

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

ISMAIL KADARE

The Wedding

“Do you see that goatskin stretched out and nailed to that round wooden frame? Beat it with a stick and it will echo all the sounds heard in life ranging from the rhythm of rocking cradles to the roar of battles.”

(Overheard at a wedding party)

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THE WEDDING: A NOVEL ABOUT ALBANIAN WOMEN

— *Deirdre Egan* —

Recently a friend of mine gave me a copy of *The Wedding* to read; she felt that my interest in the women's liberation movement would make this novel which centres on women's struggles in Albania seem relevant to me. I must begin by confessing that I know very little of the history or cultural life of Albania, but I found the description of the people and their cause of such high interest that I have since read the *History of the Party of Labour of Albania* to deepen my knowledge of this great socialist country.

The central event of the story is a wedding which is taking place between a mountain girl and a young mechanic she met while engaged in the socialist construction of a new town in a rural and isolated area of Albania. The conflict in the novel is between the new life and the old, revolution and counter-revolution. The forces of the old and dying culture are represented by the Canon and the father of the bride who is still loyal to the precepts of this code of behaviour which prior to liberation subjected women to great hardship. The forces of the new society are personified by the Party of Labour and the communist youths and workers who are struggling hard to build a new town and to break down the inequality of women by enlisting their full and equal participation in the building of the new

society. These two forces come together in a tense and potentially murderous way in the novel as the visit of the father to the wedding feast is described and speculated about from various points of view.

A revolution brings about a complete and double rupture in a society. The political life as well as culture undergo total transformation, and *The Wedding* chronicles the way this transformation has made itself felt in the lives of a few people in modern-day socialist Albania.

In Albania there had once been a tradition of early betrothals of girls to men. Once they were betrothed, it seems according to the events of the story, they would be taken from school and their lives would be limited to the household and their own mountain village. The only day they would leave the village would be the day that their bridegroom, often a man much older, came to take them to his home. If they reneged there would be much bloodshed and hostilities had wiped out whole families. Fierce blood feuds went on for generations and decimated towns. In one very moving section the bride contrasts her life under socialism to what had awaited her under feudalism. First the day of her betrothal comes:

“‘Katrina!’ father called me to him. ‘Come here! You are now betrothed. Beginning with tomorrow you will no longer go to school!’

“I burst into tears. Father became angry. He snatched my reader out of my

hand and flung it into the fire. Its leaves curled and rustled as they began to burn. The pictures of cities and towns, the trains, plains, highways and the blue sea were all turned to ashes.” (p. 199.)

Then Katrina goes on to describe the go-between who profits by the arrangement of marriages and would like to disrupt her present wedding. She remembers and reviles him as she sits at her own wedding feast as a member of a proud socialist society:

“He follows me everywhere. He is trying to make me return, to deprive me of all that I have gained these recent months. He wants to deprive me of the beautiful highways, cities, the sea, the trains and my companion. In compensation for all these he wants to give me a half-lit nook and the solitude of subjugation to a forty year-old man I have never seen. He wants to deprive me of my bobbed hair, clean underwear, wall bulletins, books and songs, and in their place to give me a black kettle, a lash rope to haul firewood, filth and beatings.” (p. 200.)

She sees all this not as a simple personal problem but as a political position. She goes on to denounce this remnant of feudalism: “He wants to snatch away socialism from me. But this will never come about” (p. 200). From this we see the solidarity of the working people of Albania and the warmth of their feeling for each other and for the Party. Ka-

trina is certain that she will succeed in her struggle against the forces of reaction with the help and the encouragement of the Party and her worker-comrades.

Katrina's father is a figure of the past, a man who has suffered a great deal but is not brave enough to relinquish the old ways. In a description of the reactions of the parents when they visit their daughters who have left home we can feel much of the love which they have and their pride as well as their misgivings. It is plain by the tone that the author takes this as a contradiction among the people; when the parents see the concrete results of many of the struggles their children are carrying on they too will be won over wholeheartedly to the task of socialist construction. Katrina remembers the mixed feelings of the elderly parents when they came to see the new life that their daughters were taking up in defiance of the old ways and the reactionary Canon which had for so many centuries held all of them in thrall:

“Then a delegation composed of elderly people came from the village to see how things were getting on. They alighted from the bus and walked through the camp in a dignified manner. They visited and looked at everything. They peered into our sleeping quarters, visited the club, looked at the flash-posters on the bulletin board (they read them all for they had been told that it was here that we mountain girls wrote love letters to city boys). Then they visited our

dining rooms, the kitchen, the broadcasting station, the shower baths (they asked a lot of questions about the shower baths, though goodness knows why. They even asked to be shown the soap we washed with and passed the cakes of soap gingerly from hand to hand as if they were dynamite). Finally, they saw us, too, coming straight from the railroad track singing. They shook their heads in wonder and yet were greatly pleased and fascinated. We looked so smart in our overalls.” (p. 76.)

But these changes Katrina counts as minor when compared with the impact of Comrade Enver Hoxha’s speech which she heard on the afternoon of February 6. This speech, it would seem from the context of the comments of the story, gave the final blow to the ancient Canon which had enslaved Albanian women for generations. It releases the initiative of all the girls involved and they resolve to follow the lead of the Party and break their underage betrothals. Katrina describes the militancy of the class struggle:

“That night not a girl in our dormitory caught a wink of sleep. How could we? Almost all of us had been betrothed when we were young children just as Comrade Enver said. Horrible intermediaries, roaming night and day from one village to another, from one district to another like spiders, had fastened us with undetachable ropes. Hundreds of rifles stood guard over these bonds. Some of us had been bought for

cash, some had been exchanged for cows, sheep, horses, sacks of corn and even for shepherd's dogs... Before us lay the terrible Canon. To leave the fold we had to trample it. It lay prostrate at the threshold threatening us. Hundreds of rifles waved us back, threatened us if we dared to step out!...

“Girls!” shouted Liza who was the first to get up. ‘Don’t worry, we have our Party. It will not leave us in the lurch.’” (pp. 77-78.)

I am quoting in such detail from this book because I find these pages inspiring. They show the relationship of the individual to the Party under socialism and the way that struggle for equality must continue at every level under the leadership of the Party.

A question may be raised: Why was not the Canon abolished before the revolution as a means of mobilizing women, did they not want “freedom now”? A Party writer and intellectual in the story illustrates graphically the primacy of revolution and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary condition to women’s full emancipation:

“Betrothals from motives of interest, the pledged word and going back on it, insults, old feuds, threats to the clan, all these things went to creating those black contours which hovered like winter clouds over our weddings. And it often happened that in the midst of gaiety rifles

were seized and havoc was wrought. The Albanian wedding could not be conceived otherwise. Gaiety and alarms were bound together like Siamese twins. It was only the revolution that pulled them apart.” (p. 102.)

Revolution brings about a radical rupture in both the politics and the culture, but the culture cannot be changed until the economic base is transformed:

“The revolution shook up everything, weddings included. But the old world keeps writhing still. It palpitates here and there but in old customs it is stronger than anywhere else.” (p. 102.)

The emancipation of women in Albania is integrated with the struggle to build the new society, and it is crucial for the success of the revolution that it be constantly renewed and continued under the dictatorship of the proletariat until all remnants of inequality are abolished. Women’s emancipation depends on their participation in revolution and the success of the revolution. The two are dialectically linked but revolution is primary. The women in the novel are shown as directly responsible for carrying on the struggle under the most favourable conditions which the Party has provided. I find this encouraging and in sharp contrast to bourgeois feminists in the United States who ask me, “Will the Party guarantee women’s liberation?” Women’s liberation is not a guarantee or a warranty that one can

get now and cash in on demand. The point is that a Communist Party leads the struggle for women's emancipation by seizing state power and involving women in this struggle. By so doing the women prepare the conditions to free themselves. This is true of Katrina; with a nation of women like her under the leadership of the Party of Labour, Albanian women are daring to fight and achieving their equality.

(Literature & Ideology, No. 15, 1973)

THE WEDDING

ISMAIL KADARE

INTRODUCTION

Early one Sunday morning in March a rail had been tampered with on the N. sector of the railway line. This delayed the usual passenger train six minutes. Nothing clear resulted from the immediate investigation conducted by the staff of the Railroad Directorate.

Someone had telephoned to the Director's Office that morning to say that communication had been interrupted because of a warped rail and that he was sure that this had been done by some drunken wedding guests who were now hard at work before his eyes repairing the damage by replacing the rail they had warped during the night. An engine driver who happened to be at the office at the time said that when he had driven his freight train on that line at midnight he had noticed a big wedding celebration going on in the neighbourhood of the station. He had heard the beating of drums and merrymaking both times, going and coming. The inspectors reached the hasty conclusion that, apparently, some drunken wedding guests (it was later learned that many of them had been railroad fitters) must have taken a fancy to tampering with the rails in the neighbourhood of the railway station.

*But facts turned out to be quite different.
And thereby hangs a story.*

A STATION WITHOUT A NAME

This was the most recently built station linking branches of the railroad. That is why it had not yet received a name. It had only been in use for a week. So far it had been known by many names but no one knew for sure what was its proper name, so it was called simply the Station Without A Name — like a man with various nicknames like Shorty, Curly, Red-Faced with no one knowing his real name. The fact is that so many competing names had been suggested for this station that no one had been able to decide which one to give it. It stood in a place bearing no distinctive features of its own, so it was left nameless even a week after its official opening. There was no village, river or hill in the neighbourhood, only a plain and that without a name either. Nevertheless, many people called it the “Station of the Plain” but this was so vague that it could hardly keep up with time. It is true that there were villages in the surrounding region but they were all equally distant from the station so that none could claim to lend its own name to it. One edifice from which a name might have been derived was a monastery surrounded by tall cypresses and standing isolated by the loamy pathway rutted by the ox-driven wagons of the villagers. In fact, many peasants, particularly the elderly people, did call it the “Station of the Monastery” but this name, too, was short-lived. As the days passed, it was to be called less and less often by that name.

A big factory was under construction about one and one-half kilometres away from the station and its framework next to the workers' barracks seemed, at twilight, like the silhouette of a queer landscape painting on that open background. This factory was, at the same time, the nucleus of a new town which would be built here and this station, now a humble and nameless one, would become the principal station of this town seething with life and noise. For the time being, however, the town itself was non-existent and a town which does not exist and has no name of its own can hardly name its station. It is true that in some office at the Ministry of Building Construction draughtsmen had spread sheets of paper on their drawing tables on which they had sketched a number of large and small squares with as many symbols and annotations, but these were still at the draughtsmen's office and the plain was ignorant of it. The only thing the plain knew about was the excavation of the huge foundations of the factory and the great weight of the concrete blocks and pillars which were implanted deep in its body. While of the future town which it would bear on its breast, of the buildings, cinemas, of the shops and asphalted streets, it was still ignorant.

Just as those of a newcomer who comes and settles down on some unfamiliar spot, the railway station's relations with the plain were still informal. They became more intimate one early morning, just as those of the workers' barracks, the early guests of this barren old plain, had done some months before. To

the plain the railway station was a stranger, a recently arrived guest and, as such, having put up its white-washed building with its small concrete platform, its paster with the warning "CITIZENS, BEWARE OF THE TRAIN, THE SLIGHTEST NEGLIGENCE MAY COST YOU YOUR LIVES!" and the temporary timetable nailed on the wall, it looked as though it had forgotten to post its name and had thus been left nameless.

While the station and that part of the railroad were still under construction, officials at the Directorate had addressed their correspondence care of the worksite No. so and so, and even now that it was completed and all through the week, it still bore no name. They referred to it as the "Station Beyond the New Station," which was the station before the last. Even the price of tickets to the nameless station changed almost from one day to another during that whole week, and this indicated that everything was temporary. It could hardly be different for a station belonging to an unknown town.

