of Syunik, events of an entirely different nature were evolving in the southern part. The Emir Nsur having been informed by Ashot the Tyrant’s letter that Marzpetuni intended to lay siege to Dvin and to capture it through conspiracy, instantly gathered his forces, organized auxiliary marauding units from the Persians of Azerbaijan, and marched into Vaspurakan. And, by way of lending his march a triumphant look, he tried to capture a number of towns on his way, but he was vigorously repelled by the ever ready and vigilant troops of Gagik Artsruni. Unwilling to become involved in a fight with King Gagik lest he weaken his forces, the Emir retreated, and hastily crossing the river Yeraskh, entered the land of Syunik.

The Emir knew that two of the three brothers who ruled the province of Syunik, princes Sahak and Babgen, were hostages in Dvin. There remained the third, Prince Smbat, who surely would not dare cross swords with him. Consequently, he boldly approached the fort of Yernjak with the intention of capturing it and putting the garrison to the sword. In this manner, he meant to spread terror and destruction on his way to Dvin.

But the Emir was in for a great surprise. Having taken heart from Marzpetuni's example, the Armenian princes were ready for the Arabs everywhere, particularly the Prince of Syunik. Having ambushed the Emir's army in the gorge of Daru, Prince Smbat sent him a messenger, saying:

"God's avenging arm has led you into this trap, you who perfidiously seized my two brothers, and now I will make you pay for their sufferings. At this moment your army is surrounded by my soldiers and not an Arab will escape unless I say the word. Therefore, as a ransom for your person and your army, I offer you these terms. As soon as you reach Dvin you will set my brothers free and return them to me here. For this, I want your sworn word as well as a number of hostages from your princes. Should you reject my terms, I will make this gorge the grave of your army."

And truly at this time the Arab army was in peril. The natives of Syunik had trapped them in a narrow gorge, surrounded on all sides from the heights. The warriors of Syunik could have destroyed the whole army within an hour under an avalanche of rocks, without resorting to their arms.

Seeing his plight, the Emir resorted to his customary cunning. He gladly received the Prince's messengers, agreed to return to Dvin and free the hostages, and on his part, he delivered a number of hostages.

But, the minute he extricated himself from his trap, the Emir marched into Nakhichevan, entered Sharur and Urtsadzor which were regarded as his estates, and started to raid the Armenian villages whose inhabitants had aided Marzpetuni. Finally, having entered Dvin, he not only did not free the hostages but doubled their guard.

Besides, in revenge for the reverses of Beshir's armies, the Emir confiscated the estates of the Catholicosate which, in his opinion, was the principal cause of all his misfortunes.

Having heard of the Emir's perfidy Prince Smbat regretted his error in trusting the Arab but it was already too late. All the same, he resolved to make the Arab pay heavily for his perfidy if only God would permit him to save his captive brothers.

The Catholicos, on the other hand, was disconsolate and conscience-stricken. "If only I had listened to the advice of Marzpetuni," he complained repentfully, "if only I had carried out my promise, the Catholicosate would have been spared now" He was particularly bitter toward Ashot the Tyrant for having dissuaded him from his original intention.

"On the contrary, I saved you from certain dishonor and death," the Tyrant apologized. "You had run away from the Emir a number of times and you could not have placated him by returning to Dvin. Sooner or later he would have arrested you and would have killed you in a dungeon. This is what would have happened to you, had you listened to Marzpetuni's advice."

“I am already dishonored and dead,” the Catholicos wailed. “What right have I to call myself the head of the church when I have betrayed and lost the trust of my predecessors?”

“The fault is not yours. It is the fault of him who calls himself the King of the Armenians but who is hiding from fear in Sevan. When a king who wields a sword and has an army to follow him runs away from the enemy, what can an ecclesiastical do whose only weapon is his prayers?”

“If only the people could share your thoughts, but the people will blame me for everything, especially when the indignant prince puts the whole responsibility on me.

“You refer to Prince Marzpetuni?”

“Who else? I dread the thought of him. What answer can I give him should he return here?”

“You don’t have to give an account to him. What right has he over you?”

“He is the King’s loyal servant and acts at his behest. He gave me good advice but I didn’t listen to him.”

“Do you want to spare yourself further unpleasantries, Your Majesty?” the Tyrant suddenly asked.

“Oh, I do, I do, but how?”

“Go away from Bagaran.”

“Where else can I go? There is no room for me in Ayrarat.”

“You are the Catholicos not only of Ayrarat but of all Armenians, and wherever your seat may be, the Armenians are obliged to worship you.”

“But where can I go? Who else can defend me?” the Catholicos asked quite crestfallen.

“The very man who is willing to defend you and whose request you have rejected so far.”

“And who is that man, pray tell me?”

“King Gagik.”

“King Gagik?” the Catholicos exclaimed and suddenly his face brightened.

“That’s right. You go to Gagik Artsruni in Vaspurakan and he will protect you. If you do not want to stay in the Artsruni capital you can retire to the Island of Aghtamar. The king has built there an impregnable fortress, a beautiful mansion and a magnificent church. Establish your seat in that island which is the heart of Armenia, assemble around you a new monastic order, foster the teaching of the faith and spend your last years in peace.”

“God has not deserted me after all, Sire,” the Catholicos said with great relief. “He has spoken through you and has shown me the way. I am grateful to you and I will bless you as long as I live. I will go to Vaspurakan, retire to the island of Aghtamar where I shall be free of the slings and arrows of enemies. The throne of the Armenian Catholicos shall be intact there and my successors shall bless your memory. I shall establish there a new brotherhood, shall assemble around me new disciples of the Holy Scriptures, and will rekindle the torch of the faith in Aghtamar. I have wandered long enough; now I shall find a corner for myself where I can rest my head.”

“And there you shall complete the history of the Armenians,” the Tyrant reminded.

“Very true indeed. I shall finish my own story which to this day is incomplete. I shall be indebted to you eternally once I finish that story.”

The Catholicos was happy like a little child who has suddenly recovered a lost toy, as if he had no other worry in the world to torture his soul, or as if the history of the Armenians would be completed once his life story was finished.

A few days later the Catholicos, together with his retinue left Bagaran and entered Yerazgadzor. Marzpetuni’s soldiers who had been waiting for him at the Tznndots woods were delighted at his appearance but great was their regret when the Catholicos informed them that the Emir had already arrived at Dvin and had confiscated the Catholicosate. Under the circumstances, he told them, he was seeking refuge in Vaspurakan under the protection of King Gagik.

Upon this disclosure Marzpetuni’s soldiers returned to the mountains of Gegha and from here, at the command of *Sepuh* Vahram, they set out for Sevan to take the news to the Prince. But the Catholicos, traveling through Chakatk, Bagrevand and Kogovit, finally reached the border of Vaspurakan where he was met by a few companies of King Gagik’s troops who led him to Van, the capital of the Artsrunis. The people of Vaspurakan received the Armenian Patriarch with a great demonstration of joy while King Gagik met him on the way with his princely entourage. The king’s joy was boundless now because the arrival of His Majesty the Catholicos completed, the only prestige which his kingdom lacked. That the Armenian Catholicos had transferred his seat into his country was an honor too great for words.

Chapter 3 The Fruits of Reconciliation

The dismal island and its inhabitants slowly bore down on the King who was wounded in soul and body, worsening his condition. The wound from the poisonous arrow was breaking his iron constitution with each passing day. And although the Queen tended him tenderly and the surgeon redoubled his efforts, still the result seemed hopeless. Slowly, the King was wasting away and losing

its strength like the old oak tree whose roots are being gnawed at by the worms. He turned more taciturn with each passing day, shunned all company and sought solace only in solitude.

But the physician, with the Queen's assent, advised the King to hasten to make his last will and testament and make ready to depart from this world, in view of the sharp turn his sickness had taken.

The physician's advice was cunningly made. He knew that the King would die of his wound sooner or later, but he also knew that the end was far from being imminent. And, to prolong the end, he deliberately wanted to extricate the King from the depression of his solitude. To prevent the daily cares and the anxieties of life from deteriorating his body and thus accelerating the end, he should live in a gay and carefree company and busy himself with the affairs of the State. And indeed, the physician succeeded in his scheme. The King's letter to his brother Abas was a direct result of this stratagem.

And one beautiful day the shores of Lake Gegham were covered with a multitude of soldiers. The King who was watching the commotion from the window of his castle, at first thought Beshir had returned to avenge himself for his former defeat and something like fear disturbed his soul. But when he noticed the royal banner which fluttered on the banks his apprehensions were changed into joy.

"It's Marzpetuni, my brave and loyal servant," he sighed with relief and emerging from his chamber he went to the watch tower. Presently the opposite bank was crowded with small boats and rafts which the Prince had provided beforehand, and after being manned by several hundred soldiers, the little flotilla started to glide over the smooth surface of the lake.

The foremost canoe which also bore the royal banner carried Prince Marzpetuni and the King's brother Abas with their retinue. The Prince was jubilant for returning the King's banner triumphantly when he recalled under what uncertain conditions he had received it from the King, and especially because he was bringing with him the King's own brother who had seceded from him long since and whose support would insure the success of the new venture.

When the small boats reached the banks of the island the King's guards were already waiting for them at attention. They had come to welcome Prince Marzpetuni but when they saw the King's brother, who greeted them cordially, they could no longer restrain their joy and they rang the welkin with their cries of Hurray's and "Long live the Prince." The company then was led to the King's quarters.

The King who had not expected his brother, seeing him with Marzpetuni, was overjoyed and at once forgot both his rank and the bitter memories. He remembered only that Abas was his brother, his one and only brother in this world, therefore he did not wait for the latter to come up to him but hastened to meet him half way. The two met on the verdant slope of the small hill and their cries of "My beloved brother" were choked in the warm embraces and kisses which followed. The Prince and

his retinue, rooted there on the hill, were watching the scene which was so touching that many openly wept. They all had a keen sense of realization of the extent of the suffering which the land had endured as result of the two brothers' past misunderstanding, and how much the fatherland would gain by their present reconciliation.

After a few days of festive enjoyment signaling the reconciliation of the two brothers, the King invited his brother Abas to an audience, and in the presence of his Queen and Prince Marzpetuni opened his heart to him, saying:

“For a long time I have wanted to extend to you the hand of reconciliation, as my brother and heir, as I saw how much the fatherland was suffering at the expense of our rupture; but being the first-born, and my royal vanity prevented me from humbling myself before my younger brother. I expected you to make the first gesture. How right was I in this? I do not know, but all the same, that is what I wanted. When a man wants to live he passionately clings to vain sentimentalities. But my expectations proved futile, you made no move to return to me and I was deeply hurt by your cruelty. Scarcely a year had passed, and behold, fate deserted me and the passion to live died in my heart. But let us not talk about it, you well know the story. When my physician told me that my days were numbered, I thanked God for the opportunity to become reconciled with you. I thank you, dear Abas, that you respected my last wish and brought to me a brother's kiss which is most precious of all, which brings happiness to our afflicted land, which does not exact innocent victims, which wipes off the tears of the miserable and comforts the afflicted hearts. Alas, why are men so slow in recognizing, in appreciating this precious quality? And now, in return for your nobility, I offer you my crown and my throne which I inherited from our beloved father; I offer it to you as my and the Queen's only heir. Enjoy it with God's, the nation's and my personal blessing.”

In pronouncing the last words the King flashed a warm, sympathetic look at the Queen, then turning to his brother he continued:

“But, my beloved brother, before you assume my crown and my throne, accept from me another precious trust and swear to me that you will protect and guard her most tenderly — that most precious trust is my Queen and your sister who suffered many afflictions in this world, and whose fate I can trust only in your hands, my very own brother in all this world.”

The Queen who had been listening to the King silently suddenly sobbed and broke into tears. But Abas interrupted the tension. “What is the intent of these dismal words, my Lord King?” he exclaimed, rising to his feet. “Do you think the throne is more precious to me than my duty, or do you think the crown can ever recompense the loss which I shall suffer with the death of my own brother? I pray you, do not grieve my heart which is full of affection for you and whose only wish is to see my king once again restored to his glory. May God grant you long days and I shall be the servant of your throne. That is my only wish and that shall be my sole duty.”

“I believe in your sincerity and it grieves me that I was so late in sharing the sweetness of your affection, but my days are numbered, dear Abas, and I shall soon part from this world. May God bless you and keep you so that you may comfort our people which suffered so much in the days of my kingdom.”

“The people can be comforted under your kingdom just as well,” Abas replied with spirit, “you will leave this place to gather with us, will return to your capital and resume your throne, and we shall surround that throne with its erstwhile splendor.”

“You speak of glory and splendor but I have dried their sources long since,” the King sighed sadly.

“No, my Lord, these sources have not been dried but only diminished. And for this I am to blame and not you. It is up to me to atone for my sin.”

“You have only one duty, and that is to make the Armenian people forget the name of Ashot *Yerkat* by becoming a worthy king”

“The name Ashot *Yerkat* shall be glorified even hereafter,” Abas insisted emphatically.

“I have not long to live,” the King observed.

“On the contrary, you still have many years to live yet,” Marzpetuni observed with a mysterious smile.

“Have you seen my wound?” the King asked.

“I have heard from your physician and what he told me is very encouraging.”

“What do you mean?” the King asked, surprised.

Marzpetuni apologized for the physician who, having the best interests of the country at heart, had deliberately misled the King in regard to his illness, and told him that there was no real danger to his life, that he would soon recover if only he agreed to return from Sevan to Vostan.

For a long time the King was inflexible in his decision to live and die in Sevan; but upon the importunities of Abas and Prince Marzpetuni he finally yielded and decided to return to his capital of Yerazga-vors. To make the King’s return stately and in keeping with his royal rank, Abas and the Prince sent word to their troops in Vostan ordering them to hasten to Sevan. A similar proposition was made to Prince Smbat of Syunik. The latter gathered his contingents and entered Gegharkounik to pay his respects to the King.

Sepuh Vahram likewise assembled his army which was in Gegha Mountains and together with the young prince Gor proceeded to Sevan. Finally, with the arrival of the remainder of Abas’ troops, a sizeable army was assembled at the King’s quarters in Sevan. A few days later, the King, together with

the Queen, his brother Abas, and the princes departed from Sevan and, accompanied with his army, headed for his royal province of Shirak.

For a week the City of Yerazgavors had been undergoing a complete transformation. The formerly silent streets now were filled with the clamor and din of a lively city, traffic was heavy, and the public squares were crowded.

The royal palace which until then had been deserted was once again lively and festive, its magnificent salons were decorated with costly rugs and velvet, the arches were festooned with flowers and the colonnades were draped with multicolored banners. There was unusual animation everywhere and the deserted stories of the building were filled with dwellers. By special arrangement of Prince Marzpetuni, the princely families who had taken refuge in the Castle of Garni had returned to Yerazgavors. The young lady Shahandukht who was in charge of that castle had turned her duties over to Mushegh the Keeper of the Fortress, and, together with the Ladies Mariam and Gohar, had come to Yerazgavors. By this time, all was set for the coming of the King and the Queen.

When the appointed day arrived all the inhabitants of the royal city came forth to meet their distinguished guests a few leagues outside the city, led by the freemen, while the company of the palace ladies and the princesses, led by Lady Gurgendukht, the wife of the King's brother Abas, waited for the King in the Church of the Holy Savior.

Finally, the King, accompanied by the Queen, and his retinue of princes entered the royal city from which he had been absent for a whole year. His entry, so stately and teeming, rather resembled a victorious return from the battle. Aside from thousands of troops who stopped outside the city, the City of Yerazgavors was crowded with the inhabitants of the extensive province of Shirak. It seemed all of them had been longing for their King and had hastened to be on hand in order to satisfy their overflowing nostalgia. And everywhere the King passed, the people met him with hurrah's and shouts of jubilation. At sight of this manifestation of affection the King was deeply touched and he wept. He remembered his past, compared the people's jubilation with those of the past and found it equally spontaneous and sincere. And yet, alas, he no longer was the former hero; his inner world was devoid of all enthusiasm, and the jubilation around him did not warm up his heart. But, not to disappoint those around him, especially his brother Abas and Prince Marzpetuni whose devotion to his person and cause he deeply appreciated, he tried to control his feelings and to appear cheerful.

Besides, he even decided to advise Marzpetuni to take advantage of the people's enthusiasm in the interests of a more profitable venture, namely, the occupation of the City of Dvin, a project for the success of which the Prince had interceded with him for a long time but which had been frustrated by the treachery of Ashot the Tyrant.

When the festivities of the royal reception were over, the King summoned his brother and the Prince and revealed to them his plan.

“Now that we have assembled such an imposing army, and since the Prince of Syunik is near his with his contingents to support us, I want you to make ready for the attack on Dvin. The Arabs cannot resist your forces and you will surely seize the city from their grasp,” the King announced.

“How come? You really are giving us permission to attack the city?” Marzpetuni asked, half surprised, half beside himself with joy.

“Did I not speak plainly enough? I not only permit it, but I am advising you to do it. There is no time to lose.”

“I am ready with all my troops,” Abas announced decisively.

“Then speak with Prince Smbat and tell me the result,” the King ordered.

The same evening, in the mansion of the King’s brother, there was a session which included Prince Marzpetuni, the Lord of Syunik, *Sepuh* Vahram and the young Prince Gor. The King’s brother explained the purpose of the meeting and wanted to know their opinion in regard to the King’s proposition. After a few more explanations by Marzpetuni the conference agreed unanimously to adopt the King’s plan. Prince Smbat was jubilant over the idea, hoping thus to rescue his captive brothers and the Armenian Catholicosate from the Arab usurpers. For this reason he volunteered to assemble his entire force around the City of Dvin. All the rest of the princes likewise fell in line and were ready for the oncoming assault.

