

THE KAILASHIAD

A Novella

Roman Popov

Translated from the Russian

I. The Man

A man was driving home to his flat in a small car.

“Young man, why are you dawdling! Let me through! What are you waiting for!” — it came to him as though from the bus that was tearing across the bridge over the Yenisei.

And in that filled metal barrel, people had been sealed up tight under pressure. The barrel rolled along with its contents and rattled over the bridge.

There were not enough handrails, but people had no need of them, for there is no better brake in a bus than a full one.

Meanwhile the man in his car drove on, awash in the golden rays of the June sun, listening to mantras. In an hour he reached his building.

Coming up to it, what you would sooner see is a human anthill. Box-houses rose up and made the eyes swim.

The houses stood in rows, competing in height with themselves. In them you could feel the crunch of money stuffed into the developer’s pocket, and of the human happiness the residents had purchased next to a cemetery and a power line.

Having wedged his car in well in advance, he made his way to his flat, first across the stairwell landing, then borne up by the lift. And only after that was he able at last to penetrate into his own flat, which had never seen much of a renovation.

It should be noted that this man was approaching forty and had already been thinking of putting his

property in order, but such wishes were for him at one and the same time an illusion, *maya*¹, as he put it.

A man, precisely — perhaps even a personality; but a personality requires sociability, and of that he was somehow short. At work he was forever being pestered by insistent customers, and he worked as a manager. Clients came to him fairly often — or rather, as often as it is possible to come. And he, as an office worker, was obliged to receive them and to hear them out.

But now, having come home from work, he set about at once transforming himself into an off-duty condition. And this was not the drinking of spirits at all, but the reading of books and the singing of mantras...

The thing is that this man, Alexander Ghorin, was a most interesting man, of most interesting reasonings; for which he had been condemned more than once, while others looked at him sideways. Back when books on yoga and Vedanta² first appeared on the shelves, Alexander's attention had fallen upon them at once. And in those books, in his opinion, the whole of the meaning was concentrated. After they began to circulate freely, organisations started to form, and he joined them himself, but was disappointed and resolved to go alone.

And so his life had run these last years.

Evening came on, and then night. Having supped, he decided to go to bed, but felt something was amiss. Alexander sensed that somebody was listening to music very loudly indeed.

¹ *Maya* — in Indian philosophy, the illusory nature of the visible world.

² *Vedanta* ("the completion of the Vedas") — one of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, grown out of the Upanishads. It teaches the unity of the individual soul with the highest reality, and that the visible world of multiplicity is not the final truth.

And if only that music had been of some primitive content... But the content of it was precisely this: that it was music. A three-note anvil was sounding out of flat two hundred and three, on the seventeenth floor of a twenty-storey building. The young tenants were entertaining themselves.

“Good evening! Might you turn it down somehow, I’ve work in the morning!”

Into the small thin face of Alexander Mikhailovich there stared an australopithecus; bulging its two raisins, it answered with an absolute failure to keep time:

“I might not!”

And the door slammed shut.

Alexander decided not to call the police. That takes a long while, and it was time he was asleep.

In his sleep he heard the words “beekeeper” and “raspberry Lada.” And she even presented herself to him — all delicious, driving over the raspberry berries, with the beekeeper pollinating her. But then he woke — not from any understanding that a Lada is not the finest of automobiles, but from the sense of the necessity of going out among people and hearing out clients.

And so, having finished his tea, he set off for work.

II. At Work

After endless reports he received clients, and then more clients. But here, after lunch, he felt that something not altogether pleasant was awaiting him...

The director came to see him.

"Sasha, I know you consider yourself a talented man. But how can you think so, if nothing of ours is selling? The clients ought to buy our product themselves. If you cannot properly secure our sales, then you are incapable, and you must be dismissed."

"I have no intention of working for half a wage. You, Viktor Fyodorovich, said long ago that—"

"I promised you nothing! I have to report on performance tomorrow. If you do nothing by tomorrow!.."

Alexander said nothing, seeing the displeasure of his chief, who himself wanted to report in order to gladden his own chiefs. Whereas he simply wanted to work. In his section they all held conversations about the earning of money — not about honest ways of it, but about all manner of dodges and deceptions. And they all fawned upon the chief besides, like dogs.

To run away somewhere from such people.

There are plenty of people, but of real ones there are none here. They were all immersed not so much in worldly affairs as in under-worldly ones.

He went out into the street.

"Got any money? I'm short for my fare."

Alexander gave the beggar a hundred roubles.

"What? So little! Keep it yourself, you pauper!"

Alexander was getting into his car and, hearing a crowd of people swearing, thought:

Has the Kali Yuga³ really come? Everything in the world thinks of profit, of dreadful and black things. Can no one come down to the earth and put an end to this chaos?