It was at this station that rainy Saturday night when a mountaineer, still stalwart-looking though advanced in age, his head wrapped in a red kerchief, alighted from the evening train. The old man stepped to the ground stumbling a little on the wet rails. He strolled around for a while peering into the distant darkness as if in a search of something. He watched the locomotive puffing steam as it set out again hauling the wet wagons, its rhythmic rumble, its strong headlights, leaving the plain

in complete darkness. The old man turned his steps towards the small station building at the entrance of which hung a lantern inside a box of iron meshwork. The door was open and as the old man stepped inside the small dimly-lit room looked more deserted because of the cigarette stubs scattered here and there on the muddy concrete floor. The old man came out and watched the night. Within the short radius of light from the lantern at the threshold, light raindrops and hazy fog almost touching the surface of the earth could be seen while further away, where darkness began and rails could no longer be distinguished, a long row of freight wagons stood like huge oxen quietly chewing their cud in the tranquility of the night.

The old man walked cautiously for fear that he might stumble on the rails. There were several tracks here and he could not tell on which of them the train that had brought him had rolled. They were identical, equal in shape and as unclear and puzzling as many other things were for the old man.

From the distance came the farewell rumble of the train and after that he heard only the raindrops patter lightly on the ground. At a distance on the right the old man discerned lights and he stepped out with longer strides in that direction. He thought he heard the distant sound of music but, being hard of hearing, he often thought he heard things when in reality they were only in his head. Suddenly he stopped. He stood stock-still, cupping his hand to his ear so he might hear better. The

beat of a drum came from the direction of the distant flickering lights.

“This is the way,” he murmured to himself.

THE WORKERS' BARRACKS

The wedding party was held in one of the barracks. One part of this largest building served normally as a dining room, another as the Red Corner while the remaining part included the kitchen and some of the offices of the administration. Tonight they were crowded with people.

Tables occupied part of the dining room and part of the Red Corner. The dancing was mostly confined to the dining room but now and then the dancers also invaded the Red Corner and even the kitchen and offices of the administration.

The celebration had started in the afternoon but once night fell it really got underway, embracing everybody. Groups of guests kept arriving all through the afternoon. Some of them came by train at half past two, others at four. The first who had come in the afternoon on the same train as the Tirana guests were those who had installed the printing factory in the Berat Textile Combine. At five the builders of the Vau i Dejës hydro-electric power plant arrived in their own bus. The only absentees now were the workers of the Fier power plant. There may have been two or three others absent also but everybody was worrying about the power plant workers for they were a large group. People had been sent to the station a couple of times to wait for them but they had not arrived either by the five-thirty train or later. The Vlora Caustic Soda workers who had passed through Fier in their bus at about

one o'clock were asked but no one seemed to know anything for certain. Some said they had seen a group of workers in a truck heading northwards but they had no idea of where they were going. They were probably heading for a wedding party somewhere but who could tell with certainty what destination an old truck was bound for with its dangling and flapping tray in which the riders sang and banged on the driver's cab as he tore along at seventy kilometres an hour?

Anyway, the party was at its height and the little void created by the absence of the Fier workers had been largely filled by the music, by the songs and the loud merrymaking of those that were there. The long barracks building with its brilliant lightbulbs at each corner resounded with gaiety. People moved to and fro. Some brought in fresh beer bottles while others removed the empties. Some people brought in new stools, squeezing into the little space remaining.

The young writer S.K. and a newspaperman who had come with him stood at one of the entrances looking at the wedding party. The newspaperman was speaking of the way new social phenomena brought about changes in the people's rituals but, apparently, the essence of these rituals remained unchanged while only the outer appearance has changed. The newspaperman was here on business and intended to write a report on the builders of the factory.

"I don't agree with you," said the writer. "I think it is precisely the essence that chan-

ges while the form remains more or less the same.”

“No!” replied the newspaperman. “Take this wedding party for instance.”

“Precisely, this wedding party,” replied the writer. “This wedding party reveals just what I said.”

“I don’t think this party proves your point at all,” insisted the writer, sipping at his drink.

As they sat there emptying their glasses, the writer’s eyes turned again to that good-looking girl in slacks in the opposite corner. He just caught her eye as she looked away. Then, forgetting the girl, he cast a glance around that long room resounding with voices, songs and music from the band. Now and then the hubbub surged up as if threatening to take hold of the whole party, but being unable to do so, kept within the bounds of the corners and hallways.

The orchestra played on. It was a new group and its members were all amateurs from among the workers on the job. They played nonstop, tuning up folk songs, changing to dance music and vice-versa.

The wedding guests, particularly the girls who had come all the way from Tirana, were always on the move, either dancing, which some of them kept up all the time, or standing at the bar chatting. They rarely sat at table.

The writer cast a glance to the table nearby at which some older women from Tirana, two engineers, the manager of the works with his daughter, two Chinese specialists, a Deputy-Minister taking his turn in production

work, the night guard of the establishment and other fitters and guests were seated.

The group from the Vlora Caustic Soda Plant were trying to arrange a table of their own.

“Come this way, men of the Caustic Soda Plant!” shouted a lanky worker.

“Why do you want to sit at a separate table, you of the Caustic Soda Plant?”

“Why not? What harm is there in that?”

“Mix up with other comrades, men! What sense is there in coming all this way to sit by yourselves?”

“Right! We will sit right where we are!”

“This way, you, you of the Caustic Soda Plant!” the lanky chap kept calling.

Another group nearby had turned on the wireless and were trying to hear the news:

“Prices are going up in Greece!”

The orchestra struck up a tune and the speaker’s voice became inaudible.

“The first wedding in a town which is just beginning. This is as good a topic as you can find for your report,” said the writer.

“But I must write something about the builders, about the work which is going on here. That is what we planned at the Editorial Board.”

“Isn’t it the same thing,” interrupted the writer, “Ain’t these the builders, the heroes of labour — fitters, plumbers and carpenters? Here you have them all, sitting at tables, dancing and drinking.”

“You may be right.”

“This is the youngest town of the Republic,

you follow me?" S.K. continued. "Everything is new, everything is 'the first of its kind.' This is the first wedding, and a year later, it will be the first baby. No death has ever taken place in this town. What a grand thing, man!"

"That's right," said the newspaperman. "But I think you could write this up much better than I can do. Don't you think so?"

"In a way, yes!"

"Why have you written so little about the factories? Now that you writers have gone down to the grassroots, the public expect much more from you, you know."

"They are quite right, too," the writer said. "Such a revolutionary situation has been created in the country that it takes a revolutionary art of all viewpoints to portray it."

"There you are! Listen to that song sung to the Open Letter,"* said the newspaperman.

"Yes. The public are quick at grasping things."

"Time is a great teacher. We journalists..."

"It is not only a matter of time," interrupted the writer. "Time is one aspect of the problem. A new concept of things is just as important as time. Life is so dynamic and interesting. There are so many topics and problems arising that they make one's head turn. Do you know what it means to a writer when his head turns?"

"I can imagine!"

"But mostly we wait for things to 'crystal-

* Reference is made here to the Open Letter of the CC of the Party of Labour of Albania on further revolutionization.

ize,” continued the writer. “We keep a certain distance from events. That is why there is more mould than living things in our books. Don’t you think so?”

“There’s plenty of mould,” agreed the newspaperman. “You could easily extract penicillin from them.”

“And we could run a hydro-electric power plant with your wet articles.”

They both laughed.

“Listen!” added S.K. “I really mean it. Reality, after all, is neither wine nor plywood that needs aging.”

The newspaperman laughed again.

“The writer’s face must be scorched by the breath of time just like that of a stoker feeding coal to the furnace at the metallurgic plant.”

“That’s right! But you have accustomed your readers to bad habits too,” the newspaperman remarked, “For instance, if you were to include these remarks we are making at this wedding party in your novels, I can imagine some reader biting his lips. I am sure these things would look to him like ‘reportage’ rather than ‘a novel’ because by reading bad books he is used to separating real life from books.”

“Quiet — quiet everybody, the manager is speaking!” ordered a worker with boyish features.

The manager had taken the floor but his words could scarcely be heard. As the noise subsided in one corner it rose in another.

The manager went on speaking:

“This wedding is taking place at a time

when our workers' collective, like all the workers of the country, have mustered all their efforts to accomplish the tasks of the first three-month period of the plan..."

Someone snapped a flashlight photograph.

This reminded the newspaperman of his own camera and he got his flash arranged to take a picture too.

"This looks like a press conference," said the boyish featured worker.

"That's enough, Rudi!"

The manager kept speaking:

"Upholding the initiative of the mortar workers, promoting the women to posts of responsibility..."

Outside a car horn blared.

"The workers of the Fier power plant!" shouted some one.

The manager interrupted his speech. People crowded to the doors of the barracks. The horn blared again triumphantly.

"Here they are at last!" shouted someone.

But they were not the power plant workers. A tall heavy built man, smeared all over with mud and with a scratch in one hand, made his appearance at the door.

"Revolutionary greetings to you all!"

"Why, Soda Caustica! Where did you spring from, man?"

"Did you think I wouldn't come?" he roared. "Did you think that an old member of your collective has blotted you out of his memory?"

The mighty newcomer embraced each one.

"I had three crashes of my motorbike in

the swamps back there. I had a hard time finding you. See how pretty I look?"

"Why do they call him Soda Caustica?" the writer asked the boyish looking chap whose name was Rudi.

"O, it's an old story" replied Rudi. "He used to work, at first, at the Caustic Soda Plant or something like that. I don't remember properly. Big bloke isn't he?"

"I got a late start," Soda Caustica said. "We have been installing machinery all day and we were caught in a hailstorm."

"He is working on the installation of a radio station," said Rudi to S.K.

The writer nodded.

When Soda Caustica sat down at one of the tables, the manager stood up, intending to continue his speech, but all of a sudden, the orchestra started to beat out a tune and people joined in a dance.

"Comrade Feizo is very fond of speech-making," Rudi said with a smile in his lips.

The writer cast half a glance at him. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"Aren't you the writer S.K.?" Rudi asked.

"Yes!"

"I remember you. You came to our school once on the occasion of Literary Month."

"Is that so? When did you graduate from school?"

Rudi gave a broad smile.

"I haven't graduated yet."

"Come here, Rudi!" called Soda Caustica and drew him into the dance.

The newspaperman had disappeared. A little later he appeared again among the crowd of dancers.

“Have you seen the bride?” he asked the writer.

“No!”

“There she is, that girl over there!”

“The one who looks so worried?”

“Yes!”

“It used to be hard to find a wedding where the bride didn’t wear a second veil of sadness over her face,” said S.K. “But I don’t understand why this bride...”

“They say that there is not a single member of the bride’s family at this party. Do you know the history of this wedding?”

“I heard something about it at lunch”

“She had been betrothed while she was still in the cradle back at her home village.”

“Yes, they told me so.”

“This accounts to some extent for her distressed looks.”

“Of course. Nevertheless, she seems too much disturbed at that.”

They listened a while to the beating of the drum.

“All the people here are from the bridegroom’s side,” the newspaperman continued. “Do you know him? There he goes! the one with the slick hair.”

“Yes, yes! I see him! How interesting!” exclaimed the writer.

In the other part of the barracks the drum kept up its rhythm and the floor shook under the pounding of the dancers’ feet. There was

an extraordinary commotion on the far side. Some stretched their necks to see while others whispered to one another. But the drum kept up its beat, beat, beat, while the orchestra played. The dance was at its height and the youngsters leaped and jumped about like healthy young animals.

“There goes the bride again! She is as pale as a ghost,” said the writer. “Don’t you feel as though something is happening right here in our midst and we are being kept ignorant of it?”

“What could have happened?” asked the newspaperman. “The bride is a bit pale”

“She is quite upset”

“I have been to wedding parties where the bride fainted.”

“Something is actually happening here and we are not getting a hint of it,” insisted the writer. “Don’t you see people moving about and some of them quite alarmed?”

“The music is still playing. Nothing can have happened.”

“Something is happening,” the writer insisted. “I’ll go and see.”

“No, let me go and see,” said the newspaperman.

The other stood up and watched, listening attentively like one who tries to hear the noises of a forest.

“I feel that something strange has stepped into this gathering,” he thought to himself, as though a strange and dangerous beast had sneaked into the wedding party.

The newspaperman returned.

“Well?” the writer asked.

“It’s odd!” said the other.

“Didn’t I tell you that something was going on. But you, wouldn’t have it. Well, now, what is happening?”

“The girl’s father has turned up.”

“Yes?”