The allied princes pitched camp in a vast plain around Yerazgavors, where the Tigris merges with the River Akhurian. For several days there was lively activity in the camp, as if all the men were on fire. A part of the troops were drilling for the encounter, others were practicing mock attacks, some were busy with sharpshooting contests, and still others were assembling battering rams and other equipment for the siege. These operations were supervised by *Sepuh* Vahram and the young Prince Gor.

While these preparations busied the army at Yerazgavors, there happened an unforeseen event which poured cold water on the zeal of the troops and their commanders. The day of the King’s arrival in the Province of Shirak news had come to the Arab Emir that the King was returning to his capital with a great force. Nusr, who long since was familiar with the valor of Ashot *Yerkat* and knew how often he had fallen only to rise again, how many times he had recovered and how many times he had scourged his realm, was frightened at the news of the King’s return. His fears were enhanced by the reports of his spies who had witnessed the King’s victorious return, his jubilant reception by his people, and the high morale of his advancing army.

To begin with, the King’s reconciliation with his brother was such a momentous event which would frighten the Emir because the Arabs could not meet the joint forces of these two brave leaders. But when the Emir learned that Prince Smbat of Syunik too had joined the alliance, he completely went

to pieces. He was sure now that the King would be satisfied with nothing short of the complete expulsion of the Arab rule from the land, and he expected no mercy from the Prince of Syunik whom he had insulted many times and had indicted himself by holding his brother's captive.

Dejected by these mediations, the Emir summoned before him his Commander Beshir and the Denpet (foreign religious leader) of Dvin and consulted with them about ways and means of averting the impending danger. The Beshir told him that the garrison of the city had scarcely enough supplies to last ten days, and that their only salvation lay in sending messengers to Damascus and seeking aid from the Supreme Emir himself, but this would take too long a time. Meanwhile nothing would prevent the Armenians from laying siege to the city.

"What if we ourselves offered peace and solicited the King's friendship?" the Emir put the question.

"Our laws give you the right to simulate submission to the infidel if you cannot overcome him by force," suggested the Denpet.

"You must bear in mind, however, that for each humiliation you must humiliate him ten times when you get the upper hand."

"You are quite right. I have to humiliate myself only once until I disperse the King's armies," the Emir replied. "After that, I know there will be new defections; the princes will rise against one another. 'You cannot boil two Armenian heads in one kettle,' the old proverb says. We will settle their score once we raise our swords."

The Beshir and the Denpet agreed that this was the best way under the circumstances.

And one beautiful day when the allied princes were in the midst of their last military exercises, and as the King, mounted on his steed and surrounded by his select guard, personally was supervising the event and inspiring the troops, behold there appeared on the opposite plain a company of riders galloping toward the Armenian camp. When the company was quite close Prince Marzpetuni noticed the Arab banner and instantly ordered young Prince Gor to meet them with his company and to ascertain the object of their mission.

The young Prince was greatly surprised as he noticed Prince Babgen of Syunik in the Arab company, not as a captive but fully armed and surrounded by the dignitaries of the Emir. But before he had time to express his wonderment Prince Babgen rushed to him and embraced him. In a few words he explained to him his mission and the two, together with their retinues, returned to the Armenian camp.

Prince Smbat of Syunik recognized his brother from a distance and rushing to him, embraced him warmly. The meeting of the two brothers was so touching that the Arab messengers, out of deference to the occasion, stood aside and waited until the affectionate exchange was over. Then the Arab

delegation, joined by Prince Babgen, presented itself to the King who received them in the open in the presence of his princes. The spokesman of the delegation addressed the King in following words:

“Emir Nusr, the *Vostikan* of the Supreme Emir, sends greetings and salutations to the Armenian King, and through us congratulates him on the royal return to the seat of the Shahanshah (King of Kings). Desirous of establishing a perpetual bond of friendship with the Shahanshah, the Emir requests that the King forget past misunderstandings between us, all rancor and enmity which have been engendered by painful clashes of the past, and to cement a mutual friendship pact in the best interests of both the Emir and your people. As proof of his good will the Emir has released from captivity the Sisakan princes, one of whom volunteered to lead us here, and the other, Prince Sahak, is now in Dvin, living in homage in the palace which was built by the Armenian kings. As further proof of his good will, the Emir has sent to the Shahanshah some gifts which he requests you to accept as the vouchsafe of his sincere friendship toward the Armenian people and their King.”

Thereupon the spokesman beckoned the gift-bearers who presented their gifts to the King.

The King, although taken aback by this unexpected delegation, nevertheless, out of deference to Prince Babgen, cordially received them and expressed thanks to the Emir for his good intentions and his gifts. He invited the messengers to be his guests in the city, promising to give his reply to the Emir in a few days.

But this new development made a bad impression on both the princes and the troops who were all set to attack Dvin, especially since they had been inflamed by the passionate exhortations of Abas and Prince Marzpetuni. And now, the cunning Arab's delegation had poured cold water on their enthusiasm. Many of them really wished that the King would reject the Arab proposition and insure the peace not by befriending the Arab but by expelling him from the land once and for all.

To this end, a conference was held with the King. At first all were in favor of an immediate attack. But when Prince Babgen revealed that the Nusr was really holding his brother, Prince Sahak, a hostage in Dvin, and that at the first approach of the Armenian troops to the city walls he would be hanged from the wall tower, all were discomfited.

“If nothing else,” Prince Smbat argued, “at least to prevent risking the life of my brother we shall be obliged to accept the Emir's proposition.”

“You were a bit too hasty, dear Prince,” the King observed with a smile. “Although the demand of our troops and our princes to attack Dvin is legitimate and just, nevertheless I would be loath to sacrifice the life of a single soldier when I can achieve the enemy's friendship through peaceful means. And while our forces are superior and the conditions favor us, nevertheless we can not capture Dvin without sacrificing at least several hundred soldiers. We shall spare those lives since we already have sacrificed too many. It's true that at first the Emir's offer made a bad impression upon me but the real

reason for this was because I was really infected by your enthusiasm. But when I pondered the matter seriously I came to the conclusion that it is better to leave Dvin in the possession of the Emir than to sacrifice the lives of several hundred soldiers in the effort to recover it. If I am so considerate of the life of the common soldier, how much more considerate I would be for the life of your brother, who is my brother and who is dear to our Court and to the entire dynasty of the Syuniks, and who at this moment is a captive of the Arab beast. For this reason, I have decided to accept the Emir's offer and sign a friendship pact with him. After that, if we are not molested, we can turn our attention to the reconstruction of our land until some happy day we can save Prince Sahak from the Arab's clutches."

The King's decision was accepted unanimously while the princes of Syunik were effusive in their gratitude to the King for

his tender consideration of their brother still held captive by the Arabs. The next morning the treaty of mutual friendship was drafted, and signed with the King's seal, was delivered to the Arab messengers. This occasion also was signalized by the wedding of young Prince Gor and the young lady Shahandukht.

Chapter 4 The Old Flame Still Smolders

The year 925 came to its end and the land of the Armenians, thanks to the reconciliations which had been made, was in peace and tranquility. With the exception of Prince Marzpetuni, all the princes had withdrawn their troops from Yerazgavors and had retired to their native domains. However, young Prince Gor, together with his bride, was back in his father's castle of Garni.

When the King asked Marzpetuni why he did not follow the example of the other princes and go back to his home, the Prince replied that the hour of his rest had not yet arrived. "I still have a debt to pay," he added.

"You already have paid all your debts," the King said assuringly. "This is the second year of the peace and yet you are perpetually beset with cares. You saved me from the pursuit of the rebels; you tortured yourself for the unity of the princes; you organized an army almost from nothing; you defeated the enemy, dispersed the Arab bandit bands, and lastly, you reconciled me with Abas and forced the Emir to seek our friendship. What other debt is left to pay?"

"The most important of them all, Sire."

"And what is that?"

"The debt imposed by my solemn oath."

"What is this oath?" the King asked in surprise.

“The oath I swore on the grave of St. Mashtots in Garni, before my soldiers of the covenant and the people of Garni.”

“Meaning?”

“I swore never to return to my family hearth until the last Arab is driven from the land.”

The King recalled anew the story which the Prince had told him in Sevan and asked doubtfully:

“If you had made such an oath, why then did you let me become reconciled with the Emir?”

“I thought it was better that I remained an exile, rather than to risk the safety of the army.”

“You were in favor of attacking Dvin,” the King reminded, “wouldn’t that have risked the safety of the army?”

“At that time I had hoped that my loyal followers would succeed in making a secret entry into Dvin together with the Catholicos, but that hope vanished when the ‘Tyrant’ betrayed our secret.”

The King fell into thinking. He knew the Prince well, that he was as tender-hearted and affectionate toward his family as he was invincible to the enemy. He realized what this forced separation from his family meant to the Prince and he was deeply grieved. If he only could release him from the obligation of his oath. That way he could at least recompense him in a small measure for the debt he owed him. But what could he do? The only way was to break his word with the Emir, but this, as a Christian King, he could never do.

Finally the Prince had a proposition which the King accepted gladly. They could present the Emir with a perfectly legitimate demand which he could either accept or the alternative would be war. “We have no reason to break our word with the Emir but we have the right to demand the return of our confiscated property,” the Prince argued. “The seizure of the Catholicosate not only is confiscation but it is a sacrilege the like of which has never been perpetrated neither by the Persian satraps nor by the emirs who preceded the Nusr. If we do not avenge these insults, at least we can demand the return of church properties. To this end I will proceed to Vaspurakan and try to persuade the Catholicos to return here as head of the church and demand the restoration of his property. His Majesty (the Catholicos) has no reason to fear because we have the upper hand just now. If the Emir grants his demand, good and well; if not we will take by the sword what belongs to us. No self-respecting nation will refrain from breaking a treaty with a neighboring nation which violates its sacred rights.”

The King found the Prince’s argument justifiable and gave him his assent. Desirous of winning the alliance of Prince Gagik of Artsrunis in case of war, the Prince asked the King to appoint him as his plenipotentiary to that Prince. The King granted this request too with a letter of credentials written in his own hand.

A few days later Prince Marzpetuni, accompanied by the guards, departed from Shirak for the province of Vaspurakan, but before his arrival at the Artsruni capital he received word that Catholicos Hovhannes had passed away at the Monastery of Dzor.

The passing of the Catholicos grieved the Prince deeply because it upset his plans. First, it put a crimp into his plan of capturing Dvin and expelling the Arab from the land. Second, with the Catholicosate and the church estates under the rule of the Nusr, many monasteries and religious orders were subjected to privation. Third, the chance of disengaging himself from his oath and of returning to his family was now out of the question. And lastly, with the recent transfer of the seat of the Catholicosate into Vaspurakan, the prospect for the solidarity of the church was none too bright. There would be rivalries between two Sees and, who knows, endless divisions and intrigues between factions which would cause the disintegration of the institution.

Nevertheless, the Prince with all haste proceeded to the Monastery of Dzor to arrive there in time for the funeral of the Catholicos. King Gagik received him with the homage due to his rank and entertained him in his palace for some time. As a result of this visit, King Gagik accepted the King's offer of friendship and concluded a treaty with him, signed in his own hand.

Meanwhile, the question of the succession of the Catholicosate began to agitate the monastic orders of Armenia. The clergy of the northern provinces wanted to elect a successor from among their own bishops and insisted on the restoration of the Seat back to Dvin, the capital of the land, while the southern provinces insisted on the retention of the Seat in the Monastery of Dzor, with one of their own monastics being elected Catholicos. The controversy was transferred to the partisan princes and thus the division became widespread. The minor princes joined with their superiors, and the latter enlisted the princely families.

Prince Marzpetuni, a tried and tested veteran, instantly saw that the situation might easily harm the unity which he had just created and might prove a serious obstacle to his future plans. And when he saw that King Gagik sided with the southerners, he immediately wrote to the King and begged him to support the Vaspurakan clergy in deference to King Gagik. Such an arrangement would cement the alliance between the King and the Artsruni dynasty and would bring rich dividends to the Fatherland and the Throne.

The Prince wrote a similar letter to the King's brother Abas, asking him to use his influence with the King for the success of his plan. The King and his brother assented to the plan and wrote to the Prince to this respect, whereupon, the Prince informed King Gagik that his wish was granted. King Gagik was elated by the news and vowed eternal friendship with the House of Bagratunis and King Ashot.

After a time, in a conclave of the clergy at the capital of the Artsrunik, Bishop Stepannos was elected Catholicos and the ceremony of the anointment was performed in great splendor in the newly-built

Church of the Holy Cross on the Island of Aghtamar. In expression of his gratitude, King Gagik sent to King Ashot precious gifts, and he bestowed similar gifts on Prince Marzpetuni for his services. The King and the Prince were pleased not so much for the gifts as the new alliance between the two royal houses to which they attached great importance. For a small sacrifice, Prince Marzpetuni had achieved a far greater gain, and this was the opinion of both the King and his brother.

After the completion of his mission, Marzpetuni returned to the King at Yerazgavors where he took a much-needed rest and started to take up his new plans which, due to the altered situation, needed considerable re-adjustment. At first he had thought of capturing the capital by secret means and internal conspiracy in order to avoid unnecessary loss of lives. But now that King Gagik had joined the King, they no longer had any cause of fear. The Armenians could take Dvin by direct attack if necessary, should the siege take too long a time. The Prince was now thinking of making preparations during the winter, preparatory to the spring attack.

But the relentless fate continued to frustrate his plans. He had scarcely set his affairs in order and had issued his instructions to his trusted men when news came from Utik that Tslik Amram, together with the princes Gugark and Tashir, had delivered the three northern provinces to King Ber of Abkhaz. This news had a depressing effect on the Court, but it especially distressed the King and Prince Marzpetuni. When the latter went in to see the King and to get his opinion in regard to Amram's new conspiracy, he found him depressed and exhausted. All the same, the King received him cordially and the two held an intimate conversation.

"This conspiracy is nothing new," the King said dolefully, "it is the continuation of the old feud. As I told you once, that prince is not the enemy of the nation, he is my personal enemy, and therefore, his new plot is directed against me. He was inactive until today because I had fled him and lived in disgrace in the Island of Sevan. He gloated over my misfortunes and the fire of revenge was extinguished in his heart. But now that I have returned to my old throne, and thanks to you, our affairs are in better shape, it seems the old spirit of revenge has revived in him. This man thinks King Ashot is on the way to his old glory and for this reason he has delivered our provinces to our old enemy in order to embitter my heart anew. If he only knew that this wounded heart is on the brink of the grave, perhaps, as a human being, he might feel sorry and put a stop to his evil designs."

"I am willing to leave my work here, or turn it over to the Grand Prince Abas, and proceed to Utik. I may be able to forestall the danger as long as the King of Abkhaz has not yet arrived to take over his newly-acquired loot," the Prince volunteered.

"Going to Utik is important, but you already are too tired and the land of the Armenians has no other Marzpetuni. You must spare yourself."

"The Marzpetunis would be an obscure people indeed if they sat still," the Prince hastened to reply. "Command me, my King, to set out as soon as tomorrow. I might yet be able to save the day."

The King was thoughtful for a few moments then he raised his gaze to Marzpetuni. It seemed he was about to say something but held back.

“Is there any particular thing which prevents you from giving me the order?” the Prince asked.

“No, nothing at all. You are free to go and try your hand. There is a chance that you might influence him. But where do you think you might meet with Amram?”

“I can search the whole of Utik.”

“You better go straight to Tavush. You might find him there.”

“Tavush? Very well. I will start tomorrow. There’s nothing to keep me here any longer.”

“How? So soon?”

“The sooner the better.”

It seemed the King was transported with a secret and delightful feeling, not unmingled with a tinge of grief. He at once forgot the northern provinces, forgot King Ber and Tslik Amram. His mind flew to Tavush, into the secret recesses of the castle, where he was seeking the hapless, miserable captive, the beautiful princess

whose flaming eyes had once set his heart on fire and who became the cause of all his woes. How long since he had had news of her! Could it be that she was dead, or still was alive? Did she still love him, or cursed him? He could not tell.

Only once, when he entered Gugark with his Arab auxiliaries, had he heard that Amram had imprisoned his wife in a dungeon of the castle, as one doomed idiot. After that he had had no news of her. And now, Prince Marzpetuni was going to Tavush; no doubt he would bring some news of Lady Aspram. How he longed to say something about it, send her a message, command the Prince, nay, beg him, importune him to enter her cell where she was confined and speak with her, tell her that the King of the Armenians, Ashot *Yerkat*, still loved her, that he was being tortured at sight of her plight remembering her pale face, her tearful eyes...”

But how could he give such a command to Marzpetuni, that virtuous hero who knew only two sanctities in all the world — the Fatherland and the Family, the only shrines which he worshipped?

The King naturally knew this, therefore, he said nothing. He was satisfied that the Prince would surely hear something about the princess in Tavush and would bring him some news of her.

The next day, as was determined, the Prince, accompanied with his guards, departed from Yerazgavors, headed for Gugark.

Chapter 5 The End of Old Griefs

Despite the fact that the snow already had blanketed the mountains of Gugark and closed all the roads, there was feverish activity in the Castle of Tavush, preparatory to a distant journey. An army of servants were busy assembling the portable objects, packing them, and stacking provisions. Loyal villagers were scurrying inside the castle's courtyard, driving herds of pack animals. Some of them were carrying loads, other were returning after the unloading, considering how strong and durable were the pack animals. This labor was being supervised by menfolk and in the entire castle there was not a single woman. Even the moving of clothing which was the work of handmaidens, was being done by man servants. It seemed some blasting whip had driven away from the Castle all the creatures who bore the name of woman.

In one of the upper storey salons of the multi-towered castle where a huge fire was burning at the fireplace, the *Sepuh* Tslík Amram was pacing the floor. His face was sad, his brow wrinkled, he was gazing at the fire. His luxuriant beard which reached to his waist was rippling in white waves, in perfect contrast to his attire which was completely black. He no longer wore a silver belt nor carried his golden sheathed sword. The only ornament which he held in his hand was a black rosary whose beads he kept pulling as he paced the floor in slow steps.