He went into his flat and drew the curtains tight shut; in the building the two-beat music thundered. Below, cars drove past.

Somebody was quarrelling with the driver of an expensive car for having parked his contraption on the pavement.

A glistening face answered him rudely. The witness of all this was Alexander.

He shut everything that could possibly be shut, put out the light, and fixed his eyes upon the poster of his patron.

"Only you can solve my problem! Look at what humanity has been brought to! They all wish for nothing but evil and money and are mired in it!" Alexander whispered softly. "Come down and show yourself! There is no one here at all! Everything is sunk in darkness."

³ *Kali Yuga* — in Hinduism, the last of the four world ages; the age of discord and moral decline.

III. In the Mountains

"Lord! The cry of your devotee has reached you!

Mahadev⁴, awake!"

"I hear it all myself, Nandi⁵," the blue figure answered calmly.

On the summit of Kailash there sat a man with blue skin. His hair was long, and by his neck a serpent coiled. Beside him stood a trident and drums. Their voices carried like an echo through the snow-white silence. Nearby stood only the little house of his wife Parvati⁶ and his son Ganesha⁷.

The bull Nandi waited calmly for an answer.

"You and I have a journey before us!"

"Mahadev, we have not come down from this summit in thousands of years! The last time you descended was for your wedding with Parvati."

"Remember who we are, Nandi. This world holds no terror for us. And besides, you wish to see a world that I have not seen with my own eyes since the first millennium. I see it constantly with my third eye, but never yet have I gone down into it so deeply. And then, this is my devotee, and I cannot fail to answer his request."

Nandi shook his horns with a certain apprehension. He began to swing his tail, as though beating off flies.

"Be at peace, Nandi!"

⁴ *Mahadev* (the Great God) — one of the names of Shiva.

⁵ *Nandi* — the white bull, Shiva's mount and gatekeeper.

⁶ *Parvati* — the consort of Shiva.

⁷ *Ganesha* — the son of Shiva and Parvati, the elephant-headed god, remover of obstacles.

“Mahadev, come to the table!”

“Parvati, we are setting off on a journey!”

“Well, it is so long since you last did that...”

“Do not be uneasy. Tell Ganesha of it. Perhaps I shall come back for him.”

And here came Ganesha.

“I want to come with you too!” cried Ganesha.

“Mahadev, do not leave me alone!”

“Do not forget that you have helpers. And besides, Kailash is safe at present.”

They parted.

“Ganesha, Nandi, we are setting off for Siberia!”

IV. Already on the Way

In the streams of darkness, after the prayer, something made a noise in the next room.

Alexander became very frightened. His legs gave way beneath him, and into his hand he took a frying pan. And suddenly he saw in the darkness a blue body; beside it stood a man with the head of a bull, and to their left a man with the head of an elephant. He screamed, as one does.

But, seeing who stood before him, he fell down.

"Get up! You called me? Well, I have decided to bring everyone along."

"Shiva... Is it really you?"

Having thought a little and looked his guests over, he decided that they must at the very least change their clothes.

"Do not worry about that," Shiva answered.

And here the blue man turned into a gentleman of about forty in a shirt and black trousers. His hair was short and coal-black. His face, even despite the transformation, conveyed no small intellect, though without spectacles; it was calm and kind, and two emerald pieces of glass sat firmly in their sockets. Ganesha became a young man of twenty in a grey T-shirt and jeans, with a long face, thick black hair and a large belly. As for Nandi, he remained with the head of a bull, but in a suit.

"Nandi, do you not see?"

"Well, somehow with this head of mine..."

But, seeing the disapproval, his head began to turn human. And he became a rather stout man of about thirty.

"Come to the table," said Alexander.

They all sat down at the table and began to drink tea. Ganesha ate the pastries willingly.

"Ganapati⁸, you and I agreed that you would not eat a great deal when we are guests!"

"Then in exchange for the great deal I have eaten, I present you with *jalebi*⁹ and these other sweets besides."

And they all set to eating the delicacies he had prepared.

"And where is Mushika¹⁰?" Ganesha said loudly.

"Why, I have quite forgotten him!"

Under the bed there sat a mouse of enormous size.

"I shall not come out!" he cried loudly.

"Then I shall not give you any sweets!"

Whereupon an enormous mouse came running into the room.

"Mushika? And why have you not had time to change?" asked Ganesha.

"I do not wish to lose my form..."

"But it is only temporary, afterwards you will be a mouse again."

⁸ *Ganapati* — another name for Ganesha.

⁹ *Jalebi* — an Indian sweet: spirals of batter fried in oil and steeped in syrup.

¹⁰ *Mushika* — the mouse, Ganesha's mount. By tradition he was the mighty demon Mushikasura, who terrorised the earth and laid waste the dwellings of the sages. Ganesha gave him battle and, overcoming him, turned him into a mouse; the vanquished demon begged for mercy, and Ganesha spared his life and made him his mount — so that unbridled force was not destroyed but set to service.