“I saw him. He is in one of the offices.”

“Has he come alone?”

“All by himself!”

“I have a presentiment of evil,” said the writer. “This is a strange wedding party indeed.”

“He was soaked to the skin.”

“I’ve got a horrible feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen.”

“You are not the only one who is worried. A lot of people are. Apparently they do not understand why the old man has come.”

“What about the couple?”

“The bride is upset but she isn’t saying much. The groom is quite unperturbed.”

“Really?”

“I talked to him for a minute and he seemed quite at ease.”

“An interesting wedding party!” said the writer.

“It won’t be very interesting if a fight breaks out. We all know how this ends: the police, an authenticated statement and a lawsuit!”

“You have no idea of such things,” said S.K. “But it is not your fault. These subtle things find no room in your cut-and-dry reports.”

“I am going to bed,” said the newspaperman. “Tomorrow I must have my cut-and-dry report ready.”

“Good night!”

“Take my advice and don’t get yourself mixed up in any skirmish!” he admonished him as he put on his trench coat.

The writer smiled at his departing companion’s back.

Left to himself, he stood up and ambled around from the dining room to the Red Corner and through the administration offices.

Meanwhile, word of the old man’s arrival had spread through the crowd of guests and all wanted to have a look at him, but there was such a crowd around the door to the room where the old man sat that nobody could force his way in.

“Move away!” exclaimed Soda Caustica, “Don’t make him feel uncomfortable by peering at him so curiously. You understand? It is downright rude.”

“Make way! the manager is coming!”

The manager stepped into the room where the old man was sitting, followed by the Party Secretary and three others.

“What’s going on?”

“Comrade Feizo is lecturing to the old man!”

“Rudi!” someone reprimanded.

“Why has the music stopped?” shouted Soda Caustica. “Hey band! strike up a tune!”

The orchestra began to play again.

“Go ahead and dance!” ordered Soda Caustica. “Why have you crowded up here as

though you were going to a football match?"

S.K. forced his way up to the door and was about to say something to Soda Caustica when the plywood door was pushed open and all those who had been in the room filed out looking rapt in thought and earnest. The old man came out with them.

He was a tall, spare, old man, his head wrapped in a kerchief which looked like an integral part of his forehead and scalp. He was wet and his long and weather-beaten face looked like a wood carving which had stood out in the sun for a long time and had been worked on by the wind and rain.

The wedding guests parted automatically as the group made its way to the banquet table. Soda Caustica beckoned to the members of the orchestra to keep up the music, and the instruments which seemed to have been lulled to sleep became animated anew.

The old man sat at the head of the table, his daughter by his side and then the others ranged themselves along the same table.

Someone tried to explain something to the Chinese comrades who sat at the adjacent table. Apparently, the Chinese misunderstood him at first for they smiled, nodded and said:

“Very good, very good, ho!”

Another intervened and, partly through words and partly through gestures, gave a different explanation. The Chinese were astonished and looked curiously at the old man.

The manager beckoned to someone who hurried outside.

“He may be armed?”

“Who knows. He probably carries a pistol.”

“Even if he doesn’t carry a pistol, he certainly has a bullet with him.”

“How so?”

“It is written in the Canon. The father carries a bullet with him. If the girl goes to the groom’s house reluctantly then he gives the groom’s people this bullet. The Canon has it: ‘the girl’ is sent to the groom’s house with a bullet ‘in her bridal chest.’”

“A bullet for a dowry!”

“Yes, something like that.”

“And then what?”

“If the bride attempts to escape the groom shoots her.”

“How horrible!”

The manager spoke to the old man but he held his head erect and no one could tell whether he was listening or not. The bride, too, held her head high. She looked as uneasy as her proud gaze could betray.

S.K. fixed his eyes on the table where the old man sat.

“There’s going to be some surprises at this wedding party,” said Rudi as he walked past with a load of fresh beer bottles.

“What did you say, Rudi?” asked a chestnut-haired young woman who happened to be standing next to the writer. “Do you think there will be any shooting?”

S.K. turned his head around. It was the same young woman who had cast a lively and, at the same time, inquisitive glance at him before.

A broad grin on Rudi's face and a gesture with his head seemed to imply that he did not think much of the young woman's remark.

She cast an angry glance at him.

"You work here, don't you?" S.K. asked her.

"No, I have come from Tirana."

"A relative of the groom, I suppose?"

The young woman nodded in affirmation. She looked very smart in those cream-coloured slacks which are the uniform of the volunteers in the mass actions.

"The man who just passed by was a classmate of mine," she continued.

"Really?" said the writer in an absent-minded way.

"You are the writer S.K., aren't you?"

"Yes!"

The young woman was obviously looking for a chance to say something else but apparently she was not successful for his eyes were elsewhere.

"I like your writings!" she finally said, failing to find the right moment.

Apparently, the writer had not heard her. He stepped forward slightly to have a closer look at things. Xhavid's younger sister, a girl of twelve with her hair in plaits, was now sitting between the old man and the manager. She rested her chin on the palms of her hand and fixed her gaze on the old man. This gaze of hers seemed to annoy the old mountaineer and he picked up his glass of brandy and gulped it down at one swallow.

"He is drinking, he is drinking!" someone

said in a low voice.

The orchestra struck up an old tune.

THE VIPER

The old man wanted to forget but memories were molesting him and he was unable to blot them out of his mind. He disliked all this gaiety around him for it looked as if it was mocking his desperation and extreme loneliness. All these screeching strings might have been his nerves and the drum his very skull.

He cast a frozen glance at the walls of the dining room and of the Red Corner covered all over with bulletin boards on which were posted various pictures, lists of socialist emulation winners, graphs, big character flash-posters, mottoes, announcements and quotations from 5th Party Congress decisions and from the February 6 speech. Only half comprehending, to the old man it looked as if all these pictures, drawings and big characters spread all over the red velveteen covered bulletin boards dazzling his eyes were making fun of him, mocking his aloofness. All this wedding party seemed more like a funeral to him and his thoughts turned to his own distant wedding nearly half a century ago. The old man wanted to forget but the memory of his wedding descended upon him just as a dark cloud pregnant with rain and thunder descends upon a forest. He tried to escape it but it followed him, surrounded him. Strange noises resounded about him but he did not hear them. He heard other, more melodious sounds of ancient lore. The haze that had been following him engulfed him and claimed him for its own. Gradually, the pictures, writings

and posters took the form of stones. Before him lay his castle-like house built of stone and the guests coming with their torch lights nearly half a century before, while he, his father and his brothers welcomed them at the staircase, relieving them of their rifles and pistols which they then hung on the walls upstairs. Guests kept coming and they had to fix additional nails on the walls for all their rifles. If a rusty old nail gave way under the weight of rifles it was replaced with a new one.

Coming up and going down the narrow stone stairs to do the honours of the house, he took time off to admire the array of rifles hung in rows on the wall and felt happy that his clan was so powerful and invincible.

Many years later, when sitting in the room by himself, he often turned his eyes to those rusty nails on the wall and tried to recall where each rifle had hung but he could not remember them all. He had a faint memory of a long rifle belonging to one of his uncles, another's carbine, his elder brother's musket, another uncle's blunderbuss and another breechloader which he had seen for the first time that night and the muzzle of which was still fresh in his memory, striking terror into his heart with its cold metal. If it had not been his own wedding he might probably still recall all the different weapons there, for he was very fond of them, but that night it was his wedding feast. He recalled that he had been told his wife was very pretty but ill-starred at the same time. On their way home, the wedding guests who escorted the bride to the groom's house took

another road back for it was rumoured that a sorcerer had cast a spell on their way.

Witches! A spell! He had spent all that morning looking through the narrow bay window of his castle-house on the cold majestic vista of the woodlands, wondering what this spell, this sorcery could be and why it could be. Incidentally, he looked at the rifle hanging on the wall and burned with the desire to grip it and run along the grey road to look for this piece of witchcraft. But the spell could not be killed with a rifle. It crouched somewhere under the rocks, cold and untouchable, like an evil spirit. It exercised its power in a round-about way and one could not grapple with it, for it had emanated from the unknown and everything from the unknown and incapable of being reached by the bullet from a rifle is appalling.

Gazing over the landscape, his thoughts turned alternately to his wedding party abounding with music, songs and dances, and a banquet richly set with victuals and drinks, and to the spell which had raised its head like a viper ready to strike. Why had this terrible mysterious something raised its head at his wedding feast? What was it after? Where had it come from? No one could answer this. This mysterious spell which seemed to hang over the wide grey mountain landscape hovered a moment on the big cross of the church belfry to disappear into the fathomless sky.

The first riders of the bridal procession to the groom's house appeared at the mountain pass coming down an unbeaten and difficult

path. The spell had been left behind, beyond the walls of his courtyard, beyond the limits of his wedding party. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw the white steed on which his bride was riding, seized his rifle and fired a couple of shots in the air to give vent to his joy.

Nevertheless, the evil spirit which had ridden along with them seemed to be present everywhere that night. It spread over the cobblestones leading to the house so that people coming and going trampled underfoot and then hung it on the rusty nails together with their rifles. Could he have felt it as he went up and down the narrow staircase past the silent weapons and amidst the repeated songs and toasts of the guests? But the weapons kept silent while people danced and made merry. The evil spirit, however, lay hidden in the black muzzles like evil single eyes looking downward. He could never have imagined a wedding party without weapons. If he had seen such a party he would surely have scorned it. Even if he had known that calamity would befall the house from these very weapons he would not consent to have his wedding celebration without them.

But he did not foresee evil for this was his own wedding party. He did not expect any trouble even when an argument took place between a drunken guest and his elder brother. No one knew what the dispute was about for the cause was probably an insignificant one. The others might have anticipated something but he, himself, forgot all about the incident for his thoughts were centered on his bride.

At dawn, when the party was over and the guests were going off to the village limits and while he was embracing a woman for the first time in his life, a shot was fired far away. Somewhat later there was loud wailing in the courtyard outside. At first he could make nothing of it but the bride, naked and marble-white as she was, stiffened between the sheets as if hit by a bullet.

Three days after the wedding, everybody in the house was clad in black and his elder brother's body lay on a slab in the centre of the waiting room. They slaughtered all the livestock and those who were to clip their fingernails postponed the act so that they might be better able to scratch their faces on the day of burial. In the evening, he heard the distant wailing and lamentations of mourners coming to the burial. From the window of his room he saw groups of black clad relatives plodding along at a slow pace so that, according to custom, they could reach the dead man's house at dusk. Wailing and lamenting, the mourners reached the courtyard, where they tore the flesh of their faces and beat their breasts, while the people of the household came out to meet them, wailing and beating their breasts too.

Then, carrying the heavy slab on their shoulders, they proceeded slowly to the graveyard and he recalled how all the mourners dropped down and caressed the earth gently with their hands so that it might receive the corpse in its bosom.

He recalled that later his relatives also

caressed the earth, begging that it receive his other brother's corpse, but this time the earth was frozen for it was winter and the mountain winds were chill. The slab and corpse had frozen to a solid block of ice. They stroked the frost-bound earth and begged it not to turn out their brother's body in these bleak winter nights.

Day followed cheerless day at the mourner's house while he puffed at his pipe for hours at a stretch and tongues dwelt only on the same monotonous topics as if time stood stock-still. A blood feud had confined part of the men of the village to their houses. They dared not emerge because revenge-seekers were on the lockout. Through the narrow lattice windows they watched the fields where their womenfolk worked all day. Revenge-seekers wandered rifle in hand through the abandoned pathways of the village. Then dusk came. At times it looked as if it descended from the sky, at others, as if it rose up from the plain and still at other times as if it flowed down from the mountain. At times it seemed to seep out from cracks in the cellars.

They watched their womenfolk drive the wearied teams of oxen up the village highway. The women could move about freely and no one molested them. Revenge-seekers lowered their heads when the women passed by. Other mountaineers who happened to be sitting at the threshold of their houses when the women passed leading their teams homeward rose to their feet as a token of respect for the teams of oxen.