Suddenly he stopped in front of the narrow window with multifold colorful glass and started to gaze at the glen of Tavush along the slopes of which a small band of mounted troops were galloping upwards. He strained his vision and yet he could not recognize the leader who did not look like an ordinary man, but he surmised from the uniforms of the riders that they were coming from Vostan.

When the horsemen reached the castle gate, he instantly recognized Prince Marzpetuni, and stepping out to the stone balcony, he ordered the gates to be opened.

"I wonder why he has come here, what has he got to do with me?" he thought to himself, and finding no answer he stepped inside the salon.

As he dismounted, Prince Gevorg noticed the bustle inside the courtyard and murmured to himself: "We are late; he already is leaving."

As he ascended the upper storeys of the castle the Prince noticed that the place was completely stripped — the rugs and the ornaments were piled up, the sofas had been dismantled, the candelabras had been unchained — in short, the castle was completely stripped of its decorations.

"Why so soon, in this winter?" the Prince wondered, and still he was without the answer.

When he entered the salon, the *Sepuh* was seated in front of the fire, fingering the beads of his rosary.

“What brings you here, Prince Marzpetuni?” the *Sepuh* forced a smile as he rose to meet his guest. The smile, however, could not conceal the sadness on his face.

“As you see, Lord *Sepuh*, I am here. I have come to your castle as your guest, but it seems you have purposely stripped it of its splendor.”

“God stripped it, dear Prince. He stripped the most precious ornament of my castle,” said the *Sepuh* in a shaking voice as he grasped the Prince’s hand and led him to the fireside. “Sit down and warm yourself. You must be cold. The plain of Tavush is full of bleak winds,” he continued, stirring the fire with a pair of iron tongs for a while...

“You are quite right. Your mountains pinched us a bit; our goatskins scarcely kept us from freezing.”

“How come, you remembered me in this cold winter, Lord Marzpetuni?” the *Sepuh* asked with apparent impatience.

“And how come you are leaving your land in the thick of the winter?” the Prince retorted with a mild smile.

“I have delivered my land to the King of Abkhaz, receiving in return the banks of Chorokh. I am going to take possession of my new estate,” the *Sepuh* replied directly.

“I knew that. But why in the cold of the winter?”

“To stay here one day longer is death for me. The chambers of this castle are haunted now by infernal monsters who give me no rest day and night. I am running away from them.”

“Infernal monsters? What do you mean?” Marzpetuni asked in bewilderment.

“Yes, monsters! Have you ever met them? Have you ever seen them?”

“Me? No, it seemed to the Prince that the *Sepuh* had gone mad.”

“You are a lucky man then. Whom the monsters do not torment he is a lucky man, yes indeed. There was a time when I, too, was a lucky man, but my fate destroyed your King.”

“Lord *Sepuh*!”

“Ah yes. What’s that scoundrel doing now? He still lives, is it not so? He stages parties in his court, he is thinking about recapturing his capital, and never remembers his crimes.”

“Lord *Sepuh*, I am hungry, first order some food for me,” the Prince interrupted purposely, trying to forestall the *Sepuh*’s anger.

The latter was silent for a moment, then turning to the Prince, he said, "Forgive me, Lord Marzpetuni. I was excited. I should not have behaved like this, yes, I know. But what shall I say? I am a sick man, my heart and soul are covered with wounds. Wisdom no longer guides my actions." Saying it, he clapped his hands and the guard came in.

"Tell them to fetch dinner for us," the *Sepuh* ordered.

Immediately, the servants brought in water. The princes washed and then partook of the dinner which consisted of some delicious morsels. After the dinner the *Sepuh* entertained his guest with innocent conversation in order not to excite himself, and thus, to spoil the Prince's disposition. The next morning the *Sepuh* asked Marzpetuni the object of his mission since he did not expect to stay in Tavush much longer.

"We got news in Vostan that you have joined the princes of Gugark and Tayk," the Prince began, "and have agreed to surrender the provinces of Gugark, Tayk and Utik to the King of Abkhaz. The news made a bad impression on the Court, as to myself, I was verily horrified. I have come to foil that treacherous act."

"You are too late," the *Sepuh* observed frostily.

"How come I am too late?"

"Just so. We have already completed the transaction."

"How?"

"We have signed a treaty with King Ber, delivering to him the above-mentioned provinces, and in return we have received various estates in Abkhazia."

"By what right have you done this thing?"

"By the same right which has been granted us by the King of Armenia."

"He merely appointed you as overseers of those provinces."

"But later we rebelled against him, took possession of the provinces and the Lord King was unable to seize it from us."

"All the same, these provinces were not your inheritance; you seized them by treachery."

"I don't deny that we seized them. If it were not for Tslik Amram, Gugark and Tayk would not have been separated from the King of Armenia. I myself caused this separation. You know the story, and you know the reason which made me do it."

“I know that. But haven’t you already had your revenge? You deprived the King of his possessions, you forced him to take flight, to go into hiding in Sevan for long months, finally to be caught in a fight with Beshir in which he was mortally wounded — a wound which will take him to his grave. What more do you want of him? Why do you want to require a single wrong a hundredfold? And lastly, what is the sin of the poor people of those provinces? Why are you turning them over to the foreign beast?”

“Lord Marzpetuni, you speak as if I were the guilty party. But when I remember the past and examine the present, what I have done seems trivial to me. King Ashot wronged me grievously and caused me irreparable loss. He took away from me my matchless treasure. It seemed my revenge would never be satisfied. I did relax somewhat after my revolt, my occupation of Utik, and his flight to Sevan, and I was just beginning to come to terms with my misfortunes. I tried to obliterate the memory of my foe from my mind and, indeed, I had forgotten him. But what shall I say? I can’t recall it without horror...”

“Did something else come up, Lord *Sepuh*?”

“Oh, if I only could stop talking about it!”

“Tell me, what else happened?”

“Nothing else, nothing happened.”

In uttering the last words, the *Sepuh* paled, he averted from Marzpetuni his gaze which at the moment was like a burning furnace.

“Tell me what happened, I beseech you,” the Prince pleaded.

“What happened? Well, the heavens collapsed upon me, that’s what happened. The heavens, do you understand? But no, you can’t understand it. Hell with all its terrors fell upon me, to torture a wretch like me, to torment my heart and soul.”

“Believe me, Lord *Sepuh*, I don’t get you,” the Prince said respectfully.

“I will speak more plainly. I will be tormented a few minutes longer as I repeat the terrible story.” The *Sepuh* straightened himself in his seat, pulled at the beads of his rosary, and then continued:

“When I first learned the unbelievable secret, an infernal madness seized me, I ordered my poor wife to be chained and thrown in a dark dungeon of the castle. O, why has God endowed the beasts only with devouring jaws? Does not man surpass the beast in his ferocity and cruelty? Yes, I had her confined in a dungeon, I forbade all communication with her, I made her live on a bare daily ration of food and water, to meditate and to suffer for her sin.

“Then I left Tavush and started the rebellion, the beginning and the end of which is well known to you. When I returned to Tavush I ordered the release of my poor wife. She stood there before me in her chains, trembling. O why did I not go blind in both eyes at that moment? How did I watch her misery and still remained stubborn? Her once lovely body had wasted away, her bright face had paled and the spark in her flaming eyes was gone, extinguished. She looked at me, wanted to speak, but I stopped her. Why did not the hand of God smite me down at that moment? Perchance she wanted to protest against my injustice, perchance she wanted to justify herself or to adduce new evidence which would prove her innocence. But I was cruel to her, I refused her this one chance. I glared at her with beastly eyes and reminded her of the shameful defeat and cowardly flight of her lover, the Ring.

“After that the only favor I did to her was to release her of her chains and to confine her in one of the upper levels of the castle.

At the last words Amram sighed deeply and buried his head in his hands. It seemed he could not go on. The Prince asked him to say no more if some insupportable grief prevented him from speaking.

“On the contrary, my grief forces me to speak,” the *Sepuh* continued, raising his head. “How long have I gone without speaking! How long these halls have echoed the sound of my mournful sighs, have witnessed my bitter tears! Oh, this is too, too insupportable, and yet this is the fate which has been allotted to poor mortals like us. But it seems to me these griefs would soften, would cease to persecute us so cruelly if those who surround us, the people who bear the image of our souls, would examine our hearts a moment and see the anguish which resides there. Tell me now, Lord Marzpetuni, what would you have done if you had been in my place?”

“For instance?”

“For instance, if you suddenly learned that the person you loved most had betrayed you?”

“I count no man perfect. Each of us has his faults, and therefore, I would be tolerant toward all who have sinned against me.”

“But are there no sins which are unpardonable, sins for which men would hang the sinner from a pillar, would bum him at the stake, would drown him in water?”

“Of course, there are.”

“And what is that, Prince? I want to hear it.”

“Treason against the fatherland.”

“Only that?”

“Yes, only that. That’s the only crime which is unpardonable.”

“But when your beloved betrays you? But what am I saying? How could you understand me? That’s why I said our anguish would soften if only fellow creatures could comprehend its nature and extent.”

“Go on, Lord *Sepuh*. I can understand.” “Can you? Tell me then, what would you do if you suddenly learned — forgive my presumption — that your wife, Princess Gohar, had betrayed you? Do not pass judgement with your present heart; go back to the past, become young again, remember the old fire which used to inflame your heart.”

“I don’t know. I have never experienced such grief.”

“Oh, how happy you must be! That’s the reason why the Lord Marzpetuni has worked for his home, the glory of his father-land, and has won such renown with such a clear conscience and such a tranquil heart. But I, Tslík Amram, whose heart beat no less for the fatherland, has become a traitor. Indeed, if you could comprehend the extent of my grief for a moment, you would then understand why I locked her up in the tower, her, my Aspram whom I loved as no ten hearts put together could love. Yes, I locked her up in the tower, but if you knew how much I suffered seeing her deprived of the sunshine, and left her alone in her misery. How many times I wanted to go to her, to enter her solitaire, open my arms and press her to myself, and tell her I forgive her! And yet, why should I hide my sin? The thought that she was more happy in her suffering than the idea of returning to my arms always stopped me.

“Thus, months passed. My inner pride prevented me from going to her and speaking out what my heart long since had spoken. I sank deeper and deeper in my self-pity. There were moments when my anguish was so heavy that it would stifle me, and I stifled my emotions and silently wept.

“Once, by sheer accident, I saw the maiden returning from the tower, carrying the food which had been untouched. To my inquiry, she told me that the Lady had ordered her not to bring food to her anymore. This strange request made me suspicious. Could it be that she wanted to starve to death? I wondered and my conscience hurt me. Again, I was beset by my old thoughts. Again, I decided to go to her, free her from the tower and return her to her former status of Ladyship. Tormented by conflicting thoughts, I remained there in my room for long hours. Finally, the sexton’s allelulia and the knolling of the church bells aroused me of my stupor. I sprang to my feet. ‘I am late,’ I said to myself, I must hurry and save that poor woman.’ Oh, what a moment that was! Why did not a lightning strike me down then?”

“Why, what happened?” the Prince asked in alarm.

“What happened? This is what happened. I hurried to the tower, ordered the guard to open the iron door, stepped inside the cell, and what should I see? My God! My wife, my beloved Aspram, was hanging from the ceiling. Her frail body was dangling in the air. I was horrified by the sight, it

seemed the heavens collapsed on my head and the terrors of hell engulfed me. The minute I saw the horrible image I roared like a wounded lion. The echo of my roar shook the rafters of the castle and the occupants became bewildered. I grabbed her body and pressed it to myself, then, like a madman, I ran away from the tower. For a moment I thought she still was alive, that she would open her bright eyes and would whisper into my ear. But, Alas! It was all an illusion. Aspram was dead forever, her lovely face had turned blue, her beautiful eyes, her lips were closed, and her heart had stopped beating. I saw and felt it, then I embraced the dead body and started to bewail her death.

“I don’t know what happened to me after that. For several days I was out of my wits. At the last moment, when they were lowering the casket into the grave, my heart burst again, and again I started to bemoan my loss.”

The *Sepuh* drew a deep sigh, hung his head, and relapsed into silence. The Prince who understood the depth of his anguish tried to comfort him, but his words had the opposite effect on Amram.

“Do not try to commiserate with me, Lord Marzpetuni,” he exclaimed, visibly disturbed. “You cannot comfort the man who has lost a treasure which is more precious than life, whose spirit is dead, whose heart is cold, and who lives only to suffer. Do you want to comfort me? Then show me how I can revenge myself upon my enemy and your King. Yes, only cold, inexorable, deathly revenge can comfort me now. My heart will be refreshed, my soul thrilled, once I see Ashot being tormented in the hell which I shall prepare for him. I guess you said he is a dying man. God forbid! I do not want him to die. Do you think eternity can subject him to tortures such as I want? No. Let him live until Tslik Amram prepares his hell.”

“You are too excited, Lord *Sepuh*. However, will you permit me to ask a question? A while ago you said that, after the King’s flight, your revenge had been satisfied. What is the cause of your new inflammation against him?”

“I said I had become reconciled with my misfortune, but remember, my wife hanged herself after that.”

“Was that the reason why you surrendered our ancestral provinces to King Ber?”

“Exactly. I could no longer live in Tavush; that castle had turned into a hell for me, its halls are filled with monsters, each nook and cranny of that castle reminds me of my Aspram. That’s the reason why I am running away from here.”

“Lord *Sepuh*, you could easily have moved from Tavush. Was there any need to deliver your province to King Ber?” “I did it in order to prevent Ashot from taking possession of it.”

“And do you think Ber will be able to inherit this land?”

“If he fails, at least he will make war against Ashot, will disturb his peace, will ruin his land. That’s the most important thing for me.”

Seeing that passion alone was speaking through the *Sepuh* and that his counsel would avail nothing, the Prince regretted his coming to Tavush and asked no more questions.

Two days later the *Sepuh* gathered his belongings and moved from Tavush, leaving his estates to the King of Abkhaz, whose loyal servants had already arrived to take possession. Prince Marzpetuni, likewise, took his leave, but, instead of proceeding to Vostan, he headed for the princes of Gugark and Tayk in the hope of persuading them to revoke their promise to King Ber.

Before leaving Tavush, however, he wrote a letter to the King explaining to him the cause of the *Sepuh*’s new treachery. Furthermore, he described the causes of the *Sepuh*’s grievance, even justifying him, and argued that not all men possessed the virtue of subordinating personal interests to the common good, that the *Sepuh*, before being an Armenian patriot, essentially was a human being, made of flesh and blood, and consequently, he could not bear the unconscionable wrong which he had received from his friend.

Still under the influence of the *Sepuh*’s words and his sad departure, the Prince wrote his letter in such a style which in reality was a direct condemnation of the King. He did not foresee that his writing would affect the King’s health which, without it, already had been afflicted by too many blows of fate. Some two days later when the messenger had already arrived at Shirak, he reflected upon that letter and regretted it. However, it was too late now.

In his letter the Marzpetuni has asked the King immediately to send *Sepuh* Vahram at the head of a few strong regiments to the region of Utik, to occupy the provinces of Utik, the Gugark and the Tayk before the arrival of the Abkhaz. Some ten days later *Sepuh* Vahram, without awaiting Marzpetuni’s instructions, seized the fortifications of Utik and cleared the region of all followers of the King of Abkhaz. The native population being opposed to foreign rule supported the royal troops everywhere, thus facilitating the *Sepuh*’s operations. *Sepuh* Vahram had the same success in Gugark. Then, turning to the south, he entered the land of Tayk where he met Prince Marzpetuni. The latter informed him that the fortifications of Tayk which were closed to Abkhazia, had already been occupied by Abkhaz troops.

But since winter was approaching and the occupation of Tayk presented an extensive campaign, it was deemed necessary to bring fresh troops from Vostan. Accordingly, it was decided to camp the army near Phanaskerd, in a plain of the same name which was the junction of Gugark and Tayk, and wait there until spring.

Meanwhile, the Prince did not remain idle. He started secret negotiations with the secondary princes in an effort to win their friendship. And since the latter still were loyal to the throne, they gladly accepted all his propositions concerning the forthcoming campaign against the Abkhaz.

With the arrival of spring when the snow melted and the roads were clear, Prince Marzpetuni marched his army first of all against Panaskert. The commander of the fort, in accordance with a previous agreement, surrendered his fort and the town to the Prince. The latter reinstated the Commander in his post and after replenishing his force with a company of guards proceeded with his army toward Utik. And since an encounter with the enemy here was inevitable, the Prince sent word to the King to hasten some reinforcements by way of Araratian Basen, planning to join them at the source of the Chorokh River.

While the messenger was on his way a new messenger arrived from Vostan, bringing a letter from Grand Prince Abas announcing the critical condition of the King and asking him to hurry to Vostan at once.

The Prince paled while reading the letter. "Some evil genius is persecuting us," he said to his fellow warrior the *Sepuh*. "You stay here with your regiments and guard the border while I proceed to Vostan."

"You go ahead," the *Sepuh* replied assuringly. "I will fall back on Panaskert to ensure the army against any surprise attack. If you need my help, send me a messenger and I will hurry at once to Shirak."

When Marzpetuni arrived at Yerazgavors the King was dying but all the same he was glad at the arrival of his loyal prince.

"My only wish was to see you for the last time," the King said, extending his hand to the Prince. "Come closer, my Prince, and tell me that you forgive me."

"For what crime of yours, my Lord?" Deeply moved the Prince knelt down and kissed the King's hand.

"My crimes are many, I cannot recount them all. This much I will tell you that I am the cause of all your troubles. Forgive me. Forgive your King."