“The only time I was manlike was before I was turned out of a demon.”

“It is entirely harmless,” said Shiva calmly.

Then the mouse turned into a small man, whose eyes ran about in disorder and whose mouth twitched.

“And who is it that plays music so loudly here, and indecent music at that?” asked Shiva.

“That is my neighbour.”

And here he told them of the previous evening’s occurrence.

Then out of the speaker there suddenly sounded the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya*¹¹.

The neighbour ran about his flat for a long time, looking for whoever could have connected to his speaker.

They all dissolved in laughter.

“Oi, neighbour!” came from behind the wall.

Suddenly the figure of the neighbour appeared in the doorway.

He was met by Shiva.

“Good evening!” said the latter affably.

“An’ why’re you connectin’ to my speaker?”

“What are you saying, we do not occupy ourselves with such things. Sleep peacefully.”

And he shut the door.

The neighbour had no sooner returned home than his speaker came flying out to meet him. It began to fly about in the air and to sing mantras.

The neighbour fell to the floor at the sight.

¹¹ *Om Namah Shivaya* — “Reverence to Shiva,” one of the principal mantras of Shaivism.

A black ellipse flew about the flat, crying magic words. The entire contents of the flat, in which some sort of party had apparently been going on, ran out of it.

The speaker suddenly began to sing: "Ah, good evening! Greetings from a mighty hangover!"

And then: "Ah, Borka is a womaniser!" (the fact being that the neighbour's name was Boris).

At this song, the guests began to scatter from what they had seen.

Female students fled, dropping their handbags. The whole gathering was dispersed.

V. The Evening

"Well then!" declared Shiva. "I know you have a cemetery nearby. I shall go there with Nandi."

Ghorin, having a fairly large spiritual experience, knew of the dwelling place of Mahadev, and therefore asked no questions.

"But how will you go there without a passport?" enquired Ganesha.

"In case of an inspection I am issuing passports to you all! New ones, glossy, as good as real!"

And there sparkled in his hand passports with eagles in red covers.

Shivin, Alexey Nikolaevich.

Ganeshin, Valery Petrovich.

Bychkov, Andrey Ivanovich.

Myshkin, Gennady Valeryevich.

Each was handed one little book, and each had a photograph in it.

"And now it is time we were off... Ganesha and Mushika remain to keep an eye on our things."

(In a small dark room there lay a trident and a little axe.)

The two went out; the door slammed shut behind them of its own accord. From a blue shelf a key came flying and locked it itself, with two turns.

It was already quite dark. On both sides of the road cars were driving about, and the air smelled of summer. Twilight stood over the city. Red threads stretched across the sunset sky.

By the time they reached the cemetery it had grown wholly dark, but the twilit band remained drawn out across the heavens.

Shivin and Bychkov found at last a place to sit — after searching and examining the gravestones. Some of the portraits seemed altogether new, while others had noticeably receded into the past. But there was a free patch of ground there too; and upon it the *sadhakas*¹² settled themselves, sinking into a brief austerity.

Meanwhile in that wooded stillness there was no one at all, and only one woman walked there, with one intention. And no one was to hinder her — by her own reckoning, of course...

In the face she was, in a word, repulsive: her thick lips glistened with hatred, and her appraising, aggressive gaze was nursing some dreadful plan...

"Men, what are you doing walking about here!" she cried in a piercing voice. "It is quite dark already."

"We shall not disturb you," said citizen Bychkov.

"But the dear departed may not be pleased at your coming."

"Then let us ask them!" Shivin cut in.

Out of the black earth bodies began to rise: some charred, in ragged clothes black with soil, some in white. But they all looked like an object that has only just been pulled out from under the ground — like some archaeological find.

They cried out:

"We do not object! But you, witch, be gone! Be gone!"

One of the dead men went up to the witch and tore off a scrap of her clothing. She screamed.

¹² *Sadhaka* — one who undertakes a spiritual practice.

Out of the pocket of her jeans there fell a black knife, and out of her bag there rolled a pig's head.

And there is the evidence, went the thought.

"Now do you understand who is superfluous here?" said Nandi, rearing up.

He turned into a man two metres tall with the head of an ox, so that only the crescent moon lit his white horns, while his body was hidden in shadow. Shiva took on his natural form. His dark blue skin shone brightly, shimmering in rivulets, and about his neck a hissing serpent coiled. Beside him stood the trident, its metal glittering in the moonlight.

The woman's body began to turn green, and two horns grew out of it. And this was visible, notwithstanding the darkness that had already set in.

She began to scream and to run about in a frenzy. The trident, thrust into the ground, began to revolve and to glow, then spun still harder and hissed like a cat.