The blackest days for those who delayed in taking revenge came when coffee was served under the knee. He had delayed in avenging his third brother's death and for some time coffee had been served in that way. Who could have been the author of this horrible rule of the Canon? The coffee cup handed to him under the knee seemed as heavy as a rock. The days spent confined within the four walls of his house were days of festivity in comparison with this. Now he was no longer confined to his house. He could walk freely for the other party of the bloodfeud had already avenged by killing his third brother. Now he must kill. It was the turn of the others to confine themselves within the four walls of their house.

But he delayed. It was springtime. He had become a father. His first child had been born. The fields had to be planted. If he revenged his brother now he would have to shut himself in the house and his fields would remain fallow. But now his fields were being tilled while those of his enemy were not. He started work early in the morning driving his team past his enemy's fallow fields. The sods in his field steamed in the sunshine while his enemy's fields were dry and wrinkled, like the clamped jaws of the hungry seeming to look at him and his cultivated soil with resentment. And he thought that anyway it was good luck that only people hated and killed one another, and not the fields, trees or waters. Now his fields were planted to wheat while those of his enemy carried no seed in their cold bosom. Nevertheless, his enemies had honour to their

name while he was covered with shame. It is true that he had shed a lot of sweat in planting a big area to wheat but he had not shed the blood he was bound to shed according to the dictates of the Canon. That little pool of blood which he should have spilled out somewhere in the highways or paths was of more value than all his golden wheat. Between wheat and blood he chose the wheat. Others had done the contrary. Therefore, they received the cup of coffee straight into their hands while for him it was passed under the server's knee.

"Once the wheat is ripe," he said to himself. "Once the wheat is ripe and I will avenge." The wheat was ripening from day to day. "Just a little longer," he said to himself. "Just a little until I reap the wheat, until I gather the last sheaf and then..."

His enemies had begun to come out in the open. They felt that they were not in danger as long as the wheat had not been harvested. At times, they had even ventured downtown. One of them even dared to sit in a crowded coffeehouse full of tobacco fumes and order a cup of coffee.

Alas, how slowly the wheat ripened! He raged within himself. In the eyes of those who disliked him he read mockery. In the eyes of his well-wishers he read despair.

The wheat grew riper. This was a queer sort of wheat with a different colour and a different rustle. Or did it just look that way to him. He had sown and reaped wheat many times in as life but he had never come across such wheat as this before.

At times, when he was tired and in very low spirits, he used to lie down in the field. Right and left he heard the rustle of corn stalks. They seemed to wait for him to take a nap so that they could start their own conversation. He closed his eyes and tried to overhear what they were saying. At first faintly, very faintly and then clearer and clearer. It was a queer conversation, like this corn and this field. He opened his eyes suddenly and looked around. Who spoke? The green corn ears swung to and fro right there before his very eyes. There was a waft of wind. A breath of alarm ran through from one corner of the field to the other. It looked as if the corn was in fits.

At night he used to suffer from headaches. His enemies were almost face to face with him.

One day he betook himself to the village priest. He wanted to talk things over. The pastor knew the Canon code better than anybody. He had studied at a high school abroad. He was learned and full of wisdom. Surely he would advise him.

In the pastor's room there were a number of books in a foreign language. He admired the beautiful books, large in size, the illustrated magazines perusing which the pastor spent his long winter nights. The priest's welcome warmed his heart. They spoke about the weather, the grain, about the livestock. He had heard that among those books there was also that of the Canon. He felt so much at ease that he was about to ask which one of that multitude of books was the Canon. But he lacked

the courage. In the little brazier before them the coffee pot was sizzling. His heart beat faster. The pastor was wise and well-learned. He had been abroad and had seen the whole world. He would surely give him some good advice. His baby son was now four months old and his wife would not be able to do the work alone. What would they have to eat all winter? The coffee was boiling. The pastor would understand his predicament better than anybody else. As soon as the corn was harvested, as soon as the last sheaves were in. And then... together with the first rain...

The coffee was mounting in the pot. The pastor pulled it off the fire and poured its contents carefully into two coffee cups. The mountaineer's heart beat quickened. Sitting on the wooden stool opposite him the pastor took one of the coffee cups and, with his eyes on the floor, lifted his right foot, passed his hand and the coffee cup below his knee and held it out to him.

He took the cup in his hand, his face deathly pale. He sipped the coffee in silence and left without uttering another word.

It was noon and scorching hot. He hurried through the village and crossed to where the fields began. Hidden between the corn stalks he waited. Cicadas were shrilling all around him. The world seemed in a state of coma from the heat. Corn stalks pricked his ears, neck and his perspiring brow. Nervously he jostled them away. Two hours passed. Finally the man who was to die passed by. He strode along a rifle hanging from his shoulder.

He raised the rifle, pushed aside some corn stalks. It was the corn's last interference. He took his aim, held his breath and squeezed the trigger. Flames scorched the corn stalks. The man dropped face down on the ground.

When he passed through the village again, the people who had heard the crack of a rifle understood what had happened. He knocked at the first door. A young girl opened it and ushered him in. He exchanged greetings with the master of the house and then, one of the women of the household brought in the coffee. The master of the house took the cup and, casting a look of respect towards the guest, handed it directly to him.

He sipped the coffee slowly feeling somewhat exhausted, then stood up, said him good-bye and left. It was dusk when he reached home. He cast another glance around him, inhaling the evening breeze and then stepped indoors, bolting the door behind him. He stepped up the narrow stairway and hung his rifle on a nail.

“Did you kill?”

“Yes!”

She bowed her head and sobbed. He brushed off some corn fluff from his woollen coat.

Then followed day after day of famine tortured by the sight of the distant field of corn. Now it was ripe, drooped its head and no one went to reap it for the woman was ill and in bed. Flocks of birds descended on it and the field resembled a yellow desert of despair. The sight of it tormented them more than their ac-

tual lack of food. Down there lay their fields as yellow as the face of a corpse. One day he pulled the shade down the little window facing that direction so that they did not see how the corn dropped to the ground stalk by stalk; how it rotted on the ground until the rains and winds came to turn everything to mud and blasted hopes.

How had they survived? The old man recalled the gloomy nights and days in his room with the rusty nails on the wall and he himself felt as rusty and broken, while his little daughter played up and down the narrow staircase. But then his daughter grew up and came of age to be married.

“Why did you desert me, my daughter, why?” he asked in silence.

He bowed his head as though anticipating a blow. The orchestra played on.

O MECHANICS, ROVING BIRDS!...

At the tables the guests were singing a new song dedicated to the mechanics. The author of the song and the person who had set it to music were not yet well known and no one was sure of all the words for the song had been heard for the first time only a few days before. Some said it was a song of the south, others insisted it was a northern song. One thing, however, was certain: it was sung differently in different places.

“We live in wooden barracks
And follow in our five-year tracks
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la!...”

“Orchestra! Accompany it, orchestra!” yelled Soda Caustica. But the orchestra was beating out another tune and many of the guests were dancing with the girls who had come down from Tirana.

The long barracks resounded with their voices. The hubbub tried again to predominate but it soon withdrew. It seemed as if the beating of the drum encouraged the racket to come out in the open but then it was pushed back again to the corner of the long hall.

“They are having a grand time!” said the night guard to the writer S.K., as he took his place near him.

The writer smiled and nodded.

“Where do you hail from?” he asked.

“From Labëria, I am a night watchman here”.

“My word!” exclaimed the writer, “You are a long way from home?”

“Yes!” said the other. “What about you, what is your job?”

“I do some writing.”

“Poems?”

S.K. smiled.

“Not poems, prose. It’s just the same.”

The men from Labëria heaved a deep sigh.

“Like that poor chap Selfo,” he said.

“Who was he?”

“Well, he used to write poems like you. But he was killed. The nazis killed him.”

A man with a camera passed by. The night watchman said:

“Take a picture of the comrades at the banquet table!” and he pointed to the table where the manager, the old man, the bride, the bridegroom, the Chinese specialists, the Deputy-Minister and four or five others were sitting.

The photographer approached them and raised his camera but the old mountaineer motioned “No!” with his hand and covered his face nervously with his elbow.

“Go away!” ordered the manager rather reluctantly.

The old mountaineer’s face became more stem. It looked as if angry streams dashed down the deep wrinkles of his face.

“He doesn’t want to be photographed,” said the night watchman. “Who knows how it looks to him. In our village there was a man — Uncle Shero we called him — who was so shy of being photographed that he grabbed a

tourist by the throat and we had a hard time to pull him loose.”

The writer gazed at the rugged mountaineer. It was difficult to see how far away the latter's eyes had been fixed. There was something tragic about the way he had wrapped his shawl around his head, as though that piece of cloth had been cut from the curtain of an old tragedy. That head wrapped in the shawl must surely have been the target of many a sharpshooter's aim, mused the writer.

Animated conversation was in full flow at the table nearby.

“Do you recall the first day we came to this plain?” asked a grey-haired carpenter.

“Faintly, why?”

“Do you remember when we put up the first barracks and it began to rain before we had the roof on? Then it stopped raining and we continued work. The monks of the monastery had all come out to the hedge to look on. Do you recall how they stared at us and we made fun of their beards and dirty turbans?”

“Yes! And there were those two girls who used to stroll around here, a thin one with cream-coloured boots and another one”

“The ones who tried to pick up a conversation with the correspondent of the Telegraphic Agency?”

“Yes. What a fine chap that correspondent was! What was his name?”

“I don't recall!”

“Nor do I.”

“If we could have remembered his name we would have invited him to the wedding.”

“That would have been good.”

“The monks were dumbstruck when the Regional Party Secretary told them that a new town was being built here which would swallow up the monastery.”

The writer was listening attentively to the conversation, fascinated with the talk of new towns springing up. He had often butted in when people spoke of building houses, of newly laid out boulevards or of bridges being opened. New towns were his hobby, just as talk of sports or hunting is fascinating to others. The carpenters were speaking about minor events of the early days. They constantly interrupted one another correcting dates and putting in names of their companions. Listening to the flow of talk he thought how strange it is that every city in the world has its own predestination at birth. For instance, somewhere up on the Alps the snow melts. The water rushes down forming a river on the banks of which a new town will be built. But suddenly a huge solitary rock blocks its way and the river takes another direction. This rock does what no man can do. It shoves a whole town off tens of kilometres to the right or to the left. Or, take the case of oil in the unknown depths of the earth. This thick and black liquid down in perennial darkness knows nothing of its having been the cause of the birth of a brightly lit city with its boulevards and hustle and beetle of children kilometres away on the surface of the earth. From the depth of its bed the oil holds the destiny of the city in its hands, just as the boy who holds the strings of his kite flutter-

ing high up in space. If the oil flows swiftly through the veins of the earth down below so will the city above have more people and vehicles running up and down its streets, more concerts and noisy Sundays. If oil slackens, life in the town above will also slacken and Sundays will be spent in uninteresting coffee-houses full of smoke. For these are new towns and new towns are very susceptible to change. For the sake of such towns many people lose their night's sleep, hundreds of others bend over their drawing boards for days and nights outlining their contours. Telephones ring, chiefs bang their tables, drivers quarrel over the right of the way in the cold highways. Such towns are the topics of debate at government and Central Committee session because they are new towns and everybody takes as much interest in them as in their children.

A loud and prolonged blast on a car horn came from outdoors.

"The workers of the Fier power plant!" shouted four or five people at one breath rushing to the doors.

This time they were not mistaken. The Fier power plant workers hurried in, all gay and noisy as they greeted and embraced the other guests.

"Excuse us for being late, but it was not our fault. That old truck of ours stopped four times on the way. We almost tore the whole engine apart. What a trip we had coming over!"

People were busy making room for the newcomers at the tables.

"And do you know what? What a joke!"

“Well, tell us!”

“They shot a film of us for the movies!”

“Today?”

“This afternoon. We were fixing the truck. Lots of peasants had gathered there and along came a team from the ‘New Albania’ Film Studio taking a picture depicting backward customs and religious superstitions. There was a church nearby but the priest had had his beard shaven. The Film Studio people were making him up for a picture. In addition, they wanted to shoot a scene in which the woman washes the feet of a guest but none of the peasants wanted to be the guest. And finally, who do you think volunteered?”

“Lulzim Rama!”

“A good guess! Our Luli volunteered for the job.”

“I knew he would.”