"My Lord King, we are fighting against external evils. They come from far off."

"I am the cause of those evils too. The letter you sent me from Tavush was a truthful sermon. I thank you for it. It opened the doors of freedom to me. If you knew how happy I am to be rid of my sufferings at last."

The Prince understood the hint, and although he was convinced that the King was happy to die, he nevertheless was deeply grieved that his letter had accelerated the crisis.

“It is you who should forgive me, Sire,” the Prince said sorrowfully. “I jeopardized your health by my indiscretion.”

“Not at all. That single step which you call ‘indiscreet’ is the crowning glory of all your services to the Throne. Ashot *Yerkat* is the Jonah of the Armenians and it is because of him that the Armenian sea has become stormy. Marzpetuni’s efforts cannot pacify the storm as long as ‘Jonah’ is on the ship of salvation. Throw me into the sea and the ship and the crew will be saved.”

The King fell silent for a moment, then opening his eyes he looked around. Standing over his head he saw the Queen and his brother Abas.

“Behold I go away,” he said in a faint voice. “Soon I shall be lost in the infinity of the sea. Before you is life, with its evils and its attractions. Try to enjoy it wisely, not as I have done, uselessly. My beloved brother Abas, to you I leave the Fatherland, loaded with her pains and afflictions. Inherit the former, and take good care of the latter. You were lucky in your family life; you will be lucky in your kingdom, for he who is a good father to his children will be a good father to his subjects.

“And to you my hapless Queen, I leave you grief, mourning, and bitter memories. I would have wished that you would forget me, that you would never remember my name and my deeds, but alas, that is impossible for you. At least do not curse me, do not curse your poor husband and king, for I shall be tortured in hell twice as much, should your curse reach the eternal throne.”

Two days later the king passed away. The King’s physician confirmed that he died of his old wound. And that was what the people believed. But at the court the people insisted that the suicide of Princess Aspram hastened his end. The poor King had been unable to stand the pangs of his conscience. The spirit of the dead victim and the tears of the living Queen persecuted him, and he decided to die. But no one knew for sure what angel brought him his death.

Chapter 6 The Old Foe and the New King

The news of the King’s death swiftly spread throughout the land whereupon the Armenian princes with their contingents, the Armenian Catholicos, and the civil and religious dignitaries of the land hastened to Yerazgavors to attend the funeral. In a stately ceremony befitting a king, the body was moved from Yerazgavors and taken to Bagaran, the traditional mausoleum of the Bagratunis, and was finally put to rest at the Holy Cathedral, the resting place of his martyred father Smbat and his martyred brother Mushegh.

The King's death was bitterly mourned by the Queen, his brother Abas and the rest of the royal family. Prince Marzpetuni, who had been his childhood companion, was the most disconsolate of all. A playmate of childhood days, fellow trainees in arms when they were mere lads, aide de camp in his youth, and after his accession to the throne his trusted friend and fellow warrior, the Prince had been deeply attached to his King. For many years he had been the right-hand man of Ashot, had fought side by side with him, had won and lost with him, had shared in his joys and sorrows, had laughed and wept with him. At that moment he was recalling the entire eventful past — Ashot *Yerkat's* troublesome and stormy reign. He was recalling the days when he was enraptured by the young King's heroic exploits, the roar of his voice on the battle field, his daring and impetuous assaults on the enemy and the blows of his sword against his foes. How he had rejoiced in his heart when he first realized that God had called the King to be the savior of the Fatherland, to wipe off the foreigner's insult and to restore the former glory of the ancestral throne.

But, alas! A weakness in his make-up had undermined his greatness — the gnawing worm of passion had overthrown the mighty oak, this magnificent handiwork. And now, finished, he lay under the cold earth, his heart no longer sensitive, inaccessible to love or tears. And yet he had taken with him great hopes and expectations — a vast country, a populous family whose members numbered in millions, deprived of countless blessings just because of him, left in insecurity and a grave crisis, menaced by enemies and ambitious relatives. All this would have been different if the only man to whom the fate of the Fatherland had been committed had been unlike other mortals, if he had not succumbed to his passion, or if he had sacrificed that passion to a far more sacred sentiment — the love of the Fatherland.

But while Prince Marzpetuni was being tormented by these thoughts another man was wholly engrossed with different sentiments. The King's end had put into his mind entirely different ideas. The earth which covered the King's body would, he thought, bring forth a new life and new glories for himself. That man was Ashot the Tyrant who still aspired to be king of Armenia. Seeing the vast concourse at Bagaran attending the King's funeral, he thought first this was the opportunity to show his generosity to the army and the people, and secondly, as soon as the mourning days were over, to raise the question of the succession since the conditions favored his cause as long as the army was away from the capital and the princes were in Bagaran. Thus, he could seize without difficulty the Court and its treasures and arrest Abas and his princes.

With this aim in view for several days he generously entertained not only the royal and princely families but the royal troops and the vast multitude which had thronged in Bagaran from near and far. Besides, he distributed large sums in alms for the needy, ostensibly for the salvation of the deceased King's soul. All this made a profound impression on the public in regard to the "Tyrant" and even a few of the princes looked upon him with great admiration for his generosity.

Encouraged by his initial success, the “Tyrant” now set himself to his primary objective. First, he sent messengers to Nusr advising him of his intention and asking his aid in case of need. The latter who was looking for just such an excuse to take his old revenge joyfully accepted the “Tyrant’s” proposition.

Next, the “Tyrant” ordered his troops at Yeraskhadzor slowly to advance toward Yerazgavors, without giving rise to any suspicion. The arrest of Abas and his loyal followers was the next step in his scheme. And to insure the loyalty of the army after this treachery, he commissioned his agents to bribe the leaders of the army.

After having made these dispositions he broached the neutral princes to obtain their opinion in regard to the future king. He hoped to discover malcontents among them who would gladly join his cause but in this he was greatly disappointed because the princes to a man pointed to Abas as the successor.

“He is the only legal successor and the people look to him as their next king,” they told him. It was their fond wish to see the Prince of Princes on his brother’s throne as soon as possible. Even the Catholicos urged the princes to hasten the coronation of Abas before the enemies took a hand in the matter.

The “Tyrant” naturally was displeased by all this but he concealed his feelings until the greater part of the princes had left Bagaran. When the customary days of mourning were over, all that were left in Bagaran were the Queen and her attendants, Prince Abas with his retinue, David, the Lord of Gardman, Prince Marzpetuni and his son Gor. The latter, however, was outside the city, commanding the troops encamped near Akhurian.

As for Prince Marzpetuni, he was impatient for the waiting. There was so much to be done and he eagerly awaited the day when Abas, having completed the allotted days of mourning, would return to Yerazgavors and prepare for the succession. Like the Catholicos, he thought it imperative to crown the new king before enemies and traitors had time to rally partisans and disturb the peace of the land. To this end, he naturally had consulted with the loyal princes and ensured their cooperation.

But how great was his surprise and apprehension when Prince Smbat of the Syuniks sent him word that, after leaving Bagaran, he had met a few regiments of Ashot the Tyrant, advancing from Yeraskhadzor to Yerazgavors. Prince Smbat had seen a sinister motive in this move and advised Marzpetuni to take precautionary measures.

The Prince received the news while he was with the army and still was hesitating when his loyal servant Yeznik brought him other alarming news. For some days they had been distributing free provisions to the army from the storehouse in Bagaran, saying, every Armenian soldier in Bagaran

can freely benefit from the storehouse of the *Sparapet*. Besides, everyone was singing the praises of the *Sparapet* for his generosity, and boasting that his sergeants were richer than our captains.

The Prince was furious with rage hearing all this. He instantly summoned Prince Gor and explained to him the entire situation.

“From all signs it is apparent that the Tyrant is up to his old tricks. I never dreamed he would stoop so low as to take advantage of the mourning days. I am going to the city now to urge the Queen and the King's brother to leave Bagaran at once, no matter how contrary to the accepted custom. Let them observe the mourning at the Court. Keep your eyes open and watch over both the army and those who enter or come out of the city. We are in for some very unpleasant developments.”

Having given his instructions, the Prince mounted his steed and galloped toward the Tyrant's mansion. Yeznik followed him. He reached the mansion just when the Tyrant and Abas were ascending the citadel, presumably to inspect Ashot's newly-built castle. In front of the mansion stood a company of guards, awaiting their master's command.

“Where are you going, Sire?” the Prince asked Abas with a quizzical look.

“By way of a distraction my Uncle asked me to ascend the citadel and inspect his newly built castle,” Abas replied naively.

“You might accompany us if you wish,” the Tyrant interposed sweetly. “I would be highly pleased if Prince Marzpetuni approves of my architectural taste.”

“You forget I saw your architectural handiwork when Catholicos Hovhannes had sought refuge there,” the Prince replied frostily.

“Doesn't matter. Join us just the same, the season is warm and pleasing,” insisted Ashot.

“Illustrious Sire, your castle is beautiful and strong. The Prince of Princes no doubt will approve of it. Still we must respect the Queen's feelings,” the Prince objected.

“And what does that mean?” asked Abas, surprised.

“It means we are still in mourning,” replied Marzpetuni.

“The living are not buried with the dead, Prince Gevorg,” the Tyrant observed with a false smile.

“True enough, but people ordinarily do not forget the dead so quickly.”

“Lord Marzpetuni, it's not up to you to give orders to your Chief of Princes; he is your king now,” the Tyrant observed sharply.

“Yes, he is my King. Long live Abas the King of the Armenians!” Marzpetuni took off his helmet and stared at the Tyrant.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Abas felt that the two antagonists had some secret of which he was not aware.

“Sire, did you ask to ascend the castle?” the Prince asked Abas without answering his question.

“No. It was my Uncle who suggested the idea and I am grateful to him for his consideration.”

“That’s right. It was I who suggested it. And now, Prince Marzpetuni, what right have you to make needless protests before my Royal Highness?” The Tyrant was glaring at the Prince.

The latter did not answer, but turning to Abas said gently:

“Sire, your servant humbly begs you not to go through with this. If you need any distraction from your grief, please let’s go to the camp. The banks of the Akhurian river are very pleasant just now. The sun is so warm there.”

Before Abas could reply the Tyrant shouted at the Prince, “Why don’t you answer my question, Prince Marzpetuni?”

“Before I answer your question, I will ask you a question of my own. Tell me, why are your troops advancing from Yeraskhadzor to Yeraskhavors?”

“My troops?” the Tyrant was confused.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Abas asked in alarm.

“The fact of the matter is our host is planning to spring a surprise on us while we sit here cozily,” the Prince said icily.

“You lie!” exclaimed the Tyrant

“It’s your ‘Royal Highness’ who lies,” Marzpetuni replied indignantly, losing all patience.

“You dare go that far?” The Tyrant turned to his aide and shouted, “Arrest this scoundrel.”

Several guards moved forward to arrest the Prince, but the latter instantly was on guard. “The man is not bom,” he roared angrily, “who will dare arrest Marzpetuni before killing him.” He drew his sword. “Come on, try your prowess, you brave men of Bagaran.”

The minute Yeznik saw this he flew to his horse and sped to the camp. Meanwhile the guards who were ordered to arrest the Prince stood rooted to the ground.

“What does this mean, illustrious Sire? Is it possible that the scion of the Bagratunis could stoop so low?” Abas spoke.

“What did you say? Stoop so low? Right in front of my guards?” The Tyrant was furious.

“You are trampling under all the sacred laws of hospitality; you are insulting the memory of the dead King. What other name can I give to your conduct?”

“Are you repeating your insult?”

“I can go farther. You are a traitor,” replied Abas indignantly, then turning to Marzpetuni he commanded:

“Prince, give the Queen my compliments and tell her we will leave here today.”

“No one will leave here,” the Tyrant rejoined sharply.

“Leaving depends upon our will.”

“And the permission depends on us.”

“Permission? Are you arresting us?” Abas was trembling with rage.

“No. You will be my guest for a long time,” the Tyrant sneered.

“Was that the reason why you were leading me to your castle, to imprison me there?”

“Yes, if it pleases you to think so.”

“This is not mere suspicion. It’s the truth. Prince Marzpetuni well surmised your intentions.”

“If so, that’s the way it’s going to be. No one has a right to get out of this mansion. Guards, do your duty.” Saying it, he turned his back and headed for the mansion.

“Saul, Saul, it is hard for thee to kick against the prodder.” Drawing his sword, Abas intercepted the Tyrant. “Where do you think you are going? Stop and repeat that command. You have no right to insult the heir to the Bagratuni throne. Stop and tell me who you are.”

“I am the King of the Armenians and you are my subject,” the Tyrant replied, turning to the guards, “Why are you standing still, you scoundrels?”

“That’s right. Why are you standing still?” Marzpetuni advanced on them, his sword drawn. The latter surrounded him and were trying to disarm him when Abas joined the fray sword in hand.

“Onward. let’s do our duty.” The clash of sword and shields and the ensuing tumult was heard in the mansion and presently Abas’ guards rushed to the scene from all sides turning the fray into a regular

fight. Fortunately the fight was far from the women's quarters and the Queen and her retinue were safe. However, the conspirators were too many for the defenders and it was a matter of time until Marzpetuni and Abas would be subdued. Providentially, just as they were about to disarm Marzpetuni the trumpet sounded and Prince Gor's company fell upon the conspirators with drawn swords. Before long the spacious courtyard was filled with soldiers. New reinforcements arrived and presently the Tyrant's castle was surrounded on all sides. In a glimpse the traitor guards had disappeared, leaving behind a few corpses which the royal troops trampled under.

As to the Tyrant, he had made his escape the minute he heard the sound of the trumpet. Having wardened the danger, Marzpetuni and Abas hastened to the women's quarters and quieted their fears.

"Let us leave this place at once," the Queen urged. "I don't want to have to curse this city where my beloved rests on account of future evils."

"We will leave today, but just give me enough time to arrest this traitor. The snake will sting again as long as his head is not crushed," begged Abas.

"Leave him alone, dear Abas. God will punish the guilty. Ashot has sinned against his guests, but the guests should not be ungrateful to their host."

"Why don't you say the traitor?" exclaimed Marzpetuni.

"Call him what you will, but leave him be and let's leave this place," the Queen repeated. The Queen was supported by Lady Gurgendukht, and the Princesses Gohar and Shahandukht and the rest of the ladies of the court, but the guards insisted that the Tyrant be arrested. To prevent future disturbances, Abas finally yielded to the Queen's wishes. The same night the royal family, accompanied by Abas and his guards, Marzpetuni and the royal troops left the City of Bagaran for Yerazgavors.

As to those forces of Ashot the Tyrant who at his command had occupied Yerazgavors, when they learned that their master's plans had miscarried and that Abas and Marzpetuni were marching on the city, they hastily abandoned the place and detoured to Shirak in order to avoid an encounter with the royal army as they headed for Bagaran.

On their way to Yerazgavors, near a small stream called Horomos, the royal army came upon a body of Arab cavalry which likewise was returning from Yerazgavors. Having caught sight of the Armenian army from a distance the Arab cavalry at first tried to escape but upon Marzpetuni's command the royal vanguard gave chase and completely surrounded it. Seeing they were hopelessly outnumbered, the Arabs did not even put up a resistance. Upon questioning, their commander told Abas that they had come to the aid of the King of Bagaran at the command of Emir Nusr, but having been deserted by their allies they were returning to Dvin.

Abas was so enraged by this revelation that he almost ordered to put to the sword the whole company but Marzpetuni restrained him saying; “God is working with us, Sire. We could not very well break our treaty with the Emir without incurring the anger of the Chief Emir, but now Nusr has broken his word and we are free to attack Dvin. Even the Chief, Emir, cannot justify his lieutenant’s action.” Convinced of the wisdom of the Prince’s advice, Abas commanded to disarm the Arabs, seize their horses, and send them back to Dvin on foot. “Go tell the Emir we will soon come and settle his account,” he admonished their commander.

Marzpetuni’s first act upon arrival at Yerazgavors was to send messengers to Vaspurakan to remind King Gagik of his friendship pact with the King and together with the Catholicos to come to Yerazgavors for the coronation of Abas. King Gagik pleaded his advanced age and begged Abas to have the coronation in the old capital of the Artsrunis in Vaspurakan. Furthermore, he argued, his capital would offer him greater security against internal and external foes who might attempt to frustrate the coronation.

Abas and Marzpetuni having approved of this plan King Gagik at once sent messengers to all the provinces of Armenia, inviting the princes and the clan chiefs to come to the City of Van and crown Abas on the throne of the Bagratunis. Having heard of Ashot the Tyrant's treachery, the princes immediately responded to the call and without losing time hastened to Van.

In 928, in the magnificent Cathedral of St. John (Saint Hovhannes) in the City of Van, in the presence of King Gagik and his courtiers, the princes and the dignitaries of Armenia, Catholicos Theodoros crowned Abas and Lady Gurgendukht, the King, and Queen of Armenia. The new King rewarded his princes with gifts and promotions, but the greatest honor he reserved for Prince Marzpetuni, appointing him *sparapet* of his armies — tax privilege which should be transmitted from generation to generation.

Chapter 7 The Capture of Dvin

After his coronation, for a few weeks, King Abas remained the guest of Gagik Artsruni, King of Vaspurakan. Gagik entertained Abas with feasting, hunting expeditions, and showing him the natural and artificial fortifications of his domain.

While this was going on, Gevorg Marzpetuni, the new Commander-in-chief of Abas’s armies, was occupied with entirely different activities. His first thought was the consolidation of the union among the Araratian and southern principalities, and second, to persuade the remaining princes to his plan of marching against the City of Dvin, and thus, by occupying the capital, to remove once and forever all traces of foreign influence from the land of Armenia.