It screwed itself out of the depths of the earth and began to fly about the cemetery.

The *trishula*¹³ drove into the witch's head, and she ran about, giving out a rasping sound, and crimson rivulets of blood began to splash in the darkness. Black scabs crawled out of her neck. At last the trident cleft her. The lifeless body crashed down upon the graveyard earth, and the spike of one of the railings ripped open her belly.

The rivulets of blood that dripped from the severed head turned into bushes of wild rose.

Her body itself turned into an enormous fir tree.

¹³ *Trishula* — the trident of Shiva.

"Now no one shall carry on their black business upon your ground! Let it be cleansed of this stench!" said Shiva, resuming his former appearance.

"Hurrah!" cried the dead.

Their black figures were hidden by the darkness; all took on their accustomed shape, and silence descended upon the earth.

The two returned out of the quiet speechlessness of the night. Reaching a shop, they asked the shopwoman for cognac.

"A good little shop you have."

"Only nobody comes into it."

"And we?" asked Nandi.

"Well, apart from you, naturally."

"And do you wish people to come to you?"

"Of course I do! Nothing sells, nothing but vodka."

"That is the secret of every shop in the district — that vodka alone turns a profit," said Bychkov. "And now be so good as to let us have our cognac!"

"But we don't sell after eleven!"

"How can that be? That is precisely the secret, that nothing sells. And perhaps one must sometimes sell after all?"

"Here, would you like these?" Shiva took out a handful of coins and poured them into the shopwoman's palm.

The coins were gold, and it was beyond this woman where the strange citizen with the insinuating voice had got them at all.

"Now listen, there is a law."

"And if you do not wish to — then let me help you!"

And off the shelf there flew a gilded bottle with chocolate-coloured contents. It flew and revolved high beneath the ceiling.

"And keep your money! You do not accept it in that form — then it shall be in another."

And the little coins turned into a five-thousand note.

The woman at first watched quietly, and then began quietly to scream, when the bottle, slowly circling in a waltz, began to fly up towards her head.

Out of this bottle there grew little arms and legs of glass, and somewhere a waltz by Shostakovich struck up.

Suddenly the cognac sank into Nandi's hand, while a bottle of red wine uncorked itself, and before the woman a table laid itself with dor blue cheese and camembert from Switzerland.

"Drink, then, and the customers will come," said Bychkov quietly, in his low and kindly voice, looking with kindly blue eyes at the shopwoman.

Her eyes no longer ran about so fearfully, but her heart was beating still.

She had not yet had time to telephone and tell everyone about it, when crowds of customers were already standing at the doors. And she noticed a loss besides: all the cheap alcohol had vanished from the shop, and on the shelves lay sparkling and dessert wines, liqueurs and whisky. Sides of jamón hung from the display cases, and various kinds of cheese were displayed on every surface.

There came to her all manner of well-groomed and cultivated people in jackets. She herself, instead of her rustic apron, was dressed in some sort of expensive suit.

Along with all this, the whole shop had been transformed in its interior entirely.

And this transformation she did not notice: the carpets laid themselves, the ceiling rolled itself out as well. The woman was calm only because she understood that she was dreaming, and wished to prolong the languor of it.

The men went out, leaving a wake of delight behind them, and, heated by their conversation, walked off along the cool street.

Shivin and Bychkov were already approaching the building.

The door opened, and through it came two citizens of considerable height.

They set the cognac down on the table with a ring and opened it.

Everyone was already sitting at the table.

"I do not drink, and I do not eat meat," said Ghorin.

"Now you eat and you drink. The austerity¹⁴ is at an end."

"I wish to tell you all about our journey..."

And here Shiva began to recount in detail what had occurred along their way. In every detail.

Alexander listened and wondered more and more. "I wish to declare to you that this woman, the one who turned into a witch, prayed to me herself. But in doing so she performed black rituals and sacrifices, and thereby set herself upon the path of destruction. He who walks that path, crushing primordial matter, himself becomes the object of his own deed; and I, with Nandi,

¹⁴ *Austerity (tapas)* — spiritual effort, self-restraint undertaken for the sake of purification.

have verily rewarded her — I have given her the fruits of that labour which are hers by right.”

No questions arose in any of those present: Shiva knew how to tell a thing in such a way that, when the telling was right, they evaporated of themselves. And that woman was indeed a witch. Having read black books from her youth, she had resolved somehow to do away with her husband by her rituals — and she succeeded, suddenly and swiftly. But a child remained to her; and in the fury of her incantations she dissolved him too, and bore no punishment for it. And having set out upon the path of true destruction after reading books about Shiva, she thirsted to obtain true power — but that power, happily, flowed before her for no great while.