“His dream of getting into the pictures was finally realized.”

“Luli! Luli! Come here!”

“Hey Luli! You’re a film star now!”

But Luli had taken a seat among the guests from the Vau i Dejës.

“Who’s the old man who sits there frowning as if his ships have failed to come home?”

“He’s the bride’s father.”

“Really?”

“Quiet! Feizo has the floor!” said Rudi who happened to be nearby.

“I propose a toast for the member of our collective, distinguished worker comrade Xhevid and for comrade Katrina who are joining in wedlock at the time when our people

as a whole are exerting their efforts to build socialism!” the manager gave a slight cough. “Raising the women to posts of responsibility, the initiative of the elderly people of Lapardha... “

“There he goes, again!” someone said.

The manager spoke for several minutes.

“He is an experienced comrade,” said the man from Labëria to the writer S.K. “But he exaggerates a little with these speeches of his.”

The orchestra tuned up a dance. It was the girls who had their say. The Writer S.K. felt someone standing before him.

“May I have this dance?”

It was the same chestnut-haired girl in slacks. He took hold of her left hand and she threw the other hand over his shoulder.

“What’s your name?” he asked as they whirled around.

“Pranvera!”

“What school do you attend?”

“The Architectural Technicum. I’m in the final year class!”

Rudi was dancing near them with a bored-looking young woman. Further away, Soda Caustica drenched in perspiration plodded around in step with the music.

“Do you like the bride?” she asked.

“Yes, very much.”

“What about her father, what do you think he will do?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing.”

“I’m afraid he intends to do something. Look at his eyes. I have never seen wilder

looking eyes than his.”

“They are not so wild. They are rather lost in amazement.”

“Those are the eyes of a bigot,” she said.

“No, no. Some of the people in the cities have the mildest features, and are apparently of highly cultured behaviour. But among these one can come across fanatical maniacs. I once saw such a highly cultured bigot in a moment of frankness. It was too horrible for words.”

“How interesting!” said the young woman.

The writer was at a loss as to what to say.

“Do you write about piety?” she asked.

“I may probably do so. Why?”

“Do you see that girl over there with her hair cut short and a sullen look on her face?”

“The one dancing with Rudi, you mean?”

“Yes. Something terrible happened to her. It is so horrid that I can’t even talk about it. She may be able to tell you about it herself.”

“In reference with what?”

“It is connected with religion,” the young woman added “There is a lot being written about this nowadays, isn’t there?”

He nodded.

“There is a monastery nearby. Did you not see it when you came here? It lies to the left of the railway station. The cypress trees stand out from miles away.”

“Yes, I have seen it.” he said

“It was at this monastery two years ago that something terrible happened to her.”

The girl lowered her eyes.

“I can guess,” said the writer. “The monastery, as far as I know, was a place of pilgrim-

age. I can guess what happened.”

“The young woman stared at him, her wide open eyes very close to his, making him feel somewhat uneasy.

“How could you guess?”

“It is not very hard to guess, Pranvera.”

This was the first time he had spoken her name and she liked the way he said it.

He stared at the girl they had been talking.

“Don’t stare so!” said Pranvera. “You’ll embarrass her.” People moved about, standing, talking in groups in the fog of cigarette smoke.

“Have you been on the train to Laçi?” asked a freckled-faced warehouse keeper of his companions. “You haven’t? It’s a wonderful trip. It is the queerest train in the Republic and the queerest things happen there. The compartments are filled with all sorts of people: peasants who mistake stations, chiefs of offices, machinists, young men of letters without a penny in their pockets, demobilized soldiers, priests, auditors, adventurers, idiots. You have no idea of what a mish-mash there is there!”

Pranvera smiled and lowered her eyes thinking “there is no end to the topics of conversation the people engage in.”

Xhavid went past with his younger sister. Pranvera nodded a greeting.

“Is that English that Katrina speaks?” asked the child.

“No, I already told you,” Xhavid said. “That is the way they speak in the highlands.”

“I want to speak like Katrina too,” said

the little girl in a whimsical tone.

The music stopped.

“Thank you!” said the young woman.

He smiled and walked away.

“A fine wedding party!” said the man from Labëria when the writer took a seat near him.

“Poor Selfo was very fond of wedding parties.”

The whistle of a distant train was heard.

“It’s the 8 train,” said someone in a high-pitched voice. “Someone had better go to the station.”

“Rudi! Rudi!” shouted some one.

Rudi came running.

“Go to the station again Rudi. There may be a late comer on it. This is the second to last train.”

“The last train arrives at nine fifty.”

Rudi left in a hurry.

XHAVID

I can hardly concentrate my attention on any one thing. From all sides I hear people calling "Xhavid, come here! Xhavid, listen here!" I no sooner turn my head and smile in one direction than another calls! "Comrade Bridegroom! Comrade Xhavid!"

I have to run from one table to another for this is my wedding party and I have to be everywhere. They feel insulted if I don't go. I clink glasses at every table, they pat me on the shoulder and I embrace them.

Someone posted a third caricature of me on the bulletin board. Katrina felt offended with the first one and was greatly upset. We had to explain to her that this was just a friendly gesture, and now she would certainly have burst into laughter if her father had not been sitting by her side.

And there is my father-in-law! I doubt if any other mechanic has as stern-looking a father-in-law as this. He's like a character from a film. At first Katrina felt very upset. Now she is all right though. They sit side by side, but he utters not a single word but his eyes reflect his despondency.

"Xhavid! Bridegroom!" they keep calling me from all sides.

"Beware of personal glorification!" Oh! right in my ear drum.

Very funny!

The whole morning we were installing electric lights in the "wedding party barracks." My comrades went to another station

to buy lightbulbs. It looked as if the ones we have would not be enough. "At a mechanic's wedding electricity should hold sway," they said. They brought the electric sockets and bulbs from their own sleeping quarters. Uncle Shurko, our night guard, brought his too. Rudi came in with a two metre-long neon lamp. "Install it over Manager Feizo's table!" suggested Uncle Shurko. When the manager came to see what was going on he flew into a rage. "What's all this? Do you think I'm after self-glorification? Take that neon lamp away from there!" The lamp was removed and we finally installed it at one of the entrances.

Guests have been pouring in the whole day. Now the rooms are filled to the brim. Every whistle of the locomotive seemed to relay greetings from the distance.

There it goes again. This must be the second to last train.

"Xhavid, come here!"

"I am coming. I know what you will be telling me. I can tell from your very looks." They ask me:

"Do you remember how we put up the chimney of the Power Plant in a single night? The specialists reckoned it would take at least two and a half weeks to erect it but we set it up in one rainy night punctuated by blizzards and lightning. The skyline seemed to be welding with gigantic welding rods. In the morning the specialists were struck dumb. There was the high chimney soaring up to the grey sky. The specialists just stood and gazed, chewing their pipes. Do you remember?" Why all this

questioning? Why do they seem to imagine that now that I am being married I should forget all this?

There goes the train whistle again. Rudi set off in a hurry to see if there were any late comers. The walls of the barracks were shaking with the drumbeat.

Some one proposes a toast to our future family. Katrina lowers her eyes. They wish us many children. Many. A whole brigade of Heroes of Socialist Work bearing Illyrian names. Illyrian names are now in vogue. The old mountaineer's glance is sad. His whole clan has been wiped out by blood feuds.

“Xhavid!”

I turned my head -Do you remember? The needle moves slowly. We hold our breath. This is the pressure gauge of the third boiler. It reaches to 7, 9, 13. Stop.” From the distance the locomotive whistles its greeting. Look! a new comer. Welcome, whoever you are!

BY THE 8:40 PM TRAIN

Two young village teachers, a Fellow of the Institute of Folklore, an Inspector of Finances, and two peasants with large bundles on the rack were travelling second-class in the same compartment on the 8:40 train.

The young teachers who seemed to be intimate friends were carrying on some kind of conversation, the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore and the Inspector of Finances had each finished reading their newspapers, folded and stuck them into their pockets. The peasants were looking out through the window in silence.

“Excuse me?” said one of the young village teachers to the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore. “May I have a look at the ‘*Zëri i Popullit*’*?”

“Certainly!”

Out of his pocket he pulled all the dailies he had.

“Here it is. No, excuse me! I have handed you the wrong one. This is ‘*Mësuesi*.’** Just a moment.”

“We want to see if there is anything in it against underage betrothals,” said the other young woman. “We are part of a team carrying on a campaign to abolish backward customs and break off such betrothals.

“Really? Do you find it interesting?”

“Very much so!”

* The Peoples' Voice, Albanian in the original.

** The Teacher, Albanian in the original.

“There is something about this almost every day,” butted in the Inspector. “I think there was a bit in today’s press, too, though I skipped the inside pages. On the last page there is something of Vietnam. U.S. bombers raided Haifong again.”

“Damn them!” said the elder of the peasants.

“The revisionists are playing a dirty role there,” said the Inspector.

“Here is ‘*Zëri i Popullit*!’” said the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore.

The young women opened the paper and together perused the headlines.

“There!” said one of them. “Here is an article about them.”

They got their heads closer together and read in silence.

The peasants rolled a cigarette each and the younger one pulled a lighter from his pocket.

The Inspector smiled and turned to the one who was about to strike a light.

“You should ask the young women’s permission first,” he said smiling. “Perhaps they don’t like the smoke. Women should be respected, shouldn’t they?”

“Oh, all right!” said the elder peasant and stuck his cigarette over his ear. “B’Gosh! We have not yet been used to such things!”

“Never mind! Never mind!” said the young women. “Go ahead and smoke!”

“My word, No! We are not going to light up!” said the peasant. “Excuse us, girls?”

“Go ahead and smoke, we are village

teachers and are used to the smoke," they insisted.

The peasants finally lit their cigarettes.

"In that case, I will roll one too," said the Inspector.

The peasant passed his tobacco pouch.

"What about you, comrade?"

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore shook his head by way of refusal.

"I am not a smoker!"

"Good for you!" said the elder of the peasants "This devil of a thing is quite harmful. They say it causes cancer too."

"There is a fifty per cent probability in that," added the Inspector.

"What a way of speaking!" murmured the folklorist.

The Inspector of Finances overheard the remark.

"Well," he said while rolling his cigarette, "these are terms we use in our profession..."

"The question is..."

"No use explaining things beyond my understanding. Talk of matters dealing with figures and I'll outrank you on that."

The folklorist seemed somewhat nonplussed and he shrank back to the window to watch the hazy fields. Dead silence again in the compartment. One could hear the splash of rain and now and then the siren of the locomotive.

"How are you getting on with the work of breaking off underage betrothals?" the Inspector of Finances asked the two teachers.

"Very well," the young women answered

almost in one breath. Then, interrupting each other, they started recounting episodes that had occurred all along their journey. At first their team was received with some misgiving in every village. Bigoted men and women shut the doors and windows of their houses and at times there was not a girl to be seen on the streets. Bigots and the clergy tried to stir up resentment against their team as if they were monsters coming to grab their children. Then the fight began for each individual child.

“It was a bitter battle but a marvellous one at the same time,” the young women said. “We were so happy after each success that we would stay awake all night talking about it”

The Inspector and the two peasants listened attentively.

“Look! A motorbike!” one of the young women interrupted.

On the right a motorbike was travelling parallel with the railroad. It kept pace with the train for a while and then it stuck and was not seen anymore.

The beating of a distant drum was heard. At first it was very faint but then it sounded louder and a gust of moist wind brought along the accompanying sounds of an orchestra.

“There is a wedding here somewhere,” said one of the peasants listening attentively to locate the spot. “May it be a lucky one!”

“A wedding?” asked the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore as if awakened from sleep.

“Hear that drum,” said the peasant. “That is a wedding drum.”

“What kind of wedding could take place

here?" said the elder peasant. "There is neither a village nor people in this neighbourhood."

"I don't know what this place is like, but I do know that that is a drum for a wedding party."

Sure enough the drum kept sounding louder and louder and the notes of a bassoon suddenly came through the darkness.

"What is this place called?" asked the folklorist.

The others looked at him somewhat embarrassed and the Inspector named the region.