Meanwhile the Arab Emir was not sitting idle. He knew that Abas had been crowned king at Vaspurakan and that the greater part of the Armenian princes had joined him. And since he had committed the indiscretion of supporting Ashot the Tyrant's conspiracy, thus having violated his oath of friendship with Abas, it was plain that the latter, after his coronation, would seek his revenge, especially since he had specifically threatened him to that effect. Therefore, the Emir in his turn was preparing for the worst.

First, he cemented his ties with Ashot the Tyrant, obtaining his promise to support him with his troops in case Abas attacked him. Next, he sought fresh reinforcements from the Supreme Emir on the pretext that the Arab estates in Armenia were in danger. But the Supreme Emir, being occupied with disturbances in other parts of his realm, disregarded Nusr's request. Thereupon, the Emir joined the semi-independent Emirs of Mesopotamia and the Gardman princes, and having been strengthened by their auxiliaries, he started to fortify Dvin and the surroundings.

The forts of Dvin and Artashat were made secure by select garrisons and plentiful supplies. These two forts, close together, were linked by secret underground communication lines which afforded shelter in case either was captured in time of war. Next, he divided his force into four parts: the first being charged with the defense of the inner walls; the second was to watch over the outer bastions; the third was to flood the moat around the city and have charge of the portable bridges; and the fourth was entrusted with the defense of Taperakan, the famous large bridge of Artashat over which the enemy could approach the City of Dvin.

Besides, he divided his cavalry into four advance contingents which he sent to guard all the main roads to Dvin.

Notwithstanding all these preparations, the Emir still hoped to escape the revenge of the Armenians because he was familiar with their peaceful nature and still believed he could win the heart of the Armenian King and restore the former friendship.

To this end he sent messengers loaded with gifts to Vaspurakan, to felicitate King Abas on his coronation and to seek a treaty of peace. Abas turned back the Arab ambassadors and their gifts with the grim reply: "Tell the Emir that the Armenian King will receive his felicitations in Dvin."

This was enough to impress the Emir that the King no longer would be deceived by him nor would forgive his perfidy. Accordingly, he instantly ordered his troops to prepare for the fight.

On the other hand, the army of King Abas, which consisted largely of Araratian and Artsruni contingents, was marching very slowly, because, in accordance with a previous agreement, the Lord of Mok and the Patriarch of Aghdznik would join the King with their troops in the Plain of Sharur, the princes of Syunik would enter Mazaz and together with the troops of Garni and Gegha would invade Urtsadzor. *Sepuh* Vahram, his rear made secure by the arming of the whole of Gugark, would

descend with his troops into Shirak, and joining the forces of Yerazgavors, would march to the Plain of Dvin. To give time for their assembly the King's army was to proceed slowly because the Armenian princes wanted to lay siege to Dvin and to attack it with the concerted forces.

But in Dvin the Arabs were feverishly busy with their preparations, piling ammunition near the city walls, filling the armories with inflammable materials, storing up debris to fill up the moats, arming the bastions with iron hooks and battering implements, and piling up rocks with which to shatter battering rams and scaling ladders. In short, they were busy from morning till evening, setting up death-dealing instruments, hoping thus to cause a great slaughter among the besiegers.

Following the completion of these inner preparations, the Emir ordered his men to fill up the moat with water, and presently, hundreds of Arab soldiers loaded with spades hastened to the Channel of Artashat to break the dams and to turn the water toward Dvin.

But days passed and yet the soldiers of King Abas were not in sight. The Arab cavalry which was guarding the road to Nakhichevan, daily brought news that King Abas was still camped at Sharur. For this reason, the Arabs relaxed their vigilance for a time and gave themselves to feasting and revelling. Even those who were working on the channel became sluggish. In several days they had hardly broken a part of the dam.

However, the forces of King Abas, now reinforced by the contingents of Mok and Aghdznik, had long since withdrawn from Sharur by night, leaving behind empty tents and a few regiments as decoy, to make the Arab scouts guarding the road to Nakhichevan think the King's army still was there. As a matter of fact, the King's army had been divided into several parts and was converging on Dvin through unknown trails.

The various allied forces were about to unite when Marzpetuni got word that the Arabs already had started to break the dams of the channel to fill the moat of Dvin. The Commander-in-chief who was inclined to give his troops a few days rest at Urtsadzor or was terribly alarmed at this ominous news. Filling the moat would present a number of serious obstacles. First, the army would be unable to approach the city gates, and therefore, the attack would fail. Second, it would take a long time and labor to plug the dams and even a longer time to fill the flooded moat with gravel, at least in a few places, to enable the soldiers to reach the wall. Third, the operation would cost quite a few Armenian lives since the walls were well guarded by the Arab bowmen.

The Commander-in-chief explained all this to the King and urged the imperative necessity of taking a few regiments and stopping the opening of the channel at Artashat. The Allied princes found Marzpetuni's proposition very reasonable, whereupon, the King appointed Prince Babgen, an expert on the region of Artashat, to lead the contingents of Vanand and Syunik on this secret mission.

By sunset Prince Babgen and his troops reached the Azat River plain and started to advance on Dvin. And since they were marching through the Forest of Khosrovakert which spread from the plain of Azat to the base of Gegha mountains, their advance was unnoticed by the Arab patrol guards who at the time were wandering in the plain of Dvin.

At nightfall the Armenians had crossed the Medzamor and were advancing toward Artashat, and although the soldiers were tired, the Prince would give them no rest since each lost hour was loaded with peril. He was, however, forced to call a halt a few leagues from Artashat until his advance guards who had gone to scout the channel returned. If the channel had been opened and the moat was filled, there was of course no sense in proceeding further. Such a step would endanger the safety of his troops to say nothing of betraying the King's arrival to the enemy.

Upon the scouts' report that only a few yards of land separated the channel from the dam the Prince gave the order to advance. As a matter of fact, only a few steps separated the two. Beshir, the Commander, was personally supervising the operations. Mounted on his Arabian steed, he scurried back and forth, encouraging and urging his workers. He seemed to want to see the opening of the dam with his own eyes before he departed.

Suddenly, from the side of Artashat, the Armenians fell upon the Arabs with wild shouts and started to slaughter them with their swords and javelins. The attack was so sudden and furious that no Arab dared to resist. Thrown into confusion, and terrified, they threw aside their spades and pick-axes and stalled to flee in the direction of Dvin and Artashat. The furious Beshir, with sword unsheathed, shouted orders to rally his men but no one would hear him. A few dozens of valiant men rushed at the Armenians with their spades but they were slaughtered on the spot. Seeing his utter discomfiture, then Beshir spurred his horse and fled to Dvin. The Armenians gave chase to the fleeing Arabs, then returned and seized the channel.

The Beshir had escaped with the intention of bringing reinforcements from Dvin and continuing the fight, but the Emir, who was a discreet warrior, would not let his soldiers leave the city.

"Since we don't know the exact number of the Armenians, or where they are entrenched, and since darkness prevents us from scouting their power, it is better that we do not risk the safety of our troops. In the morning, with the light of God, we shall see everything and will make the necessary dispositions," Nusr argued, and Beshir agreed with him.

Great was the Arabs' surprise when the next morning they saw that the force which had seized the channel consisted of only a few companies. Beshir was furious with mortification, to think that he, the leader of valiant Arabs, had fled before such a small force.

"I will massacre them right this minute," he bellowed, purple with rage "Not a single Armenian will escape my sword."

Heading a few companies of his fiercest warriors, Beshir was about to rush out of the city. But the Emir, who at the time was watching the plain of Dvin from a tall minaret of his mansion, saw that a large company of horsemen was advancing from the west, namely the road to Karin where he had sent no patrol guards.

“Our allies are coming, they are Ashot’s troops,” he shouted at Beshir who was standing in front of the mansion, issuing orders to his troops.

“We will finish them off without their assistance,” Beshir replied boastfully, and lining up his company he came out of the walls of Dvin.

Prince Babgen’s position was grave. Altogether he had 500 troops, and although they were the bravest of the brave, nevertheless they could not hope to resist long against such superior numbers. Besides, they were out in the open, between Artashat and Dvin, unprotected on all sides and with no time to erect barricades. The Arabs could easily surround them and massacre them to the last man. Their only salvation lay in retreat. On the other hand, they did not want to retreat because, doing so, would leave the channel to the Arabs who could complete the operation in half an hour and turn the water toward Dvin. This would nullify their entire victory, as well as their hopes for the future.

In sending the Prince on this mission King Abas had assured him that he himself, together with his army, would be at the gates of Dvin in the morning. And now the sun was up and still the royal army was nowhere in sight, not even the vanguard. Prince Babgen’s scouts who had watched the hills of Artashat from all sides came back to report that they had seen a cavalry company on the road to Karin speeding toward Dvin, but elsewhere, they had seen no one except the Arab patrols.

“Only the traitor’s troops can come from the road to Karin,” Babgen observed “We must expect our salvation from the plain of Dvin.”

“Or from heaven,” commented one of his aides.

“If it is the will of God,” added the Prince solemnly.

Just then the southern gates of Dvin were thrown open and the Arab troops, to the blare of the trumpets, rushed out toward the channel of Artashat.

Prince Babgen already had lined up his small company into a triangle and was issuing orders, when the clash came, to split the attackers into two parts and then start the fight. Such a strategy would break up the force of the initial impact and would afford plenty of leeway for the wielding of their weapons.

The minute the Prince heard the sound of the trumpet he mounted his stallion, and baring his sword, spoke to his soldiers:

“My beloved warriors. We are few in numbers and the enemy is powerful. But our cause is right, while theirs is wrong. God will help the just and his arm is the most powerful of all. Face the enemy without fear nor turn your backs to him. God will help you to vanquish him the second time, but those of us who may fall in battle, let them be comforted in the thought that they die for the Fatherland and the Holy Cross which is gazing upon us from the heights of Dvin.

Saying it, the Prince took off his helmet and facing the dome of the Church of St. Gregory, he prayed: “Help thou us, O holy mother church. Our fight and death are for the liberation of thy children. Do not let the enemy boast that he vanquished the holy cross.”

He put on his helmet, and wielding his sword in the air, shouted, “On the enemy.”

The brave men of Syunik and Vanand followed him with wild shouts. The Arabs met the Armenians with similar shouts and screams. It was a clash of the brave with the brave. The swords shone and the lances were wielded right and left with furious impact. The attack was so furious and the clash so shocking that in an instant both lines were broken. The Vanandians were separated from the Siunis, and the latter were broken among themselves. The Arab ranks, in turn, were hopelessly shattered. A part of the Armenians repelled their right wing while the latter pressed the Armenian left. Thus, the ranks being broken, the fighting was diffused on a number of centers. This circumstance worked to the advantage of the Armenians who, having plenty of freedom of motion, fought more successfully. The Emir, who was watching the course of the battle from his minaret, seeing the vigorous resistance of the Armenians, sent fresh reinforcements to his troops. The fresh attack slowly forced the Armenians to yield ground. Each of their companies was surrounded by overwhelming numbers of enemy troops. The moment seemed hopeless. Prince Babgen, who had been fighting furiously, seeing the new attack, stopped for a moment, and turning to the Mother Church of Dvin, devoutly prayed:

“O thou Cross of St. Gregory the Illuminator! Wilt thou endure our massacre and give the Arab the victory who is scorning thy sanctity? Prove to the enemy, O holy church, that our trust in thee was not in vain. Show him the power of thy right arm.”

Saying it, he swooped on the enemy with brandished sword and started to defend the weakened flank of his warriors. But neither his heroism nor the valor of his soldiers seemed to prevail upon superior numbers. On the contrary, in a number of spots, the Armenians were finally subdued. They would gladly have sought safety in flight if they did not fear complete annihilation. One more effort and the Arabs were about to sound the trumpet of victory. But just then they heard the thunderous shouts of a huge Armenian army. *Sepuh* Vahram, sword in hand, fell upon the Arabs like a swirling cyclone. He was followed by the warriors of Gugark, Basen and Shirakan. They fell upon the Arabs like a cloudburst, slaughtering them ruthlessly, some by the sword, some by the spear, and many were trampled under the hooves of the horses.

Prince Babgen was surprised at the miracle. He could not account for *Sepuh* Vahram's sudden appearance out of nowhere. As a matter of fact, the cavalry force coming from the west which the Emir had mistaken for the troops of his ally, Ashot the Tyrant, was in reality *Sepuh's* cavalry which, at the order of the King, had evaded the Arab patrols and had arrived on the scene at the most critical moment of the fight.

Sepuh's sudden appearance instantly changed the entire complexion of the battle. The Arabs were taken by surprise while the warriors of Syunik and Vanand, taking courage, fought all the more furiously. Thousands of flashing swords, spears swaying, helmets being cloven through, armor being pierced, shields being broken. The shouts of the victors and the moaning cries of the fallen, the clash of arms clamored the air, filling the entire plain.

But the star of victory seemed to incline toward the Armenians. Confounded by the furious charge of the newcomers and severely broken, the Arabs started to fall back in a number of places. Seeing the panic of his troops Beshir ordered retreat sounded to save the remainder from the massacre. But it was not an orderly retreat: the Armenians gave chase to the fleeing.

Presently the gates of Dvin were opened to receive the fleeing general, whereupon *Sepuh* conceived a daring plan. He ordered his troops enter the city together with the fleeing Arabs but Prince Babgen, who was a better strategist, stopped him, arguing that the safety of the troops might be endangered inside the city.

Satisfied with their victory the Armenians returned to the plain by the channel. In the evening, when the fight was over and the Arabs were securely enclosed inside the walls of Dvin, the King arrived with his royal army and the contingents of *Sparapet* Gevorg and the Allied Princes. The King's army, at the orders of the Commander-in-chief, surrounded the city on all sides.

Seeing the city moat was still dry, and hearing of the splendid victory, the King was very happy and in token of his gratitude he embraced and kissed Prince Babgen and *Sepuh* Vahram. Then he ordered the army to stage a great bonfire for the night.

When darkness fell and the huge wood piles were set on fire the City of Dvin presented a magic spectacle. The flames of hundreds of pyres rising to the skies illuminated the whole surroundings with a cloak of deep red. The walls and the bastions of the capital were enveloped in fire and the observer from a distance thought the entire city was on fire. Its tall mansions, its colonnaded palaces, the domed churches with their shining crosses, the tall minarets of the Emir's palace and the Arab mosques with their golden crescents stood out in brilliant, shining colors against the darkness of the night, lending the city a sort of mysterious appearance.

To the observer from the heights of Dvin, however, it was an entirely different panorama. The King's army which surrounded the city on all sides and even in daylight looked formidable, looked ten times

as awesome and terrifying in the darkness of the night. The flaming light from hundreds of burning pyres, it seemed, doubled and tripled the number of the troops, while the singing, the tumult and the shouts of the victorious troops made the besieged Emir very uneasy.

The Armenians of Dvin, on the other hand, secretly were thrilled although they did not dare to give free expression to their exultation. The thought of Emir's rule would soon be ended and that the proud Arab would finally bow before the King's victorious banners filled their hearts with infinite joy. They murmured prayers to God, young and old, women and children, that the good Lord would glorify his name by leading victory to the Armenian Cross and the Faith of the Illuminator.

Watching all this from the minaret of his palace, the Emir was beside himself with rage. Putting the blame of all these failures and misfortunes on his commanders he started to curse them.

Finally he summoned Beshir to take counsel with him. "As it looks," he said, "these Armenians are too numerous and too powerful for us to resist, should they attack us. It seems to me there is only one way of averting a clash and to force Abas to reconcile with us."

"And how do you propose to do this?" asked Beshir whose pride and insolence was shattered by his defeats.

"We will tell the Armenian King that, if he does not accept our terms of peace and does not withdraw his troops from Dvin, we will hang from the tower his cousin, Prince Sahak of Syunik who is a hostage with us."

"If Abas really wanted peace, he would not have rejected your ambassadors and your gifts."

"The conclusion is?"

"The conclusion is he will refuse your proposition."

"Then I will hang that prince. After that, let his brothers Babgen and Smbat dare to attack us. Before they capture Dvin they will have to embrace the corpse of their brother."

"And if suddenly they capture Dvin?"

"Let them capture if they can. At least I will have pierced their heart with that murder."

"But, my Lord, that's a very dangerous decision," Beshir observed. "These Armenians are never brutal when they capture a city, they don't massacre the people as we do. If they capture Dvin they will not harm our persons, nor our soldiers, if you will not give vent to your spleen. But if you kill Prince Sahak then all of us will be ruthlessly massacred. You don't know the Siunis but I have often clashed with them and I know the Armenian nation's ferocity. They will never endure the insult should you kill the Prince."

This line of reasoning impressed the Emir who hung his head and fell into deep thought.

“What are we going to do then?” he finally asked, stroking his thin beard.

“We will defend ourselves with all our might,” Beshir replied with finality.

Having come to this decision the Emir and his general parted.

But there was no special conference in the Armenian camp that night. The King and the princes were sure they held the city of Dvin in a tight ring. All they had to do was to wait for the morning when, after the necessary reconnoitering, they would decide whether to capture the city by frontal attack or by laying siege to it.

At midnight the patrol guards reported to the Commander-in-chief that a large body of cavalry was advancing toward the Armenian camp along the road of Nakhichevan. These were the Emir’s patrol guards who, having learned that the Armenians of Sharur had left the camp, were hurrying back to block their advance, or report to the Emir.

Realizing that this new force intended to attack his rear while he was busy assailing the city, the Commander-in-chief ordered *Sepuh* Vahram to take his cavalry and meet the newcomers. *Sepuh*’s regiment was reinforced by the warriors of Mok.

In a deep plain at Vedi the *Sepuh* surprised the Arab cavalry and ordered them to surrender, but the latter, unable to see the size of the Armenian army in the dark, instantly charged. The two sides closed in but the skirmish did not last long. After a brief resistance, finally realizing the odds against them, the Arabs asked for a truce. The *Sepuh* granted their request, and after disarming them and seizing their horses, he led tire prisoners to the Armenian camp.