“And we shall change this space. And I wish to tell you that in this time I have already settled in here well enough. I have managed to try a great deal on this earth. And now I think we might set off into the city itself, and look at its surroundings.”

“Do you wish to do that today?” asked Ghorin.

“Tomorrow.”

“But I know, Sasha, that nothing here pleases you. Cars stand beneath the windows, no one takes away the rubbish...”

And Alexander began to tell the true story: how he had come to the management company with a complaint about the perpetual filth in the yard and the violation of other sanitary regulations, and had been advised to move away. And the director of that management company, an ambitious and thievish personage, spoke with him rudely... The fact being that this personage

merely profited off the population of these buildings. Their construction had been exceedingly lucrative. And the man appointed as manager wished only to draw out as much money as he could. Exactly like the developer, who wished only to report on a project well executed to the administration.

“I have come to look at these personages who cause people so much unpleasantness. And the whole of my stay here shall be bound up with that,” said Shiva.

It grew dark, and it was necessary to think where the guests would sleep.

Ghorin was already hastening to give up his own place, when Shiva said that he need not trouble himself.

The one-room flat drew apart, and this space filled up with rooms.

A hot day ended in a rainy night.

VI. We Must Go

In the morning they all understood the necessity of the journey, and after lunch Shiva began to consider it. It was resolved to make use of Alexander's automobile.

And in the yard, entirely parked over with cars, there awaited them an old, battered nag not worthy of description, which God had sent only in order to live out its span — but nevertheless this old lady could still do and knew a great deal. On the whole, its purpose, which was to carry, it fulfilled. And off they set in it.

Five sorcerers were already on their way.

"And where is it we are going?" asked Ghorin, who was driving.

"We thought we might bathe," declared Shiva.

"We have one place for bathing nearby, and that is the Yenisei. I hope there are no objections?"

They all declared their agreement in unison.

And the car, puffing and rustling, tore off through the centre of the city. All around, people drove somehow aggressively and not altogether adequately. It was unpleasant for Ganesha and Shiva to look at the big expensive cars and their owners, proud and spoiled.

One of them began to cut up the nag. It swerved and weaved, and then the driver stopped and got out of his car.

Out of the black, expensive, puffing chariot there emerged a bearded man resembling a barrel upholstered in mince — or the likeness of a man.

When he saw the group of five gentlemen of considerable height, his resolve somewhat deserted him,

though his insolence remained; but after he had satisfied himself that the window would not be opened to him, he twirled his fingers and got back in.

Ghorin began to grow indignant and to abuse him, but, seeing Shiva's contented face, left off doing so and rejoiced inwardly.

The fact being that after this the radiator of the insolent man began to smoke, and, getting out of his car, he saw three large holes in his own body panels. This impressed him greatly, and the face of this torso altered considerably, drawing itself over that part of the human body where in ordinary people it is situated.

They all reached the Yenisei. Having changed, they went down to the bank.

And there awaited them a boiling icy water, which swept away with its current everything that fell beneath its force.

Shiva, having swum a little, began to astonish everyone by going entirely under the water and beginning a meditation there.

The people on the bank began to converge upon him, in order to help.

Meanwhile Nandi called out in his high voice:

"Citizens on holiday, do not be alarmed! This is a professional, and he always does it this way."

"And what is it he occupies himself with so persistently?" asked a passer-by.

"Underwater swimming," answered Bychkov.

"Why, he'll drown, he must be saved!" cried a woman who could not stand by.

Already on the bridge above the river people were beginning to film it all, and a crowd had gathered.

All of this went on until a voice like thunder rang out:

"I am perfectly well!"

People began to take fright and to look about them.

Suddenly the body appeared, and some began to disperse, while others came up to this athlete.

"How do you manage it? A talent?"

"Yoga," Shivin answered calmly.

Ganesha also decided not to stand aside, and thought to turn himself into an elephant. Towards the large figure there came the figure of a majestic animal. Going into the river, he began to pour water over himself from his trunk.

All the children who were on the bank began to converge upon this astonishing elephant and his keeper, asking the most various questions: where is he from, and what do you feed him.

To all of it Shiva answered calmly: he is mine; I feed him fruit; he lives in a village nearby.

But, understanding that more and more people were beginning to gather around them, Shiva announced that the elephant was tired and wished to eat.

Every child who came up to the keeper with the elephant found gold coins in his pocket, and in the news before long a headline was printed.

Our Himalayan acquaintances got home fairly quickly.

VII. What They Came For

The purpose of the journey remained unfulfilled while they were all staying in the city. It was necessary to deal with the housing conditions of the inhabitant. And an occasion presented itself: to the city on the Yenisei there was coming, from the centre, a personage before whom both the developer and everyone responsible for the various technical questions were obliged without fail to report. Into this affair our acquaintances also wished to insert themselves.