"I see," murmured the folklorist as he turned back to the window. "Of little interest from the ethnographic point of view, the ritual at the bride's house is more interesting; the ceremonies of the fourth night which combined with those of the second night, making those of the fifth night optional, are lacking here."

The peasants listened to him in bewilderment while the two young women bit their lips to suppress a laugh.

"Are you a specialist in this field?" asked the Inspector.

"Yes," answered the other without turning his head around, listening attentively to the music.

"What can this beating of a drum be?"

"At a wedding party, I said."

"Only if the devils or the monks of the monastery are getting married..." said the peasant. "No other people live hereabouts."

"There are lights in the distance," butt-

ed in the Inspector. "That means people live here."

"By Jove! You are right!"

Everybody peened through the windows watching the lights flickering dimly in the foggy darkness. The train lowered its speed and the locomotive gave a long blast on the hooter.

"What station is this?" asked one of the young women teachers.

"I don't know," said the Inspector. "This is a new line and I don't know the names of the stations."

The train rolled on slowly to a halt. It seemed like hanging between the terminals of the night. The rumble of the drum was heard more distinctly and so were the notes of the bassoon and the smothered voices of people.

"Didn't I say it was a wedding party," said the younger peasant. "May it be a lucky one!"

The elder kept silent.

Finally he said, "I seem to have mistaken the place. I thought we were near the monastery."

"What can this be?" asked the folklorist in a loud voice. "This is impossible! Please tell me what is this place?"

The Inspector repeated his information.

"Are you certain?"

"Even a child can tell you as much," said the Inspector. "I beg your pardon, I did not mean to..."

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore said nothing but was apparently hurt for he retired back to his window again. The two

young women bit their lips and the peasants looked uneasy.

The door of the compartment opened and the conductor entered.

“Any newcomers here?”

“No! What station is this, please?” asked one of the young women.

“It hasn’t got a name as yet,” answered the conductor. “It has been functioning only a week.”

“Do you know where this drum beat is coming from?” she asked again.

“Yes I do,” said the conductor. “Here in the neighbourhood. At those lights over there. Do you see them?”

“Yes, Yes!”

“A wedding is taking place there. The party started at noon. Most of the wedding guests have travelled in our train.”

“I said so, didn’t I. May it be a lucky one!” said the peasant.

“It must be a big party for the drum has been pounding all afternoon and all evening. That’s what the men on the freight train and the night watchman say.”

“May I ask a question?” asked the folklorist.

“Why, of course!”

“What is this place called?”

The conductor told him. The Inspector cast a scornful glance at the man who shrank back to the window. One of the young women could hardly withhold a grin.

“But it is impossible!” the folklorist blabbered all of a sudden. “What kind of music is

this?"

"Just music, what else can it be?"

"If this is the place you say it is then the music they play is different. It must be, I am a specialist.."

"That's no fault of mine," retorted the conductor. "And you had better be more careful with your words."

"Wedding parties, betrothals!" said the Inspector. "All of them a foolish waste of money."

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore jumped up suddenly.

"Are you in earnest?"

"That's what I believe," said the Inspector. "They are all a foolish waste."

"How dare you!" said the other in an icy tone.

"Why shouldn't I? I have no time for wedding parties and the like. On the contrary..."

"You are making light of our sacred age-long rituals"

"Oh, what use are rituals to me? I don't know much about rituals but talk to me of accounting and I'm on home ground there."

"Horrible!" exclaimed the folklorist.

"And what is so horrible about it? Seventy per cent of wedding parties cost about twenty-five per cent of the annual income..."

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore covered his ears.

"I would be in favour of abolishing all wedding parties," continued the Inspector.

"Ah, that's the limit!" shouted the folklorist. "I can't stand it any longer!"

He sprang to his feet, grabbed his coat and satchel, rushed out of the compartment, banging the door behind him and walked down the narrow passage in search of a seat in another compartment. All the compartments proved to be full and after standing some time in the corridor he stepped into one noisy with conversation, where everybody was smoking. The others squeezed up to make room for him.

“What a wonderful wedding party!” said a cheerful looking man with a pot-belly. “Our town hasn’t seen the like of it ever. A wedding party like that occurs once in a hundred or even two-hundred and fifty years or not at all, unless it was before our era, or before Christ as the westerners put it.”

“Excuse me if I interrupt: to what region do you refer?” asked the inquisitive folklorist who seemed to have taken a liking to the conversation.

The fat man named the region.

“A ritual which has been oversimplified due to a metamorphosis conditioned by Islamic pressure and of medieval ethnographic interest,” muttered the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore.

The others looked at the newcomer with some astonishment and the fat man continued.

“A wedding party like that occurs only once in an epoch if not in a number of epochs put together.”

“You told us that before but tell us something more!”

“Right!” said the cheerful-looking man and he began to relate a series of funny epi-

sodes.

They all burst into laughter but the folklorist sprang to his feet, a frown heavy on his face.

“One should not make light of such age-long rituals,” he said, banging the door of the compartment behind him.

There was a new outburst of laughter in the compartment.

Our Fellow of the Institute of Folklore stood in the cold corridor for a while staring at the darkness beyond the window panes.

A young conductress passed by.

“Comrade!” he said. “If I get down at the next station will there be a train to take me back to the station where that wedding party is taking place?”

“Yes!” the conductress answered. “There is a train at 9:50 pm.”

“That must be a queer wedding party.”

The conductress shrugged her shoulders.

“It is a rare occasion!” his tone seemed to become at once mellow and somewhat dream-like. “My colleagues will be fascinated. I must get there somehow.”

THE MEMORY OF PAST PANGS

Rudi returned.

“There was nobody,” he said. “The train was full of passengers but no one alighted.”

“The next train might bring someone.”

“I don’t think so, but even if there is let him find the way here himself.”

Above the dancers’ heads the writer S.K. caught the eye of the newspapermen and beckoned him.

“Well?” he asked as he came near.

“The party’s still going as you see. Did you get some sleep?”

“No,” said the newspaperman. “I tried to but there was too much racket. I spent an hour or so at the factory site. Till midnight they will be laying the new reinforced concrete plinth. They are doing a fine job.”

“I will be passing that way a little later too.”

“An interesting wedding party, don’t you think?”

“Very interesting indeed.”

“What’s the old man doing.”

“Nothing so far. He just sits and stares.”

“He looks like the Raven from Edgar Allan Poe.”

“He may have his own drama,” the writer remarked. “You know I am not sentimental but, anyway, I feel sorry for him.”

“Do you intend to write him up?”

“I do. In fact, I intend to write something of all of this.”

“Will you have difficulties?”

“In a way, yes,” said the writer. “It isn’t an easy job to tackle. All these things are new, in the process of growing, of sprouting. One has to find a new approach in writing them up, discarding the stereotyped old patterns.”

“You are right in that,” remarked the newspaperman.

“Albania is being shaken up,” said the writer. “The mountains are squaring their shoulders. You know what that means? The mountains want to shake off the Canon, old prejudices and superstitions from their backs. This requires a gigantic effort. The Canon is tough and nearly as old as the mountains. At times one can’t tell where the mountain ends and the Canon begins. They are entangled and have penetrated into each other. It is easier to move huge rocks than old usages. Nevertheless, the impossible is happening. Imagine what colossal force the revolution has awakened.”

“Quite so,” said the newspaperman. “In a revolutionary state of things the incredible turns into the credible.”

“Do you know what it means to break off thousands of underage betrothals within two months?” said the writer. “This is a Waterloo for the old world. A real Waterloo if not more so. I recall having made a trip to the north in the early days of February. Have you ever been over the ‘Qafa Bullit’ Pass?”

The newspaperman nodded in affirmation.

“Well, one late afternoon we happened to drive that way. Trucks beat that road night and

day. Where we stopped at a buffet to get a hot drink, the word had just been spread around that underage betrothals were to be broken off. Right then a man passed that way shouting himself hoarse, threatening and prophesying all kinds of calamities to come. 'Only a bullet can settle this affair,' he warned. 'Streams of blood will be shed, houses will be set on fire, men will kill their fellow men!' He was still yelling even after we drove away. Apparently, he had been there all day for his voice was hoarse from shouting and screaming. As I was just saying, probably other people had the same misgivings as this man. As a matter of fact, terrible things might have happened in other times. To break off thousands of betrothals would have meant ceaseless shootings, ransackings of houses for days at a stretch turning half of the highlands into ruins. But what came out of it all? Nothing! A threat here and there, some isolated incidents of someone trying to force another not to break off the betrothal and a shot fired at random. I don't think even one shot was fired in earnest. But even if it had been fired it would have sounded ridiculous for its very oddity."

"What if the shot is fired at this wedding party?" said a young woman who had been standing nearby eavesdropping.

The writer turned his head. It was the young woman with the sad face.

"Even if it were fired at this wedding party," said the writer.

The young woman looked blank. Someone invited her to dance and the writer S.K. and

the newspaperman betook themselves to the bar for another beer.

A number of people were standing at the bar drinking.

“Marriages are a fine thing but they all come to the same end: Why isn’t dinner ready, why did you stay so long at the club, the rent and light bills, quarrels over money shortages before pay day. Ah, I know all about it. Don’t you think so, comrade writer?”

S.K. turned for a moment to the man who spoke to him, but took a glass from the counter and made no reply.

“Women are queer,” continued the man. “Once when I had a day off I thought I’d be an exemplary husband and did all the kitchen work: I washed the dishes, put the cupboard in order, placed a vase of flowers on the table. When I came home for lunch I was in high spirits. I thought I’d find my wife in good spirits too. But what do you think? I found her in tears. ‘You rascal!’ she bawled me out as soon as I stepped into the house, ‘you traitor! tell me what woman you had in here while I was away?’ with tears running down her cheeks. Believe me, that’s what happened to me that day.”

“There is something in that too,” said someone.

“What were we speaking about?” asked S.K. of the newspaperman.

“About firing shots.”

“Oh yes, we were considering the problem of writing about the new life. We have to break our old concepts too. Now is the time for

breaking outdated customs. Have you heard the creak of shabby sharks being pushed down by a bulldozer? Those creaks are nothing to the jarring crash I am hearing. Do you believe me? My ears seem to be splitting. I hear the crash of broken concepts. It is a magnificent din. It is not a noise; it is a crash. Old concepts clash and break like ice in a stream breaking into a thousand pieces.”

“In the stream of revolution,” said the newspaperman.

“You hit the point, in the stream of revolution. Have you read all the letters Comrade Enver Hoxha has exchanged with the people?”

The newspaperman nodded.

“If you have read them through, read them again,” the writer continued. “It is a great dialogue. It is precisely in this dialogue that one can hear all that magnificent crash the Party brought about in recent times.”

“An historic crash,” remarked the newspaperman.

“Certainly. The history of peoples is created in just this way. It is not made up of dates and conventions and treaties. They are only a small, spicy part while the main body of history is made up of events like these of our recent times. Events as broad in scope as the ocean, with hundreds of thousands of people taking part and where the whole heartbeat of a people is heard.”

“That’s right.”

“Breaking old concepts is apt to be more difficult than breaking through enemy lines.”

“You are talking a lot about breaking old

concepts,” said the newspaperman. “But unless we fill in the gaps left by the broken concepts we would not have much.”

The writer gulped down the beer.

“Listen!” he said. “Concepts are not a set of crystal glasses in a cupboard which you can replace with another set as soon as you’ve broken the first. This is a complicated affair.”

“Naturally, nevertheless...”

“Take this wedding party, for instance,” interrupted the writer. “It has all the signs of a broken concept, a concept smashed to smithereens. Our scholars of folklore would have been struck dumb. This is a gay, noisy, variegated break. Don’t you see that behind the broken forms of the old wedding party there are new forms appearing?”

“A socialist wedding party,” said the newspaperman. “This term is coming into use.”

The writer cast a glance in the direction of the banquet tables.

“What about the bride?” he said. “Look at her. I think her name is Katrina, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea.”

They both looked at her for some time.

“She has had her hair cut at the railroad site,” said the newspaperman.

“She looks very smart.”

“She seems to have recovered from her first shock.”

“The old man still looks very sullen though.”

“Where is the bridegroom?”

“Over there chatting with the people from the Fier power plant.”