To liquidate the Emir’s other patrols who had been sent to guard the roads to Khlat, Berd gandz and Kogh bapor, Prince Marzpetuni sent a large cavalry force under the command of *Sepuh* Vahram, Prince Smbat and the Lord of Mok who rounded them up in all these places, captured a part, and chased the rest to the border of Azerbaijan and the land of the Gardman.

Ashot the Tyrant, who had promised to support the Emir with his troops, having learned of King Abas’s arrival at Dvin together with the princes, as well as his victories, not only broke his promise but gathered his forces and entrenched himself in Bagaran.

After cutting off the communications of Dvin from all sides, King Abas called a council of his princes to determine the manner of the forthcoming attack. The Commander Gevorg, who valued the life of the Armenian soldier very highly, advised the King to make a proposal for the surrender of the city without a fight.

“If the Emir agrees, good and well; if not, we will attack,” said the *Sparapet*.

Prince Smbat seconded Marzpetuni's proposition whereupon the King gave his assent. The princes followed suit. The same day the Patriarch of the Aghdznik, accompanied by a few freemen, went to Dvin to speak with the Emir.

Emir Nusr received the King's ambassador in a magnificent hall of his palace and expressed willingness to hear the Armenian King's message.

"King Abas commanded me to tell the illustrious Emir," he began, "that Dvin is the capital of Armenia, founded and ruled by Armenian kings, and that, even during recent years, it has belonged to the Armenian princes. The lieutenants of the Supreme Emir may reside there as his agents and collect his revenues. But they have no right to occupy the city, and thus infringe upon the land's freedom. The ruler of the country is the Armenian king; the owner and dispenser of freedom, the people itself. Yusuf and his predecessors, in addition to their unlawful usurpations, have often extended their tyranny over Dvin.

"There have been times when the Armenian princes separated from their King, or basely plotted against him. But now that the princes are with me and my soldiers are loyal to me, I am strong, and for this very reason I will not permit Yusuf's successor to follow the same path and oppress my people. Regardless of the fact Nusr the Emir violated his friendship pact with the late Armenian King and joined the conspiracy against the Armenian throne, regardless of the fact that he usurped the Armenian Catholicosate and exiled the Armenian Catholicos, a crime for which, I, as the defender of the church, should have punished him, behold I invite the Emir to surrender the city to me peacefully, after which I shall permit him to reside in his mansion. If the contrary results, when I capture Dvin by force, let the Emir know clearly that I will destroy all his troops and all those Emirs of Dvin who have estates in Vostan and mansions in the squares of Dvin. Furthermore, I will not even spare the Emir himself. By doing all this I shall not incur the enmity of the Supreme Emir but only will have punished his agent who has disturbed the peace of the land by his indiscretions."

The Emir who had been quietly listening to the words of the King's ambassador, upon bearing the last words, leaped up and exclaimed:

"Your new King is even more insolent than his predecessor. Tell him I will accept no conditions of a peace and that I rightly rule the city which was conquered by the Arab's sword two hundred years ago. Let him march his troops and seize the city by force, if he can. But, let him not forget that this time he will be fighting the Supreme Emir of the Arabs, and not only his lieutenant."

The Ambassador Prince returned with his retinue and reported to the King the answer of Nusr.

"Very well then. We have done our duty, and we shall show that Arab that his threats in the name of the Supreme Emir do not dismay us, nor chain our rights," spoke the King calmly, then he ordered the *Sparapet* to make ready for the attack.

Bit by bit they brought over siege implements from Yerazgavors — battering rams, artillery, catapults, slings and iron scaling ladders, mounted on carts. Prince Marzpetuni had attended to this as early as the King's visit to Vaspurakan. His commanders, each of whom was an expert military engineer, had assembled the necessary apparatus and now were busy setting it in order. They were busy constructing portable towers and triple-decked bastions to batter down the walls of the city.

But since the moat around the city was not yet completely filled and the siege implements could not readily be carted next to the walls, the King gave the order for attack without the use of these machines.

This being done, and further to dissipate the concentration of the besieged, the Armenians attacked the city on all sides at the same time. To meet the all-out attack, naturally, the Arabs were forced to draw upon the defenders of the bastions, thus reducing their number in half.

The Armenians, who were noted for their expert bowmanship, concentrated their arrows on the rear of the shielded ranks, then, slowly approaching the walls, started to repel the defenders. The latter, however, concentrated their missiles on those who were dragging the scaling ladders.

There was a furious fight in front of the main gate of Dvin where a number of bastions defended both the iron gate and the second wall. After silencing these bastions, it would be easy to demolish the first wall, materially weakening the defence of the city.

But the shower of missiles from the height of these bastions, as well as the torrent of flammables, prevented the Armenians from bringing the scaling ladders closer. Here the attackers were assisted by the firebrand shock troops, who, protecting their heads with their shield, and holding inflammable brands in the other hand, swiftly crossed over the moat and started the fire before the walls. These were followed by the wood packers who, in a few moments, built up large wooden pyres on the burning brands, and thus, started a large bonfire in front of the walls and the bastions.

The heat and the smoke of the lapping fires repelled the defenders of the bastions. Meanwhile, the Armenians brought their scaling ladders where there was no fire and started to scale the walls and seize the bastions.

Seeing it, the Arabs intensified their attack on those scaling the walls, but the latter were reinforced by fresh recruits. Despite the heat and the smoke which was choking the fighters, the clash on the bastions was furious.

The Arabs and the Armenians fought each other like packs of tigers; the daring attack on the one hand, and on the other, the desperate resistance of the defenders. Sword against sword, spear against spear, slashing, hacking one another, corpses on all sides, bodies catapulting from the bastions like the leaves of autumn. And yet, the brave confronting the brave, both sides remained invincible.

But since these encounters steadily cut down the numbers of the Arabs while the Armenians, on the contrary, were being constantly reinforced, the former finally were forced to yield ground. The Armenians seized the frontal bastions and turned to the second walls. Here another furious battle ensued between the crowded Armenians and the Arab defenders of the corridor. The slaughter on both sides was great, but since the Arabs received no reinforcement, here too they were finally overwhelmed. The Armenians now were in complete command of the second wall whose ramparts were promptly cleared and the material used for filling up the moat.

This unexpected success, gratifying both to the King and his allies, forced Marzpetuni to be satisfied for the moment, and to give his warriors a brief respite, he called a halt to the attack. The larger part of the troops returned to the camp while the remainder kept up the work on the second wall. By evening the greater part of the outer wall was demolished, the moat was filled, and the next day the Armenians could contact the inner wall with their battering engines.

However, due to the heavy losses the Armenians had sustained, the King delayed the forthcoming attack by several days. The interval was used in felling trees from the forest of Dvin, completing the levelling of the moat, and piling up firewood in front of the wall to set it on fire when the time came.

A few days later the King and the princes decided to launch the second attack. To this end, the batteries were the first to be moved into position. The first to be mobilized were the battering rams which were manned by comparatively few, and which were used for opening breaches in the wall. The heavy catapults, manned by hundreds, used for demolishing the ramparts, were stationed before the towers. The light artillery, which were not protected like the battering rams or the catapults and which were used to hurl javelins and bayonets, were stationed at a safe distance from the walls, out of reach of the bowmen's arrow. But the wooden bastions, whose number was not many but which, due to the solidity of structure, were the safest barricades for the besiegers, were stationed against the pyramid-shaped towers with the intention of bridging them, transport troops, or to breach the wall with hidden battering rams. These bastions were dragged, creaking and groaning, the light ones on wheels, and the heavy ones with the aid of cylinders.

These preparations, which took several days, were often interrupted by the besieged, now by the bowmen and now by the slingers. And although the Armenian casualties were few, due to their extreme caution, nevertheless they stalled the operation considerably.

Each evening, at the orders of the Commander-in-chief, the troops approached the walls, to prevent the Arabs from stopping the mechanical preparations in the night. They could do this only by descending from the walls and setting fire to the machines.

When all was ready, the King gave the order to advance. It was a morning in May, one of those days which is delightful before sunrise but scorchingly hot once the sun reaches its summit. The Armenian troops had just emerged from their camp and the princes had just made their military dispositions

when news arrived that there were movements in the plain of Artashat, and that the soldiers were deploying from the citadel. That indicated that the Arabs were about to take the field.

The commanders of Dvin had decided to launch a twin attack on the Armenians, from Dvin and Artashat. The Dvin attack would be frontal, but the one from Artashat from the rear. This arrangement was very promising, both in terms of timing and the selection of the place. It would take place at the moment when the Armenians would emerge from their ramparts and march against the city. They would be caught completely off guard.

But the Commander-in-chief surmised the Arab ruse and ordered his army to come out of the camp fully armed. Besides, he ordered the Prince of Mok and *Sepuh* Vahram to hold their regiments in readiness and be the last to come out of the camp. They were instructed to watch, and when they saw any stirrings on the Artashat flank, instantly to separate from the main body and attack them. The main force advancing on Dvin could easily take care of any emergency, should the Arabs decide to come out of the walls.

Sepuh Vahram was highly pleased with this plan and on his part conceived another idea. With the help of God, after repelling the Arab force emerging from Artashat, he meant to enter the city in the ensuing debacle. The Prince of Mok and Prince Gor were in hearty agreement with this daring design.

As was expected, the moment the Armenian army mobilized and the regiments of the rear guard had left their bastions, the wide gates of Artashat were thrown open and the Arabs rushed out with wild cries with the intention of striking the Armenian army in the rear. At this, the three leaders of the Armenian rear suddenly wheeled about to meet the Arab onrush. Taken aback by this sudden move and seeing that their secret was out, the Arabs nevertheless continued their charge until the two sides met.

Being superior in numbers, the Armenians easily surrounded the Arabs. The slaughter continued for about half an hour. The Arabs were fighting courageously, meanwhile looking toward Dvin, hoping the Emir's army would come out of the city and confound the Armenians. Time passed, the Armenians continued the slaughter, and yet there was no sign of any help from Dvin. The Emir and Beshir, seeing that their ruse had been anticipated by the Armenians, and realizing the danger of venturing out at this moment, made no move to assist their Artashat contingent. The latter, disillusioned by now, and after suffering considerable losses, turned around and fled to the city.

The Armenian commanders ordered their troops to mingle with the fleeing Arabs and enter the city. The terrified Arabs, fleeing to save their lives, could do nothing to stop the confusion. And when the Arab Commander of the fortress, thinking the fugitive troops were all safely in, ordered the gates closed, he was horrified to see that the huge iron hinges of the gates already had been shattered by the Armenians, and the slaughter in the city had already begun. Prince Gor with his warriors put to

the sword the meager garrison of the citadel and hoisted the victorious Armenian banner before the castle.

Seeing their complete defeat, the Arabs asked for a truce, and the Armenians, likewise tired, put a stop to the slaughter and took control of both the city and the citadel. The news of this victory was received by the Armenian army with great jubilation, because with the occupation of Artashat the last obstacle to the success of Armenian arms was permanently removed.

The next morning the royal army approached the gates of Dvin, and led by *Sparapet* Gevorg, *Sepuh* Vahram, and the Princes of Syunik, Mok, and Aghdznik Emir, started the second and strongest assault on the city. The sun was just gilding the tops of Gegha mountains when the assault began.

The companies of the bowmen were showering their arrows, the artillery discharging their sharp missiles, the slingers were hurling their inflammables, the catapults firing huge incendiaries, while the battering rams kept pounding at the walls. The portable towers concentrated their work against the bastions and the pyramids, repelling the defenders, throwing scaling ladders, and demolishing the sides of the pyramids.

The inexorable and unyielding assault inflicted heavy losses on the defenders, slaughtering the troops, setting fire to the closer structures, and ruining the fortifications. All the same, the Arabs resisted fiercely. Their bowmen and lancers avenged their losses. Besides, they burned an Armenian tower, put out of commission several battering rams, and with their grappling hooks overturned and destroyed countless scaling ladders.

All the same, the resistance zeal of the besieged could not be kept up for long, especially since they were forced to fight on the entire circumference of the city. On a number of points the Armenian attack was so furious that the Arabs were forced to retreat to the safety of the inner bastions, leaving the outer bastions to their fate which were promptly seized by the attackers. Furthermore, the corps which was led by the Commander-in-chief had succeeded in breaching one of the iron gates by the use of its catapults, and was feverishly busy clearing the inside court. This done, the army would be free to enter the city.

Seeing this irreparable damage, Beshir hastened to the Emir's palace to make his report. He said the enemy could enter the city any minute and he advised the Emir to withdraw his troops to the safety of the citadel. Nusr, who had not forgotten the King's threat in case he captured the city by force, was terribly afraid.

"When the city walls and the bastions could not protect us," the Emir said, "the citadel will avail nothing. Had the Armenians not occupied Artashat we might have thought of the citadel as our last refuge. We could then have used the underground passage. But now all tire passages to Artashat are closed. If we sit tight in the citadel the Armenians finally will capture it or starve us to death by a

long siege. Moreover, if we continue to resist we will further provoke the enemy's anger. After he seizes the citadel he will spare none of us."

"What are we going to do then? Time is of the essence," Beshir asked.

The Emir did not reply. He dropped his eyes and fell into deep thought.

"What are we going to do, my Lord? We have no time to lose," the Commander repeated.

"Do you know what...?"

"Command me."

"We will willingly surrender the city to the Armenians."

"What?" exclaimed Beshir, "what about the slaughter and the enormous losses we sustained?"

"He who salvages the remainder, no matter how infinitesimal, acts wisely," the Emir observed seriously. "If we act stubbornly, we might lose even more. . ."

"And so?"

We will turn over to the King his capital in order to save our soldiers and our persons.

The Beshir fell silent.

One hour later a green flag — the white flag of Islam — was floating from the tower over the big gate of the city, indicating that the besieged were asking for a truce. Soon after, the gates opened, revealing Nusr's ambassadors to deliver the keys of the city to the Armenian King.

Instantly the bugle sounded, putting an end to the fighting. The Arab delegates reached the King's tent, and after delivering the Emir's message of surrender, they handed him the keys to the city.

The next morning the Armenian army made its formal entry into the city. First to enter was Gevorg Marzpetuni with his Araratian corps, bearing the banner of the Commander-in-chief, which seized the important sections of the city to make them safe against untoward disturbances. He was followed by the Allied princes, each with his regiment and the regimental banner. Then came *Sepuh* Vahram, leading his mounted cavalry. Next came the royal cavalry with the royal banner, followed by King Abas, surrounded by his elite guards. Finally came Prince Gor with his vanguard corps, bearing the banner of the Marzpetuni House.

After making his dispositions to insure the peace of the city, the first thing the Commander-in-chief did was to seek out Prince Sahak of Syunik who had been captured. He found him in the citadel, still guarded by Arab guards, and brought him to the King. The King embraced him warmly and said, "For sparing your life, I forgive the Emir. Let him live in his palace and enjoy the blessings of our City?"

The meeting between the two Syunik princes with their brother Sahak was touching and their joy of reunion was shared by all the princes.

Then the King, accompanied by the Commander-in-chief, the princes and the soldiers, went to the Temple of St. Gregory, to worship God and to offer thanks for the great victory.

After the ceremony the King went to the Palace of Tiknuni, formerly occupied by the Arabs, but which the Commander-in-chief had hastily made ready for the King's residence.

The next day they liberated the Armenian Catholicosate, ejecting all the Arab officials. They also freed all the other royal palaces and distinguished buildings each of which had been occupied by an Arab Emir.

Thus, there was great joy in the land, for the Armenian capital had been finally rescued by the Armenian warriors.

Chapter 8 Fifteen Years Later

Fifteen long years had passed after the capture of Dvin, a reign of peace for King Abas. The people of Armenia had forgotten enemy attacks, the pillage and similar terrors. The peasant plowed his field and sowed the seed unmolested, the tiller of the vineyard pruned his vines, and the gardener attended his trees without any fear of a sudden marauder who could ruin the product of his toil. Thus, the barren fields, the ruined vineyards, and the trampled gardens were rebuilt once again, flourished anew and were filled with the bounties of nature. The Horn of Plenty spread its generous gifts all around. And since the peace of the land was undisturbed for a long time, not only the distant refugees returned to their homes but companies of peaceful people from other lands migrated to the land of Armenia increasing the population of the villages, lending impetus to the prosperity of the cities, and reviving the trades and the commerce of the land.

And since learning and the growth of the arts depended on peace, the monasteries of Armenia which had been deserted and many of them had been ruined during the war years launched on a new era of reform and prosperity. Steadily the abbots and the monks who had run away returned to their former shrines, renovated the dilapidated buildings, rebuilt the ruined ones, rallied new inmates and with diligent toil revived the interrupted art of learning. And since the monasteries of Armenia, ever since the days of Nerses the Great and St. Sahak, aside from the vocation of teaching, also were ordained to take care of the sick and the needy and to offer asylum to the persecuted, accordingly, in many of these monasteries there were founded adjunct institutions, such as orphanages, hospitals, travelers' inns and asylums.

All these public institutions were subsidized by King Abas himself, some by direct grants from his treasury, others being endowed with revenue-generating estates, and still others through other sources of income.

Thus, during the reign of King Abas, not only the old monasteries were renovated but a considerable number of new ones were erected, foremost among which were the Monastery of Kamurjadzor in the Province of the Arsharunis, the Monastery of Kaputakar of the same province, famous for its progressive monks, the Monastery of Horomos of Shirak, famous for its travelers inn, the Dprevank (School-Monastery) of the same province, noted as a center of education, Gladzor Monastery, Movsisavank (Monastery of Moses) of Kharberd, the Hndzuts Monastery of Karin, Tsaghkatskar Monastery of Vayots Dzor, the latter three noted for their constructive monastic orders, and lastly, the Monastery of Narek in the Province of the Rshtunis which gave to the Armenian nation such noted doctors of poetry and philosophy as Anania Narekatsi, the conqueror of Tondrakians, St. Gregory of Narek, the Divine poet whose hymns and prayers have been on the lips of the Armenians for centuries.