It should be said that the developer of this building was Veliam Mikhailovich Spiridonsky — as was noted earlier, a man without integrity, but immeasurably ambitious. He built cramped houses and set them together upon a tiny plot. He himself put immeasurable sums in his pocket, but here it was necessary to present the whole of his activity before the personage N., who had a mind precisely to inspect this site; and at the reception on the occasion of his arrival this Spiridonsky was to be given the floor. For several days already he had been running about learning his speech by heart.

Mr N. had already appeared in the city, and everything was prepared for his reception. He rode in his luxurious car and looked at the surroundings, but by that very act he was bearing down like a storm upon Spiridonsky's housing complexes.

"Igor, everything must be cleaned up, all the cars must be lined up, so that everything shines by the time he arrives!"

So spoke into the receiver a glistening face, cowardly and anxious for its fortune.

The lower ants of the anthill bustled about, clearing away the rubble of the Potemkin villages.

All complaints began to be received in good order and in concert.

But just before the arrival, guests came to call upon Spiridonsky...

VIII. And Here We Are

Back in the flat the five of them had begun to consider the scheme for penetrating to Spiridonsky. It was being agreed how many would go, whether it would be one alone.

"Very well, we go all together. Sasha, you are coming too."

"But what am I to do?" Ghorin took fright.

"Nothing. Sit in the seventh row and watch. Valery Petrovich will occupy himself with the tables; Gennady Valeryevich will see that no one interferes; Andrey Ivanovich will stand by the doors. And I shall have a word with the master of the house — or rather, with his dog. All the rest they will do themselves: with people of that sort it is enough to let them say what they are thinking anyway. Lies need not be exposed, Sasha. Lies need only be let out into the open, and they expose themselves."

"And that is all?"

"That is all. The most difficult thing today will be not to laugh."

"And how are we to travel?" asked Ghorin.

"Have you never flown? Today we shall fly!"

At these words the figures of the yogis began to soar up, and the current bore them out of the flat.

Shiva took on his usual form and sat upon Nandi; Ganesha flew upon Mushika, who had grown to the height of a horse; and Ghorin flew alone, having turned into a grey-haired yogi.

Spiridonsky, as Shiva explained to them all, lived on Yelovaya Street, in his Siberian residence; the rest of the time he whiled away his summers, warming his dough-like torso beneath a Mediterranean sun. But now he was there alone, in the pine forest, making his preparations.

And our acquaintances were already flying across the city, and then above the pinewood over the tops of the pines.

Meanwhile at Spiridonsky's all was uneasy.

"And the vase?" a voice fearful for its money asked the housekeeper.

"In its place, Veliam Mikhailovich," answered Nina, the housekeeper.

"So you have cleaned everything? If so much as one thing stands badly or is dirty — I shall dock it from your wages, do you understand?" he said, hissing and squeezing out his eyes.

But Nina ran off. The sweating face sat alone upon the sofa and awaited the fate of the approaching motorcade. N. was to collect him and go with him to a certain hall, something like a concert hall, for a reception; and his speech awaited him, which he kept repeating — it was about respect for the dignity of the personnel in our complexes, everything for people and their comfort, and other lying rubbish.

He sat surrounded by the pine forest, in the twilight. His apartments with their swimming pool rose up like a statue. He himself within them was a grain of sand.

He looked at himself in the mirror for a long time, exalting himself and thinking what a fine fellow he was.

And suddenly — a rustle.

The mirror split into pieces.

The vase fell. And smashed.

He took fright, his heart began to pound; he went to the door.

Coming down from the second floor, he saw his little dog.

She called out to him in her hoarse voice:

"We have guests!"

Am I imagining it, or am I not...

Spiridonsky screamed, but, covering his face with his palms, tried to master himself. Then, forcing himself, he took a knife and began to approach the door.

An invisible hand began to wrench the knife away; he shook all over and fell to the floor.

The door opened, and there appeared five tall personages.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"We want a great deal from you. Your dog will tell you."

Into the room, with a businesslike air, came an alabai, and began to speak:

"In the first place, you, master, rob honest people. In the second place, you lie, and you do it rather brazenly."

Veliam's legs began to give way beneath him, but the half-bull held him up.

"Tell me what you want from me and I shall do it all, only go away!"

"And you should speak differently to your clients, master," the dog would not be quiet.

"But why is the dog talking?!" Spiridonsky wailed.

"That is not a dog, that is your conscience, and it needs washing, as a dog does. And that is what we shall be occupied with today."

“Lord, what for?”

“For everything you have done to people,” said Shiva at last. “And you have already called upon him; it seems he will be spending the evening with you.”

“Now,” said Shiva in a commanding voice, “you will go with N. and you will not say one word to him about what you have seen. And we shall go with you.