“They are clinking glasses.”

“They are bound to be telling tales about their times together installing the power plant at Fier,” said the writer. “Let’s join them!”

Pushing through the crowd the writer felt someone touch his elbow:

“Excuse me a moment!”

It was the young woman with the melancholy face that Pranvera had talked about.

“You go ahead,” S.K. said to the newspaperman. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Excuse me for taking you away from your companion but I had something to tell you.”

The writer looked at her. True enough, her brownish grey eyes reflected an inner agony.

“Pranvera said something about me,” she said.

The writer nodded his head by way of affirmation.

“Please don’t write anything about it. It is too painful for me.”

He kept his level gaze on her face.

“She was too hasty telling you about it,” the young woman added. “If it interests you, I could relate the whole story to you myself provided you don’t write anything about it.”

The writer listened to her in a meditative way as though his thoughts were somewhere else.

“Was it something dreadful?” he asked at last.

Her eyes betrayed a deep horror.

“Too terrible for words! You cannot imagine how dreadful,” she said in a subdued tone.

“Why think of mishaps at wedding parties?” he asked in a very low tone.

He lowered his eyes regretting having encouraged her to speak about this thing.

“Their beards scratched my face like a hair brush,” she continued after a little pause. “I fought like a tiger and did not let them have their way.”

The writer raised his eyes somewhat astonished.

“Is that so? I thought...”

“No, no! They came short of attaining their objective. Nevertheless, they caused me a deep psychic trauma. For nights at a stretch I dreamt of them with those abominable whiskers.”

She heaved a deep sigh and covered her face with the palms of her hands.

“Even now I feel their bristles pricking my face,” she said in very low tones.

Her cheeks and neck were really flushed.

“Quietly now,” he said in an easygoing tone with a view to calming her down.

The young woman raised her head.

“Anyway, I don’t understand how you, a school girl, went there at all.”

“One of my classmates persuaded me. I took a fancy to a young man but he took no notice of me. Then that companion of mine persuaded me to go to this monastery. Two young women had told her that the monks could make a man love. They said they had tested the power of their magic themselves. I myself can’t tell how I came to believe all this. My companion spoke of telepathy, of thought

waves and the like. She had read about them or had been told, I don't remember properly."

The girl continued to speak as they both moved to a corner near the door. The writer noticed the other girls watching them inquisitively.

"Then she introduced me to the two young women who had talked to her before and who would accompany me there," she continued, "As soon as I laid eyes on these two I suspected some evil. I recall them even to this day. One was thin and wearing a pair of cream-coloured boots, the other fat and cross-eyed. We set out on a four-wheeled wagon. All the way that fat one fixed her wicked eyes on me."

Tears welled up in the girl's eyes.

The orchestra was in full swing and S.K. missed much of what she said but he did not cut her short. She probably needed to give vent to her thoughts. Having already let out the most shocking information she was talking more freely now.

Further away some people were dancing while toasts were being raised again at the banquet table. The newspaperman waved to him from the table a couple of times but the writer was looking in another direction.

"There I lay for some time like a corpse on the old carpet, staring at the arched ceiling of the monastery decorated with Arabic inscriptions and wondered how I had dropped into a medieval environment under an arched ceiling which would weigh heavily on my mind for a long time to come. It was the afternoon. I got up and left. No one stopped me. All the

people who had come with us in the morning had either left or were about to do so. Those two young women had disappeared. I plodded along through that deserted place until a peasant passed and took me in his cart.”

The writer lit another cigarette.

“In a bus one day I saw one of those two young women who had escorted me to the monastery but I pretended not to recognize her. She didn’t recognize me either.”

The writer puffed at his cigarette.

“There is no end to outrages like these committed in churches and monasteries!” he ruminated to himself.

“At times I feel like getting up here and telling my whole story to arouse the indignation of all these workers who would certainly set fire to the monastery.”

“You are too late. I think they have already closed it up.”

The young woman gave a sigh of relief.

“One thing though,” said the writer. “As far as I can see this occurrence has left a deep impression on you. Anyway, you... what is your name?”

“Mira.”

“Listen here, Mira. You should blot it out of your mind.”

“I have tried to but...”

“Some people like to fondle their pangs,” he interrupted her, “and this is very dangerous for them. In time they become addicted and can’t live without them, like people addicted to alcohol. The role of a despondent man is very often a fascinating one especially among

the youth.”

“I am playing no role!” she protested.

“Excuse me, I did not mean it in that sense,” he spoke in a fatherly way. “Let me try to explain. Now you feel desperate, your eyes are sulky, your gestures are hopeless. If there were no people around you would be asking me for a cigarette. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes!” she said lowering her head.

“You are creating a new code of ethics for your life. Gradually and without you knowing it all these things, your despondency, a cigarette with a single companion, solitude grow into a habit in your life. You find a kind of pleasure in them. A time will come when your existence becomes insipid without them. This is a very bad thing. Do you understand me?”

“Yes!”

“This does not fit in at all with our way of life. Does this sound like a sermon to you?”

“Yes!”

The writer smiled and shook his head.

“What you need is to come right here to this worksite face to face with this despicable monastery which is like a gloomy cloud on your life. You will see how much better you will feel.”

“I may probably do so.”

“Look at the bride!” he said stretching out his head. “Do you think she hasn’t been through all sorts of predicaments until she came here to this barracks? For three hours or so her father has been sitting by her side without uttering a single word. Do you know what that means to a young woman from the

mountain regions?”

KATRINA — I

Here at last is my wedding party.

How often have I thought of it. I was ten years old when they had betrothed me to a man from a distant village. I always imagined it as something in motion. A nuptial procession, bridal guests in festive dress, neighing horses, mother seeing me off down the narrow stone staircase and me with a white veil over my face. I imagined all these when I used to sit by my mother's side on a rainy afternoon watching her spin wool. I imagined the procession passing through deep ravines and the muzzles of rifles swinging on the shoulders of riders which seemed to say to me. 'Well, Katrina you have finally come with us. Now you belong to us.' Perennial fog hung over the mountain passes and I had no idea of what lay beyond them for I had never been away from my home village.

When our group set out for the Rogzhina-Fier railroad site I felt as if I were in a pleasant dream because I had always associated my departure from my home village with my wedding and I had never imagined that I would ever be going to a distant place without the bridal escort and a veil over my face.

That was one of the most unforgettable days in my life. As we zigzagged our way down, different vistas opened up before our eyes. This then was our homeland. We had often read the word "homeland" in our readers. It was often written in chalk on blackboards and the teacher had explained to us that this word

comes from the union of the words "home" and "land." We had read that our homeland is beautiful, but we had seen nothing of it. A very small part of the homeland had been our portion. What belonged to us was a limited plateau and a rugged ravine beyond which we could never go. That day we were coming into possession of our homeland. Its valleys opened up before us. In the distance there were hills, fields under cultivation, wide highways, villages and towns. All of these opened up cautiously before our eyes. Cautiously lest they might scare us, they might shock us. Girls are supposed to be greatly moved when the bridal chest is opened before them. We were deeply moved. These were not skirts, chemises, petticoats. They were wide landscapes decorated with all kinds of wonderful sights. This was the Party's trousseau.

The busses zigzagged down the mountain highway. It resembled an avalanche which gets bigger and bigger as it rumbles down the precipice. So was my heart becoming bigger and bigger amassing love from all the space which we were going through.

I was very ignorant. I knew none of these mechanics. I did not know that there were such barracks in the world where people would come together tonight and dance, sing and play instruments and that this would be my wedding party. How could I imagine that a day would be coming when I, Katrina, shy from the mountains would unexpectedly gain so many comrades and friends? I knew that a woman could have a husband but never com-

rades and friends. I thought that only wayward women could have comrades and friends. While, now, I have tens of comrades. Sitting at tables, cracking jokes, singing, dancing, raising toasts and all this gaiety, this clinking of glasses, this music, seem to pronounce only Xhavid's name and mine. The guests have come from all over. There is even a writer among them. There he is saying something about me to a young woman with bobbed hair. Today everything seems queer. I had thought that all writers were elderly people with beards like the ones pictured in my reader but this one is quite different. Everything is different tonight. I wish I could talk to father about all this. But he does not talk to me. He sits here by my side and doesn't open his mouth. Every time the door opens and somebody enters, I feel the cold and wet of the night. Father seems to have gathered this cold wetness in the shawl about his head, poor father! He has suffered a lot from customs, but still he lacked the strength to discard them. The go-between kept harassing him. He mixed up everything and persuaded father to give his consent for a speedy marriage as soon as I returned from the railroad.

This was on the day I set out. He had tried his hardest to prevent me from going to the railroad. Father hesitated. In recent times father wavered about everything. The Party comrades intervened and persuaded him to let me go. Then the groom's peoples set a condition that as soon as I got back the marriage would take place. Father consented

and the day was fixed. I had a feeling that day would never come. Nevertheless, the go-between with that abominable lump on his neck, scared me out of my wits.

When we arrived at the railroad camp I caught sight of thousands of comrades who had come from all corners of the country. When I saw the little town with these barracks and electric lights set up for us, I tried to forget the day of my coming wedding but it was impossible. These marvellous weeks would soon be over and we would return to our mountains where this savage custom waited for us.

The first night at the railroad camp was an unforgettable one. We stood like a timorous flock fascinated by the surroundings. It was towards the evening. Hundreds of boys and girls were strolling between the barracks lit by electric lights. Others ran here and there, in and out of the club, dropped letters in the letterbox and hurried to the headquarters. Now and then orders were broadcast on loudspeakers (we were frightened by them at first). Someone was playing an accordion. One of them raised some kind of a box to his eye and all at once there was a flash of light. We took it for lightning and shrieked in fright. The newsmen laughed at us. A crowd of boys and girls coming from secondary schools in cities gathered around to watch us as if we were rare animate. They began to talk to us but we hung our heads and did not answer. Then the boys began to speak about us right there under our noses as if we were not there at all, or as if we were animals and did not understand the lan-

guage of human beings.

“Do you know that all these girls are betrothed?”

“Really?”

“For certain. They are betrothed to old men, sometimes seventy years of age.”

“You don’t say!”

“How queer!”

“Girls, are you engaged to be married?”

“Look at this one, what a peach!”

“She’s pretty all right!”

Someone came and drove the boys away. We did not raise our heads at all. A heavy, very heavy weight pulled them towards the ground. Our lips were locked as if by a spell. What was this town, these clean barracks as light as our dreams. Who were these girls with their hair combed in such a queer fashion and these boys with their hair clipped short? Could we also run around like them, speak like them, sing like them, drop letters in that mailbox, speak on loudspeakers (how wonderful and terrifying at the same time!).

A member of the staff came. “Come with me,” she said. “You are to have a hot shower.” This confounded us altogether. What was this hot shower? We stood in front of the building where the shower baths were installed like stubborn goats and would not go in. We were afraid; the woman tried to persuade us but it was of no avail. Some secondary school girls came along. But we could not make up our minds. Finally, the staff woman herself went in and was the first to undress and prepare for the bath. We gave in and entered. A sort

of disc sprayed hot water over her head and the bathroom was filled with steam. We stood there utterly bewildered. Finally, we took off our dresses and oh, what a marvellous thing it was! We had never had a hot shower bath in our lives. We had seen waterfalls before but never could we have imagined that there could be such hot waterfalls that would drop on one's shoulders. All at once there was an outburst of gaiety in the bathroom. We bathed and played and sang. Some were weeping with happiness. The water kept pouring down. Soap bubbles formed marvellous rainbows on our white shoulders. Time was up but we refused to come out. The staff member tried to persuade us but we did not obey. We were so excited that it was only after an hour and thirty minutes that we finally came away.

On other days we would ask impatiently: "When will there be another shower bath?" There was general laughter and jollity. Then the girls from the secondary schools began to trim our hair. Every trimming was done amongst chuckling and teasing by the other girls; whole hours sleepless and with queer thoughts. The days seemed to dash away like a stream down the mountains.

Back home in our mountain villages a lot of gossiping was going on. Gossip spreads with the speed of bedbugs. This worried our parents and made them lose many a night's sleep. It was rumoured that we had clipped our hair down to their roots, that we strolled around with boys in the evenings, that we had rouged our lips, that we wore very short skirts

and that when trucks passed by on the road we waved to the drivers and blew them kisses.