Meanwhile, the peaceful years did not prevent the King from attending to the protection of the land. Knowing that his country was surrounded by uncivilized and barbarian neighbors who might attack him once they realized he was unprotected, simultaneous with the rehabilitation of the land, he paid equal attention to the fortifications of his frontiers. Realizing Yerazgavors was unsuited for a successful defence as a capital, and Dvin, situated in the open plain, equally indefensible, he looked around for a suitable site of his capital.

After consulting with the Commander of his armies Gevorg Marzpetuni, the King finally selected the City of Kars in the Province of Vanand, for centuries the property of the brave princes of Vanand, located near the River Karuts, and endowed with natural fortifications.

Having selected Kars as the seat of his kingdom, King Abas first fortified the citadel. He surrounded the citadel with mighty walls and serrated towers, capped by high and powerful watch towers at the east end. He fortified the entrances with iron gates, protected by stone barricades. In the interior he built store houses for arms, ammunition and food supplies, supplemented by a huge water reservoir. In this way he insured himself against the contingency of surrender for lack of water supply.

After this, the King started to fortify the city. First, he built a double wall to the east and the south of the city, with square shaped towers and inaccessible bastions. He supplemented this with a huge moat which, joining the river to the east and the north, practically isolated the city with its citadel. And since the city was surrounded on the three sides (east, west and north) by dikes, towering hills and deep ravines, at various suitable spots the King erected countless forts which, in time of war, could serve as advance bastions. He provided these forts with troops, war engines. and food supplies.

Having completed these labors, the King turned his attention to the renovation of the city. First, he built a magnificent royal mansion. Next he built a beautiful castle inside the citadel, after which, he moved the seat of the Catholicos from Yerzavors to Kars, and proclaimed the city his new capital. Then he started to embellish the new capital with new buildings, beautiful palaces, public asylums, public baths, new boulevards and arched bridges.

As a result, in a short while the city was filled with various newcomers who founded the nation's artisans shops, weaving factories, spacious armories, and with the ensuing incessant traffic and the busy trade, they converted the city into one of the most teeming and prosperous marts of the times.

It was the year of 943, the fifteenth anniversary of the King's accession to the throne, and yet, only now was being completed, one of the principal buildings of Kars the foundation of which had been laid 13 years before. This was the magnificent The Church of the Holy Apostles (Arakelots), which the King had pledged at the time of his coronation. The Church was located at the base of the citadel, on a beautiful terrace, constructed to the perfection of contemporary architecture. Externally magnificent, it was an octagonal sculptured building. The interior was cross-shaped, divided into twelve facets each of which bore the image of an apostle. Its pointed dome was mounted on columnless arches, capped by a shining cross which protected both the devout people who lived around it and the distant gurgling stream under the rocks.

Since the completion of the Church of the Holy Apostles and the fifteenth anniversary of the King's coronation coincided, the latter wanted to signalize the joint events with a memorable celebration. To this end he sent invitations to the Catholicos, the princes of the land, the nobility, the ecclesiastical order and the neighboring rulers to assemble at the royal city of Kars and attend the anointing ceremony of the new Cathedral and the attendant festivities.

The preparations for the coming celebrations had scarcely begun when an unexpected event brought about a serious complication. The Prince of Tayk informed the King that the King of Abkhaz had invaded his territory with a powerful force and was advancing on Gugark.

Having strengthened his position during an uninterrupted interval of fifteen years of peace, King Ber of the Abkhaz suddenly had recalled his treaty with Tslík Amram which transferred to him the northern provinces of Armenia but which he had been unable to acquire as a result of the Armenian King's sudden rise to power. Now that he felt himself sufficiently strong, despite the fact that Tslík Amram already was dead, he thought to profit from a defunct treaty.

King Abas was at a loss what to do when he received the news because he was loath to wage a war with his neighbor. He appreciated the value of peace, and especially he was solicitous about the lives of his soldiers whom he loved as his children. Besides, Ber was his brother-in-law and he was still hopeful of dissuading him from his mad adventure and to send him back to his land.

After consulting with his Commander Gevorg Marzpetuni, the King wrote a letter to King Ber asking him why he had invaded his land. "If you have no compelling cause for the peace of your land and mine, then remember I am your brother-in-law and your Christian neighbor. Therefore, you have more to gain from my friendship than from your enmity. Think well, therefore, and dismiss your imperialistic illusions, and know that the nation which forced you to remain silent for fifteen years can silence you once and forever unless you return to your land willingly."

He commissioned Prince Gor to deliver the letter to King Ber, and in case of an adverse answer, to scout the latter's strength and return to Kars. Before the arrival of Gor, however, the King of the Abkhaz already had invaded the Province of Ardahan in Gugark and had camped his army on the right bank of the River Kur, to the north of the Fortress of Ardahan.

Having arrived at the camp of the Abkhaz, Prince Gor presented himself to King Ber who received him coldly in his tent, and taking the Armenian King's letter, handed it to his chief Scribe, ordering him to read it in the presence of the Abkhaz princes.

When the scribe reached the end of the letter where the Armenian King threatened "The Armenians will silence you forever unless you return home willingly," Ber was furious with indignation.

"Go, tell your King," he thundered at Gor, "I am not obliged to explain to him why I have invaded his land. This much I will say that I have heard he has built a new Cathedral in Kars and is about to celebrate the ceremony of its consecration. Tell him I have come to consecrate that church with the Georgian ritual and don't let him dare start the ceremonies until I have entered Kars with my army."

"Very well, great King," we will meet you to welcome you to our capital with all the more honor," Prince Gor replied sarcastically as he stepped out of the King's pavilion and having gathered his men returned to Vanand.

Having presented himself to the King, he gave a detailed account of his mission. Thereupon, the King told his Commander his decision to advance upon Gugark and prevent Ber from entering Vanand.

Prince Marzpetuni who already had set his army in order before the return of his son, when he learned from the latter that several Caucasian tribes had joined the Abkhaz, sent messengers to the princes of Syunik to hasten to Gugark with their contingents. Meanwhile, he divided his army into four parts, the first under the command of Crown Prince Ashot II, under Prince Gor, the third under *Sepuh* Vahram. He himself commanded the fourth division. The latter was supported by the King's personal guard called Vostanik.

The King of the Abkhaz, however, despite his threats, had not moved one step to the south. He was still camped at Ardahan. And because he had learned that the Armenian forces were converging at Vanand, he did not venture to cross the River Kur lest he encountered resistance. He was still waiting to see the full strength of his enemy and only afterward to decide his future movements.

A few days later the Armenian army entered Ardahan and, having reached the Abkhaz contingents in the north, pitched camp opposite them on the left bank of the River Kur.

Prince Marzpetuni, now old and quite debilitated from a long peaceful life at the royal court, when he saw the army of the enemy Abkhaz, suddenly recovered his youthful resilience. After allowing himself and his army a few hours' rest he saddled his horse and started to set his army ready for battle because he suspected a surprise attack by the Abkhaz hoping to throw the tired Armenian army into confusion.

After these preparations the Commander and the generals assembled before the King to determine the time and the manner in which the battle was to begin. Prince Marzpetuni, as the most experienced of them all, advised attacking the enemy that very night, or at dawn at the latest. The Prince reasoned that the Abkhaz would not expect such a quick attack and consequently would be caught unprepared.

While admitting the wisdom of a sudden attack and the advantages which would accrue to the attacking side, the King still could not see how a tired army could be forced to make a crossing of the river without any preparations. To this, the Prince pointed out that the stream here was not very deep. The cavalry could easily make a crossing while the infantry could be deployed at the bank to support the attack. The Prince volunteered to lead the cavalry aided by *Sepuh* Vahram, while the Crown Prince and Prince Gor, under the King's command, could stand by to support them in the ensuing engagement.

The King finally gave his assent provided the attack was launched in the morning to give the soldiers a few hours of additional rest. This arrangement would further facilitate the task of the archers in their support of the cavalry.

Early in the morning when Venus had just reached its zenith and the sunlight still was hazy, the army of the Armenians was up and ready to launch the attack. The Crown Prince and Prince Gor had stationed their contingents along the Kur River, one league away from the camp, facing the Abkhaz and waiting for the signal of the Commander. Meanwhile Prince Marzpetuni to prevent being observed by the Abkhaz, had made a detour of several leagues to cross the river and had led his cavalry to the opposite bank. As the eastern horizon grew red, the Commander ordered his troops to accelerate their pace.

Meanwhile the camp of the Abkhaz was completely quiet. The King and the princes were asleep while the greater part of the soldiers had retired to their tents. As the light broke sufficiently for the other bank to be visible, and the patrol guards saw that the Armenians regiments were arrayed against them. The news threw the Abkhaz camp into confusion, because, although they had intended to start the attack that very day, they had never thought of starting that early. Dismayed by the unexpected attack, their Commander gave the alarm to arms.

The Abkhaz were in the midst of girding their armor when the Armenian cavalry swooped upon them with a thunderous cry. Confounded by the shock, the Abkhaz rushed out of their tents, surging and jostling one another in their effort to form their ranks but it was to no avail. Many of them were still unarmed, many were half dressed and only a few were fully armed. Besides, part of the troops were in the process of assembling while the others were scattering, the latter hardly pressed by the Armenians to prevent their joining the main body. The exhortations of the Abkhaz princes and especially their Commander somewhat restored the morale of the disorganized mob to form the semblance of a united front. These numbers were augmented by slowly arriving new armed companies who, having joined the former, stiffened their resistance. All the same, the force of the Armenian attack was so impetuous that the Abkhaz soldiers, although fighting bravely, could not defend their camp, and being driven from their fortified posts, the fury of the fight was transferred into the open plain.

Just then King Ber appeared on the scene, surrounded by his mighty guards, who started to exhort his troops. Inspired by the presence of their King, the latter took courage and resumed the fight with renewed vigor. But since the Armenians had driven them to the bank of the river within range of the Armenian archery, the latter cut loose such a volley of arrows which momentarily stunned the Abkhaz who were at a loss to know whether to fight the cavalry or to defend themselves against the arrows.

Finally, seeing the futility of resistance against two flanks, the Abkhaz abandoned the field and took to flight. Neither the commands of the King nor the exhortations of their Commander could induce them to return to the fight. The Armenians chased the fleeing enemy with great shouts, seeing which, the infantry on the bank rushed to the shallow river, and crossing to the other side, joined the cavalry in its chase.

The same day the Commander sent messengers to Syunik to notify the princes of the great victory and to tell them that further aid from them was no longer necessary. But when the messengers arrived the princes of Syunik had already reached the border of Ardahan. Princes Sahak and Babgen, who were personally indebted to King Abas, expressed a desire to see the King personally and to congratulate him on his victory. Thus, they advanced with their regiments as far as Ardahan.

The royal army now elated by the great victory, with the arrival of the Sisakan princes and their regiments, was even more happy. For two days incessantly, they celebrated the victory with merry making without suspecting that the Abkhaz could return to the attack. The surprise attack took place exactly at the same hour in the morning that the Armenian cavalry had surprised the Abkhaz.

Unable to endure the insult of his defeat, King Ber had rallied his scattered forces and had fired them with the spirit of revenge. Having crossed the river by night, the Abkhaz had reached the Armenian encampment at the morning hour of prayer, and had they attacked silently they could have wrought

a great slaughter. But the King of the Abkhaz, thinking to terrify the enemy, had ordered to sound the trumpets.

The unexpected sound had aroused the Armenian soldiers who were alert enough not to step out of their tents without putting on their armor. The commanders, however, heading the guards, rushed to the palisades to hold off the enemy. Meanwhile, Commander Marzpetuni having mounted his steed flew to his cavalry and the infantry companies, and with complete composure started to set them in battle array.

Meanwhile the Abkhaz encircled the camp and with loud shouts started to attack all over. A part of them climbed up the palisades to repel the guards while the other part encircled the square of the tents.

The Armenians, although fully armed by this time, were hemmed in by the enemy, nevertheless, encouraged by their Commander, rushed out and engaged the enemy in a number of points. Having hoped to disarm the Armenians, the Abkhaz vigorously kept pushing them back into their tents while the Armenians were trying to cut through their ranks. It was a furious and stubbornly fought encounter, both sides fighting for the upper hand, without yielding one step to the other.

King Abas who had full confidence in his Commanders ability was momentarily expecting him to pierce the chain and drive the enemy into the open plain, but when he saw that the Abkhaz were steadily prevailing, he mounted his steed and unsheathing his shining sword led his troops into the fray. The shock of his attack caused the Abkhaz to recoil for a moment. But since the fight was centered right in the midst of the camp, the Armenians had no freedom of motion to drive the enemy into the plain.

At this crucial moment a providential circumstance came to the aid of the Armenians. The Sisakan Princes who were encamped a distance of one league from the site of the battle, having learned of the Abkhaz' surprise return, divided their regiments into two parts and fell on the enemy from two opposing directions. To protect themselves against the newcomers the Abkhaz were forced to divide their forces in a number of points, and eventually were forced out into the plain. Here the battle was resumed with renewed ferocity, both sides inspired by the presence of their kings and the exhortations of their generals, fighting with the bravery of desperation.

But the bloody encounter would have resulted in a great slaughter, and victory would have hung in the balance for a long time had not the Armenian Commander, to decide the outcome, resorted to an old Parthian tactic. He ordered Prince Gor and the Crown Prince to lure the Abkhaz by taking flight with their archers.

The Abkhaz cavalry separated itself from the main body and with triumphant shouts started to chase the fleeing Armenians. Meanwhile the fighting Armenians pushed the remainder of the Abkhaz to

the bank of the Kur River. Seeing this, Gor's archers made a sudden about-face and showered the Abkhaz cavalry with their arrows. This stratagem, long familiar to the Armenians, threw the Abkhaz into confusion who saw now that they had been clearly fooled. And since they could neither fight against the arrows nor could return to the camp, for the Armenians had cut off their path, their only salvation lay in their flight.

Dismayed by the sudden turn, the Abkhaz at the bank surged into the river, hoping to rally their forces on the other bank. But the Armenians gave them no time to make the crossing. Those who had escaped the swords found a watery grave. The River Kur was filled with Abkhaz corpses and its waters were red with Abkhaz blood.

King Ber who at the head of a brave company was still fighting furiously, seeing the demoralization of his troops, decided to abandon the field because further resistance was useless, but this time he was surrounded by Vahram *Sepuh's* regiment. Wielding his huge sword and roaring like a lion, followed by his royal guard, he tried to cut his way through but those who surrounded him were the Vanandians, formidable and fierce giants, and their commander was *Sepuh* Vahram himself.

After a fierce struggle he was overpowered and captured. So were the remainder of his guard. The news of his capture paralyzed all Abkhaz resistance and the Armenians, after gathering the loot, returned to their camp with a light heart.

Chapter 9 Death of the Last Foe (Arak29 translation)

The next morning, the king held a review of the troops to see at what price he had won the victory, the crown of which was the capture of the enemy king. He was sad to discover that a ruthless and fierce battle of several hours had cost nearly five hundred warriors.

Although the enemy's losses were four times greater, it did not comfort the king, because others' damages could not replace the losses of his men.

He ordered the Abkhaz king, who was under the supervision of the Vananda warriors, to be brought before him.

In a spacious valley, Armenian troops were lined up around the royal tent. Their number reached several thousand. On the right side of the tent, Drans stood and on the left – the Azat regiment. Behind them stood the *Sepuhs*, then came the Ararat, Basen, Sisakan, Utik, Tayk and other regiments. The infantry stood in the first rows, and the cavalry was behind them. All of them were armed. In front of each regiment was its military commander in festive armor and arms.

The king, who was standing at the tent, was surrounded by *Sparapet*, the king's son, *sepuh* Vahram, Syunik princes and the royal bodyguards. Everyone was waiting for the captured to whom the king was to speak.

At the end of the camp, the Prince Gor appeared on a horse, with a drawn sword, leading the chained king. The princes of the captured king were also brought ahead. All of them were surrounded by the Vananda warriors with spears.

The captive was led past a long line of troops and put in front of the king.

"Greetings to you, Abkhaz knight," the king spoke calmly.

"Greetings, brother-in-law!" ... Ber replied haughtily.

"Brother-in-law? Do you still call me that way?" asked the king.

"Yes."

"But the victorious king is talking to you..."

"He is the abductor of my inheritance, and nothing else!" Ber interrupted him boldly.

"I thought that I would find in you a chastened soul and a penitent heart," the king began slowly. "I thought that you would submit and ask for forgiveness for the wrongdoing that you have committed, for the losses that you have inflicted on both your own and my army, by shamelessly and cruelly putting thousands of people to sword... but you persist and do not repent; you speak to me as boldly as you spoke to my envoy. Are you tired of life and are looking for death? Or have you forgotten whom you're speaking to?"

"The Abkhaz king, who ruled over a vast country, possessed plenty of wealth, magnificent palaces and beautiful concubines cannot get tired of life. My brother-in-law must know this. And I am aware of whom I'm speaking to. You are the Armenian king; you defeated the Abkhaz and captured their brave king. I will say that this is a great glory for you; but I will not double this glory by humbling myself before you and asking for forgiveness. Let the chains bind my feet, but they cannot bind my proud spirit. I am your enemy and I will remain so forever. Don't think that failure will ever make me bow my head."