And remember: if a dog has spoken, do not suppose that a mosquito flying about the car, or a fly that has come in from the forest, will not begin to mutter something similar.

Do you understand?”

“I agree to everything!” cried the developer.

“And one thing more. Silence.”

After these words the lights went on throughout the house, the vase and the mirror gathered themselves whole out of their fragments, and the dog went back down onto all fours.

Meanwhile N. was already driving up to the townhouse on Yelovaya. Before him yesterday’s despots spread themselves out like velvet carpets; in dealing with them they became ants. All greeted this personage.

The motorcade drew up to the house. Into the wealthy dwelling there came a contented, insolent face.

“Good evening, Veliam Mikhailovich! Let us set off for this evening’s occasion.”

“And a good evening to you...” Shiva played along.

“I see you have new guests!” exclaimed N. “Delighted to make your acquaintance. Well, let us spend this splendid evening together!”

At first Spiridonsky lost his self-possession at the sight of N., but then he entered into his usual condition.

They got into the luxurious car in the dead silence of the spruce-lined yard with its violet lighting, and set off.

The car tore through the dark city; there the guests were offered champagne, which Veliam, by virtue of what had happened to him, was not averse to refusing.

They tore along Mira Street, along Karl Marx, and everything shone and stood in awe.

A quiet "ants" escaped N. He looked, as it were, upon this spectacle from above.

There the young are smashing yet another scooter. There a meaty crowd on this little scooter runs into a pedestrian. There are these little people listening to music. And trying to amuse themselves on their Siberian coppers. Bread and circuses.

But N. had his own anthill too. Once a week he travelled to a certain office, and there he grew anxious, and had to report to his superiors; but, having sunk lower in morals and risen higher in finances, he had changed his role.

In these musings N. himself was just the same, and moulded of the very same dough as the scooter-riders and the people.

But now the carriage had borne them to the hall.

The door of the black car was opened by the driver; before the entrance to the red velvet hall everything was illuminated with light.

Into the hall came figures in suits: Shivin, Bychkov, Ganeshin, Myshkin and Ghorin.

Everyone ran up to N. and began to greet him, to try to touch his most eminent person and to be near this god.

But first there was the banquet.

Oysters and lobsters, wines — all of it lay upon various little tables, and the little people carried these appetisers about swiftly. The various dishes did not excite the sated personages, but all the same they wished to eat.

The welcoming speech began; and while it lasted, so did the food, and after it there was none. And here is the reason why.

Valery Petrovich Ganeshin, as is well known, was a very great lover of eating, and the great dimensions of his belly accommodated an extraordinary amount. Seeing the food, he decided not to draw out the time and, properly speaking, to annihilate it. The more so as the plan of annihilation had been agreed with Shivin.

And so the entire reception began, at a fairly high speed — together with the speech of Kuberov, the owner of the local catering combine — to be accommodated inside our acquaintance.

Away slipped the oysters, the lobsters, the prawns. And, most importantly, the pastries. In the end all the tables stood empty.

“And now, pray come to the table!” said Kuberov.

The guests entered the empty reception hall.

Everyone felt that somebody had managed to annihilate the food. At first Kuberov was greatly frightened at having committed such a blunder before the arrival of so distinguished a person.

“While children in the canteen eat palm oil, you report to your superiors with lobsters?” said Ganesha calmly, without losing the sense of the rightness of his words. “So taste, dear guests, what this monster feeds to children!”

The eyes of everyone present, apart from the acquaintances who knew of the plan, bulged out. Kuberov lost consciousness.

“Do something, quickly!” cried those present.

And everything began to give way. But then all of it was cleared away.

“What, have we never seen food before? Let us pass on to the main part!” cried N.

And they all moved through into the assembly hall.

There in the distance N. was in a state of agitation. Not far off sat the Himalayan travellers and the sadhaka.

“And now we give the floor to our... in a word, to the glory of this city, Veliam Mikhailovich!”

Veliam had not expected such an elevation; he came out rather briskly and did not hold his paper in his hands at all. At first he wished to begin his customary report, but suddenly felt that he could not speak and was beginning to bark — to emit a genuine dog’s bark.

The hall burst out laughing. A wave of noise extinguished the speech, if it may be called that. And Veliam, meanwhile, heard himself perfectly normally, in human speech. But the effect it produced upon him was considerable.

The only intelligible thing he uttered was this:

“I give my flat on Yelovaya Street to the man sitting in the seventh row, in the seventh seat!”

That man turned out to be Ghorin. Veliam had absolutely no wish to say it and clapped his hands over his mouth.

“But what of your repo—” cried the grey-haired old master of ceremonies.

"The fact of the matter is," said Spiridonsky loudly, "that there will be no report, and the lot of you can go to the devil's grandmother together with N.!"