"If so, then I will treat you as an enemy, not as a relative. Be as proud as you want, but know that your arrogance will not reduce any link in your chains and will not increase my respect for you as a patriotic king. A freedom-loving king does not encroach on the freedom of a friend. And you not only had such a desire, but you seized my lands, encroached and abused the freedom of my people and you even threatened to consecrate the Armenian church according to the Georgian rite... Hence, you are not a freedom-loving king, but a tyrant and, which is the worst of all, you are the enemy of my throne. Since

God is against tyrants and destroys them, he has delivered you into my hands. I could still spare you as a tyrant, but I have no right to spare the enemy of my homeland.”

Having said this, he turned to Gor and said:

“You promised, Prince, to accompany King Ber to our royal city. Then fulfill your promise, and let this brave man teach us there how to consecrate the Armenian church by the Georgian rite.”

The king entered the tent without deigning to look at Ber, and the Vananda soldiers took the prisoners back to their place.

A few days later, the royal city Kars took on a festive appearance. Its numerous buildings, princely palaces, houses and even towers and bastions were decorated with colorful fabrics, carpets and flags. On the way from the city gate to the royal palace, triumphal arches were erected in several places, entwined with garlands of greenery and flowers. Bonfires were built in the streets and squares for night celebrations. The streets were full of people, there was activity everywhere. On the roofs, balconies and at the windows there were women and girls who usually did not show themselves openly on the streets, and looked impatiently into the distance.

All of them were preparing for the meeting of King Abas and his troops, who were returning with a victory, a joyous, heartfelt reunion for the Armenians.

The majority of the Kars inhabitants got out of the city and with large groups were headed to the Royal avenue to greet the returning victorious army. Many have gathered at the ramparts outside the city or have climbed on the opposite hills to better see the passing troops.

The news of the Armenian victory and the capture of the Abkhaz king and his princes reached the city two days ago. Everyone was joyful, burning with impatience to see the audacious enemy who threatened to enter Kars and consecrate the royal cathedral according to his Georgian rite.

And now he was coming. So, people wished to see in what capacity he would enter the city – as a king or as a captive. They wondered what he looked like, how tall he was, what his face and his gaze were like. All this aroused the interest of the people.

But at last the sounds of trumpets were heard and the banner of the advanced detachments appeared. The people moved by some unknown force forward and filled the air with joyful shouts. Gradually the infantry regiments appeared, followed by the cavalry and soon the entire eastern valley of Kars was filled with troops and people.

As the army approached the city limits, the people surrounded them, as if unwilling to let them pass any further. When the advanced regiments passed and the king's banner appeared, the air shook with thunderous hailing shouts. A little later, the king himself appeared, proud and majestic, dressed in resplendent as gold armor and helmet. A snow-white feather fluttered above the golden eagle that

adorned his helmet. He was sitting on a horse covered with gilded cape, surrounded by noble bodyguards, whose armor glittered under the sun. Riding up to the ever-growing crowd, which hailed his arrival with thundering cheers, the king acknowledged them, nodding with a gentle smile.

The king was followed by the Vananda infantry, which led King Ber and his princes, all of them on foot and in chains.

At the sight of the prisoners, shouts of glee rose out in the crowd, and the most zealous of the spectators began to mock the prisoners. But *Sparapet*, who was riding behind the Vananda warriors, raised his hand, and the taunts stopped.

When the king entered the city gates, the Armenian clergy met him with a procession and escorted him to the cathedral. And the troops, having gradually entered the city, filled all the streets and squares. Everywhere the men in the city greeted them with cheers, and the women showered them with flowers and green boughs.

Queen Gurgendukht was waiting for the king in the cathedral. She was surrounded by her retinue and princesses. Everyone was happy, everyone's faces were shining. Only one queen was sad, since the solemn celebration and the cheering shouts coming from outside were caused by the misfortune that had befallen her homeland and her own brother. How could she rejoice, knowing that at this moment the people at her homeland were in grief?

Nevertheless, as an Armenian queen, she had to hide her sadness, go out to the people... and if not being joyful, she should at least not cast a shadow over the others' jubilation. It was a most difficult situation. Royal duties took precedence over kindred feelings: the queen ordered the sister to forget about her brother's misfortune and rejoice in the victory of her husband and the king... Only a soul endowed with feminine poise could hide such grief under a friendly smile...

After the king, accompanied by the *Sparapet*, the courtiers and all the princes entered the cathedral and the clergy had served a panegyric prayer, the queen approached the king and congratulated him on his victory.

The king, who loved his wife dearly, reading the sadness in her eyes, said:

“God and the Holy Church are witnesses that the Armenian army acted justly. Your brother Ber threatened my throne and our homeland. The Armenian warriors defended these shrines, as they have earned them through great sacrifice.”

“The one who threatens your throne and homeland cannot be my brother,” the queen said solemnly.

“And if God punishes him, you should not be upset,” the king added, “because he rewards according to righteousness.”

From these words, the queen's heart sank. She realized that her brother was in danger of some new misfortune, but in the presence of courtiers, princes and princesses, she couldn't ask questions.

But when she learned from the master of ceremonies that the king and his followers would go to the church of the Holy Apostles, and they would return to the palace, she called the princess Gohar to him and whispered to her.

"Find out from *Sparapet* where my brother is."

"He's here in the city," Gohar replied.

"I know, but where is he imprisoned?"

"They say that he was taken to the Church of the Holy Apostles."

"To the Church of the Holy Apostles? What for?" the Queen asked in a frightened voice.

"I don't know."

"Then ask *Sparapet*. Find out what they intend to do with him. The king's words do not bode well... I'm afraid; my heart is squeezing.... Go, Princess, find out! If they have made some terrible decision, we need to prevent it..."

"Now, my lady, now," said the princess and went to Gor, to meet her husband with his help.

The palanquins of the queen and the noble women were already moving away from the church when the princess finally managed to see *Sparapet*.

"Prince, where have they taken Ber and what are they going to do with him?" she asked *Sparapet*.

"Why are you asking me about this, dear Princess?"

"I want to know ..."

"We sent him to the Church of the Holy Apostles."

"But why?"

"That he should pray."

"Are you kidding?" the Princess exclaimed.

"And you?"

"I'm asking seriously."

“And you're not doing a good thing. You should know that Prince Marzpetuni has not told any woman about his intentions to this day... You can only ask me about what has happened.”

“But...”

“What is it? Speak.”

“The queen herself wants to know.”

“The Queen? ... Oh, you didn't have to say that... I had a premonition of it. But since you said it, I have to answer in a way. Go and tell the queen that we lost five hundred brave soldiers on the battlefield and not a single sister came to me to find out where her brother was and what was done to him.”

Having said this, *Sparapet* moved away from the princess.

“I knew it... I had a premonition... We cannot order a sister's heart not to suffer ... Let's hurry up then, so that the women's entreaties do not spoil things,” *Sparapet* whispered to himself, and following the king who was mounting his horse, he too jumped on his horse moved forward.”What were they going to do in the Church of the Holy Apostles?”

A few days ago, when the army was still encamped in Ardahan, the king gathered the princes for a council to decide the fate of the captive Ber.

Some of the princes advised to execute him, others, to put him in prison, and *Sparapet*, whom this old enemy had caused a lot of harm, demanded that he be blinded.

The king, not wanting to cause grief to the queen, stood for imprisonment, but at the same time, he did not want to refuse the honored *Sparapet*. He said to *Sparapet*:

“Blinding is as much a sin as murder. If I blind Ber, then this crime will weigh upon you. And I don't want this to prevent you from fulfilling your innermost desire.”

“What are you talking about?” *Sparapet* asked.

“You wanted to get rid of your oath and return to Garni, to your home. Keep in mind that after blinding Ber, the Catholicos will not release you from the oath.”

“Let me never return to my home, let my ashes not rest in my native land, but let the motherland get rid of this fierce enemy!” Marzpetuni exclaimed. “If I were sure that, having received freedom, Ber would leave our borders in peace, I would be the first to ask for mercy. But he is a snake's spawn and will not rest until he is crushed. Do you really think that by imprisoning him you will get rid of him? There is no dungeon whose doors would not be opened by bribery, and there will always be low people greedy for bribes. This person should be taken to Kars, shown the temple that he wanted to defile by foreign rites, and blind him in front of the temple, so that he and his own people would feel the power

of the Armenian church. This punishment is truly severe, but if Caiaphas could say about the innocent Christ 'better one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not,' can't I repeat those words for the malefactor who caused the death of thousands of soldiers? How many disasters his father, Prince Gurgen, brought to our country! We hoped to get rid of the constant enemy on the northern borders with his death, but the son was even more destructive than his father... But God is merciful towards us and has delivered him into our hands. If we don't blind him now, then he will blind us by invading our homeland. Then we will be cursed by the people and the souls of those soldiers who fell at the whim of this monster..."

The king was impressed by the words of *Sparapet*, and, unable to resist his demand any longer, especially since the other princes also agreed with Marzpetuni, he promised to blind Ber.

But *Sparapet*, fearing that the king might yield to the queen's entreaties on his return to Kars, asked permission to punish Ber immediately after entering the city.

That's why Ber was taken to the Church of Holy Apostles and all hurried to the same place.

When the king and his retinue arrived at the new cathedral, a huge crowd of people had already gathered there. Ber was there with the captive princes. They were guarded by Vananda warriors armed with spears.

The king avoided the queen's gaze, trying to carry out his decision as soon as possible. He feared that by postponing the punishment he might later be obliged to alter his promise. So, dismounting from his horse, he went up to Ber and, taking him by the hand, said:

"Go and see the church, which you were going to consecrate according to Georgian rite..."

He brought King Ber to the temple and, pointing to the beautiful interior of the temple, said:

"Look how beautiful it is! It is built on four wings and divided into twelve niches. In each of them, you see the face of one of the Apostles – the Apostles none of whom came to your country to preach Christianity. Look at the dome, how high and beautiful it is! It rests on vaults that are not supported by columns. Look at the altar, how high it is unlike the low Georgian altars. Hence, the Georgian rite can't consecrate it. Look with all your eyes, because you will never see this again."

Having said this, the King brought Ber out and, showing the exterior of the church, said:

"You see, the temple is already ready, we were going to inaugurate it but you prevented us, because you wanted to consecrate it according to your custom.

The Lord did not allow you to do this, because He is against evildoers. But you will still take part in the consecration of our church in some other way. It is our custom to offer a sacrifice to God before the consecration of the church. This is the victim you will be, in order to atone for your crime a little..."

With these words, he left Ber and, turning to Marzpetuni, said:

“Sparapet! Here is the man who caused the death of your five hundred warriors. Give him his due, which was decided by the military council.”

Saying this, the king mounted his horse and rode away from the church with his retinue.

Sparapet went up to Ber who now looked around depressed and afflicted and told him:

“There are laws, O King of Abkhazia,” he said, “that serve the happiness and well-being of the people. Those who despise these laws will suffer heavenly punishment... You have violated many such laws in your life and have taken away the good and happiness of many. And if God's punishment befalls you today, do not curse us, but the one who caused your misfortune—curse Ber, who was called the ‘Abkhaz king’...”

Having said this, he ordered the chief executioner to fulfill the order.

The executioner took Ber to the nearest dungeon and there put out his eyes.

When King Abas returned to the palace, the queen, who was waiting for him with trepidation, came out to meet him and asked:

“Where is my brother, my glorious sovereign?”

“We left him in the dungeon,” the king replied, trying to avoid the queen’s glance.

“What did you do to him?” the queen exclaimed in horror.

“Blinded him,” was the king's answer.

The queen screamed loudly and fell senseless into the hands of her attendants.

Several weeks have passed. The Abkhaz princes learned about the misfortune that befell their king. With valuable gifts, they came to King Abas with a request to release Ber and the captive princes.

Abas not only set a large ransom, but also demanded compensation for all the losses that Ber had caused him.

The Abkhaz princes fulfilled his demand. They paid the ransom, compensated for the war losses and concluded an eternal peace. Then, taking the blind king and the princes, they returned to Abkhazia.

This comforted the queen a little. Her brother, although blind, however returned to his throne, and the country was compensated in full for the losses incurred.

Thus, ended the dispute about the northern borders raised by Tslík Amram. Armenia, securing itself from this side too, enjoyed the benefits of peace and goodness for many years.

Chapter 10 The End of a Hero

Thereafter King Abas once again turned his attention to the question of internal reforms by trying to cement the bond of friendship with his allied princes and winning the friendship of dissident princes. The celebrations of the newly-built Cathedral in the fall of 943 was a propitious occasion to this end. The King sent invitations to Catholicos Ananias who had just ascended the Throne of Aghtamar, the senior bishops of Armenia, Ashot Terenik, the King of Vaspurakan, the Lords of Aghdznik, Mok, and Turuberan and the Princes of Tayk and other places, Sahak Sevada's son David, many other illustrious personages and a great multitude.

After the festivities which lasted for several days, at the proposal of Gevorg Marzpetuni, a treaty was formed which bound together the King, all the royal houses and the princes who took a solemn oath, whenever the fatherland was endangered in the future, to take up arms and repel the enemy under the command of the Supreme King of Ararat.

The Treaty was read in the newly-built Cathedral by Catholicos Ananias himself and was signed by the Kings of Ararat and Vaspurakan and the Armenian princes, all of whom swore to preserve the sacred Union which was designed to serve the general strengthening of the Fatherland and the perpetual welfare of the Armenian people.

The King then rewarded his illustrious guests with precious gifts who took their departure with cordial sentiments. But he reserved some unique honors for a few of his loyal princes. To the Lords of Aghdznik and Mok who had remained loyal to the throne from beginning to end he bestowed new estates and gave them the title of prince.

To the kin of Siunis who had remained loyal to the throne from beginning to end he granted a number of adjoining provinces. Vahram *Sevuh* who had joined Marzpetuni from the most trying days of King Ashot and had participated in all his fights, his victories and his misfortunes, he appointed Lord of the lands of Utis and Albanians, with all the prerogatives and revenues which Tslík Amram enjoyed in the days of Ashot *Yerkat*.

He appointed Prince David, the son of Sahak Sevada, as the new Lord of Gardman, to heal the rupture with the Royal Throne which had started in the days of Ashot *Yerkat*. And since Queen Sahakanush had retired in those days from Yerazgavors to her native Gardman, to enable her to pass the remainder of her life with her brother, the King granted her and her brother a few provinces from the land of Albanians.

As to Gevorg Marzpetuni, the King did not know how to reward this prince to whose steadfast patriotism he owed the reestablishment of his throne, the Fatherland and its welfare.

“In my entire kingdom there is not a treasure great enough to express the gratitude I owe you,” he said one day to Marzpetuni in the presence of the princes. “The only worthy gift I can bestow upon you is the title ‘Benefactor of the Fatherland’ which I confer upon you from this day.”

Saying it, the King held Marzpetuni’s right hand and kissed it warmly.

The old Prince was deeply touched. He embraced the King, kissed his forehead and said:

“I have already received my reward from God, which is, I have seen my Fatherland peaceful and happy, the Royal Throne is safe, the Armenian princes are united, and the enemies of Armenia driven from the land. Now I can say with a clear conscience, ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.’”

After a few years of peaceful life at the royal court the Benefactor of the Fatherland neared the end of his journey. He summoned his son Gor and his daughter-in-law Shahandukht to his side to give them his last blessing.

“The strength of the nations is in the families,” said the old man. “That nation is strong which has strong families, united, affectionate, virtuous and loyal families. Those peasant huts, those obscure houses in which live children with tattered clothes whom the great prince’s scorn, those are the very ones who embody the Fatherland’s strength. He who wishes to see the nation strong and the Fatherland victorious must first of all take care of the families like the provident gardener who, to strengthen the branches and to reap their fruit, nourishes the roots of the tree which, although buried in the earth and invisible to the human eye, sustain the life of the tree. Even as the plant whose roots are dried up or eaten by the worms cannot live, so the nation whose families are contaminated, which have dispelled love, unity and virtue, and most of all the love of God, cannot stand erect.”

“If the contaminated families of the common people can be so harmful to a Nation and the Fatherland, how much more harmful and destructive are the families of the reigning princes if they are stained. King Ashot’s family is a striking example. How much pain, tears and misery was brought about by a single human weakness of that mighty hero, and how costly was that weakness to the Fatherland!

“Knowing all this, my beloved children, listen to my last command and keep it with sacred resolve. That command is condensed into three words, ‘Love One Another.’ This love will make you happy and will make your children happy. That love will bring God’s blessing on the Marzpetuni home whose heirs you are.”

The old man was silent. Gor and Shahandukht knelt before him, fervently kissed his right hand, and promised to observe their worthy father's sacred command.

Hearing the old prince was nearing his end, the King called on him to know where he wished his remains to rest after his death.

"My oath forbids me to be buried in my native Garni," the Prince said. "Bury me in a corner of the Fatherland wherever you wish."

"I would like to take your body to Bagaran and bury you in the cemetery of the Bagratuni kings," the King said.

"Bagaran? Good. Take me there, but do not bury me in the cemetery of your fathers. There, ah yes, are buried your martyred father and your martyred brother. I would like to rest by their side. But there also is buried Ashot the Tyrant. Life has alienated me from that traitor; death must not unite me with him."

"What then is your wish?" the King asked.

"Bury me in front of the citadel, on the height of the rocks, so that I can watch over the tomb of Ashot the Tyrant, so that he no longer will betray the saints around him," replied the Prince in a dying voice.

A few days later the Benefactor of the Fatherland passed away.

The whole Court, the royal city of Kars and all the Araratian lands mourned his death. King Abas prepared a royal funeral for the Benefactor of the Fatherland.

The body of Marzpetuni was laid reverently before the Citadel, on a mighty acclivity of the rocks, at whose base the farmers of the Akhurian River murmured their eternal blessing of the Armenian hero's achievements.

Thereupon King Abas bestowed upon Gor, as the worthy son of a great father, the post of Commander of the Armies. And to perpetuate the memory of Marzpetuni, he erected over his tomb a church which was called St. George, of all the vanished ruins of Bagaran the only one which still stands to this day.

THE END