This raised a strong wave in the hall, and Spiridonsky, understanding what he was saying, all but began to lose consciousness.

They wished to lead him off the stage, but N. stopped them with his strong hand. On his face there shone a venomous smile of pride and hypocrisy; despite his rage, he wished to display his benevolence.

He ran out, seized the old man by his grey hair and, right there on the stage, began to tear out clumps of his jacket and clumps of his hair. The guards could not remove them: no sooner did they approach the stage than they felt shocks of electricity.

Suddenly the stripped old man was let go from the stage.

"Off you fly, then, you grey jelly!" Veliam bawled at the top of his voice.

Suddenly, unable to bear it, N. himself began to come out onto the stage.

The clamouring guests fell silent.

"I ask you all to be quiet. If you wished to see my honesty — here it is, I stand before you, I conceal nothing. My conscience is clean. And all rumours of my bribe-taking and fraud are lies. May I be turned into a goat if I am lying!"

And here his head began to shrink. The bodyguards rushed towards him. In the place of his torso there ran about something resembling a man with a goat's head, and it bleated at every word. Everyone began to scream.

The women screamed like men, and the men like women.

The bodyguards did not know how to act and went on running about.

This body began to run about in disorder, until it ran out into the street and off along Mira Street.

Everything was lit up with shrieks.

The police were called.

While one of the officers was already storming the building, our Himalayan friends together with Ghorin evaporated into the crowd.

IX. Home Again

Having flown through the air, they found themselves at Ghorin's home.

Shiva and Ganesha began to prepare for the road.

"Now we have done our deeds, and it is time for us to go," said Shiva. "But that does not mean our visit is at an end. We have travelled a good route and restored the *dharma*¹⁵. Our task is accomplished. Now nothing will hinder your austerity."

"Mahadev — and the flat?"

Shiva looked at him attentively, and Alexander understood that the whole evening had been leading precisely to this question, and that the evening had perhaps been arranged for its sake alone.

"The flat is yours. He gave it away before a full hall, and the papers will be in order. The house on Yelovaya, pines, quiet, not one neighbour with a speaker."

Alexander was silent for a long time. He pictured those pines. He had lived twenty years in a box beside a cemetery and a power line, and now he was being given what he had never even known properly how to dream of. And straight away he pictured something else: himself walking about other men's rooms, where only yesterday a sweating face had looked at itself in the mirror and docked a housekeeper's wages.

"I shall not take it," he said at last, and his voice trembled. "It was not for a flat that I called you."

"And if you had taken it?" asked Shiva.

¹⁵ *Dharma* — the world order; the law; the following of what is due.

“Then, I suppose, you would have come to me tomorrow. With a dog.”

Nandi gave a short smile, and Shiva laughed — and from that laughter it suddenly grew bright in the little kitchen, as bright as day.

“Holy simplicity. Kindness without sense is folly. And how will you provide for your future wife and children? For all of that will come. A blessing from above is not a temptation; always remember whose gift it is that you take. And never sacrifice Abraham to me.”

“Mahadev, why do you ask nothing for this? Why do you not demand such elaborate treatment and such veneration for yourself, asking nothing in return?”

“Power from God,” said Shiva, “is built upon love, and not upon fear. And true power does not require trembling and deference. What seemed two-faced I have turned into a true face and given it a form.”

“But all the same, with what can I pay for this?”

“The highest payment for a deed is gratitude. So long as people go on sinking into material equivalents of happiness and of gratitude, the world will go on competing with the spiritual and disputing with it.”

And with these words they departed.

X. Waking

Alexander woke rather late, since it was a Sunday. He understood that he had had a very long and very strange dream. Having sunk into meditation, he nevertheless kept returning to it now and again: some hall, Spiridonsky talking, some nonsense... *A strange dream*, he thought.

Then a strange headline caught his eye: "Yesterday the businessman N. lost his mind during his visit to Siberia."

The next item: "Yesterday, at an evening reception, the heart of Spiridonsky, a major owner of housing developments, gave out."

Alexander put the telephone aside and sat for a long time without moving.

Then he went into the kitchen. On the table stood an opened bottle of cognac and five cups, one of which was enormous, and another quite tiny, the size of a thimble. In the hallway, on the little cabinet, lay an envelope, and in the envelope a deed of gift, drawn up according to all the rules, for a flat in the house on Yelovaya Street. And besides that, in the very corner, having rolled beneath the radiator, there lay a gold coin — heavy and warm, as though someone had been holding it in his hand a moment before.

Behind the wall, at his neighbour Boris's, it was quiet. It was quiet in the yard as well: somebody had taken away all the rubbish in the night.

On his way to work he was not thinking about whether he had dreamed it. He was thinking about the

house on Yelovaya Street, about the pines around it, and about the fact that he would now have to go on living with all of this somehow.