Then a delegation composed of elderly people came from the village to see how things were getting on. They alighted from the bus and walked through the camp in a dignified manner. They visited and looked at everything. They peered into our sleeping quarters, visited the club, looked at the flash-posters on the bulletin board (they read them all for they had been told that it was here that we mountain girls wrote love letters to city boys). Then they visited our dining rooms, the kitchen, the broadcasting station, the shower baths (they asked a lot of questions about the shower baths, though goodness knows why. They even asked to be shown the soap we washed with and passed the cakes of soap gingerly from hand to hand as if they were dynamite). Finally, they saw us, too, coming straight from the railroad track singing. They shook their heads in wonder and yet were greatly pleased and fascinated. We looked so smart in our overalls.

But all this was insignificant compared with what happened after February 6. They read us Comrade Enver Hoxha's speech in the afternoon. We listened gazing at one another at the wonder of it. We felt in a hazy sort of way that some great thing was imminent. The foundations of the Canon had been shaking for the last twenty years but, apparently, the last shock was about to be felt. I recalled a day some years ago when an earthquake hit our home village. An awe-inspiring, heavy, rolling

sound came from the depths of the earth and shook the walls of our house. The foundations seemed to shriek with pain and stuck fast to the earth lest they be pulled out. Listening to the speech we could feel the approach of this great wonder. This was something bigger than the war. It resembled mountains.

That night not a girl in our dormitory caught a wink of sleep. How could we? Almost all of us had been betrothed when we were young children just as Comrade Enver said. Horrible intermediaries, roaming night and day from one village to another, from one district to another like spiders, had fastened us with undetachable ropes. Hundreds of rifles stood guard over these bonds. Some of us had been bought for cash, some had been exchanged for cows, sheep, horses, sacks of corn and even for shepherd's dogs. We were a herd exchanged for another herd. The only difference was that we wore no bells on our necks. But we had our tongues. They worked that night, low at times, loud at other times, angry at times, painfully at others. What were we to do? It was high time to make up our minds. Before us lay the terrible Canon. To leave the fold we had to trample it. It lay prostrate at the threshold threatening us. Hundreds of rifles waved us back, threatened us if we dared to step out!

This was a field at battle. Our dormitory that night, so a correspondent of the "*Zëri i Rinisë*"* had it, resembled a staff headquarters

* The Voice of Youth, Albanian in the original.

before a major battle. And it was so, indeed. Our dormitory was larger than a tent of the General Staff. And decisions were harder for us than for the generals. Our battlefield had no bounds. Towards dawn we dropped to sleep in one another's arms. The bugler called reveille.

"Girls!" shouted Liza who was the first to get up. "Don't worry, we have our Party. It will not leave us in the lurch."

The bugle kept calling and we struggled out of bed. It was certainly like a battle.

By noon recess we had decided. We gathered together at the railroad track to trample underfoot the custom and break off our engagements. That moment will always remain fresh in our memory. Trucks kept passing to and fro on the highway blowing their horns. A helicopter mounted guard over our heads. The sky was clear. "What is all this?" asked a girl shedding tears.

What days of beauty and of anxiety they were!

It was on one of these days that I met Xhavid.

It was the same day that I saw this plain and these barracks. On Sunday we had come from the railroad to visit this worksite. A convoy of trucks was racing along this beautiful straight highway between the twin lines of tall poplars, and we were singing a song we had just learned. The range of mountains along the distant horizon could scarcely be seen. The news of our having broken off our engagements must have already reached those heights but the mountains had not yet reacted.

The Canon dwelt there. We had declared war on it but not to the mountains. The Canon was trying to wrest away all our gains, threatening that we must give up the beautiful landscapes of the country we had just come to possess. The Canon wanted to wrest from us the railroad we were building with our own hands, this beautiful highway with the poplar trees which was rushing towards us, the picturesque towns, trains, the hot water, the clean ironed underclothes. All the vistas which were revealed before our eyes for a short time should now be closed again as clothes are wrapped up in a funeral bundle.

These things we were thinking about as we looked towards the mountains.

The worksite we were visiting was a vast one stretching over a wide tract of land. Everything here looked so strange. Iron rods stuck out of concrete blocks, walls, the ground. Some of them resembled wings, others looked like elbows and still others like the limbs of mythical beings walled here as if by magic. Workers moved about through the iron rods, concrete blocks, cranes, piles of bricks and trenches. We passed through and stared at this vast domain of iron and concrete. Everything here: the walls, portals and pillars seemed armed with iron weapons. This is one place with which nobody would dare to tamper. I thought to myself as I passed by the unfinished walls. I had never seen anything so awe-inspiring and so well protected at the same time. And there, among those irons and cables I first came across Xhavid. We were

admiring some massive columns when all at once I caught sight of a man wearing a welding mask bent over a tube and now and then spurting a jet of flame on the metal. It was the first time in my life I saw a man welding. He looked to me like a mythical chimera vomiting flames from its mouth. He bent over the metal and the jets of flame spurted again. This was a fantastic yellowish flame. An unquestionably chimerical flame. I could not see the welding rod and it looked to me that the masked man himself was spewing it out of his mouth. Sparks dropped on his shoulders. As in a dream, I stood aghast. My mates left. Apparently, he saw me standing there and turned his big, frightful, mask towards me. He pushed the mask to his forehead and smiled. I smiled too.

“Katrina!” my mates shouted from a distance and I ran off. Someone behind me, a slender young man, who heard my name when my mates called me, repeated it in a funny way. This was Rudi. As I ran away he called me by another name. Apparently, he took me for a girl named Sophia. From a distance he called: “Katrina, are you engaged?” I ran away shutting my ears with both hands.

When night fell and we went to bed, my thoughts turned to the man with the yellow flame. I thought of him especially when it rained. Raindrops hitting the asbestos roofing seemed to whisper “Katrina! Katrina!” I thought of my childhood days and the fable about dragons and monsters. I thought of the day of my betrothal; of my father’s rifle

on the wall, of other rifles; of the intermediary's musket, of the snowflakes on the windowpanes. All these dashed through my head with him always in the background. He took off his frightful dark mask and demanded in a strained voice: "What is happening here?" Then he took me by the hand. Father, the go-between, my fiancé's people all sprang to their feet and grabbed their rifles. Then, he put on his dark mask, frowned and spewed a stream of yellowish flame on them. Such thoughts dashed through my half-dreams.

There was a variety show one day at the club. The hall was packed. Outdoors it was raining hard. The show over, we got up to leave. All at once our eyes met across the throng of people. He was drenched but he looked so handsome. I turned my eyes away but I knew that he was slowly forcing his way through the crowd and at the door of the club we were side by side. There was hail amongst the rain. Some of us girls ran towards the sleeping quarters. Others hesitated. All at once he threw his jacket over my shoulders and pulled me away outdoors. I will never forget that short distance together in the hail-storm. I wore the jacket of a strange man on my shoulders. This jacket smelt different from the clothes of the men of our region. It did not remind me of wool and sour milk. This was a different, pleasant and quite unknown odour. It stuck on my shoulders for a long time after. If I turned my head sideways sometimes I could get just a faint scent of it. At the door of the dormitory I thanked him and he left wet

through and through. But he turned his head again and smiled.

Xhavid always smiled in a particular way. This is the way I first saw him and I shall always picture him like this just as he is, sitting amidst his comrades and smiling, as he did then. They have been recalling something, all kinds of machinery, tubes, scaffolding and wires, I suppose.

Father is frowning at everything he sets his eyes upon and is mute. At times he looks like a statue. Look at his wrinkles. They seem to be part of my childhood as the pathways of my home village are. I know how they stretch out, then suddenly change form, intensify, extend, open up, contract again and all at once become as deep as a chasm. My father's face is like the face of the earth eroded by floods and droughts. Now it looks frozen, stiff. And his hair looks like frost. That's the way the earth is in winter: cold, hard like stone. One can't believe it is the same soil which has grown grass and flowers. It looks as if it has forgotten all this and no longer wishes to think of them.

BY THE LAST TRAIN

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore tramped the platform. The station was wet and deserted. There was no let up of biting cold wind and little shelter. He pulled up his coat collar and pulled his large brimmed hat down over his ears.

“Why have I done this?” the folklorist murmured to himself. “What if there is no other train. The timetable says that there should be the last train but...” he turned his head again to the big poster to reassure himself. The timetable was written on sheet-brass which creaked in the wind.

“Here I am at night, in the middle of a plain, at a cold neglected station on whose itinerary there are two orthographic mistakes. I am standing and waiting for a train which no one knows for certain whether it will come or not, or rather, one knows for certain it will not come. So stupid of me!” he reproached himself. “A stupid venture. This passion for science some day, or night to be more exact, will send me to my grave.”

At a recent meeting of the collective his colleagues had criticized him severely for having locked himself up in his own shell, for having severed himself from the masses, for his technocratic trends at work. They had reproached him with staying aloof from life, with becoming a slave to records and books, with having injured the work of his sector by his bureaucratic attitude. The great sensation had exploded like a bomb: the Fellow of

the Institute of Folklore had at no time gone down to the grassroots, not even on official business.

And now here he was doing the first bit of service in his lifetime. He was starting out with the great venture of solitude at an out-of-the-way station where the cold wet, winter wind pierced to the very bones, where one cannot rely on the timetable. (How can one rely on a timetable with two orthographic mistakes on it?).

He was thinking that if no train passed then he would have to stay here all night with the temperature continually falling and then... "Anything may happen" he said in self pity. "But anyway, whatever happens, I am on duty."

There was a faint whistle away in the distance and then a powerful light appeared at the far end of the road.

"At last," he cried out loud to the darkness, casting an occasional apologetic look at the brass timetable as if begging its pardon.

In ten minutes the train came to a halt. He climbed aboard and paced the carriage corridor on both sides of which there were rows of occupied seats. This was a train of a novel type. The carriages were not in separate units. They resembled up-to-date beautifully furnished sitting rooms. Loudspeakers played music and the fully occupied train had a gay atmosphere.

He took off his brimmed hat and took a seat near a group of passengers, one of whom was speaking. The folklorist turned his head

in surprise. What was happening here? This was the same story of a queer wedding he had heard two hours before.

“Excuse me,” he interrupted the speaker. “Where have you heard this story?”

“At the buffet of the station where you change trains. A friend of mine told it to me”

“Was your friend travelling or..”

“Well, he was changing trains too. But, excuse me, why is this of interest to you?”

“It interests me from the scientific point of view. I have devoted some time to the study of how fast news spreads among the people. It is an interesting sector.”

“Go ahead, Remo,” said two or three voices. “You left off at the most interesting point.”

“Where did I stop?”

“Where the drivers came to the wedding party in their manure-hauling lorries.”

The man called Rem or Muharrem continued his story of that queer wedding.

The folklorist took his hat and satchel and sneaked away looking for another seat.

“Should a village teacher know how many people in the village sleep in beds and how many sleep on the floor or not?”

“That question is not included...”

“Included or not, I don’t care. You tell me my good friend whether the village teacher should know or should not?”

This discussion was between two men sitting vis-à-vis by the window.

A little distance away there was an empty seat and the folklorist sat down. Next to him

sat two boys, two girls and an elderly peasant. One of the girls whispered to her companion. The others kept silent.

“Comrade passengers!” a voice was heard from the loudspeaker. “If any of you know of any event or a short story about the struggle against religious beliefs or for the emancipation of women please come up to recount them so that all the passengers of our train may hear them. In the same way, if there are among you any writers or young poets, we invite them to come to recite some poem or short story for our passengers. The broadcasting centre is in wagon No. 7. In the meantime we are giving some music.”

“That’s a good idea,” said one of the young men. “These are topics of the day. Do you know the story about two writers who invited a young mountaineer woman, a delegate to the Trade Union Congress, to a cup of coffee at ‘Kafe Tirana’ in the capital and were quarreling with each other over who should write up what she was relating to them. The poor young woman was surprised, first because she did not know that there were living authors in the world and, what was worse, that writers could afford to quarrel at ‘Kafe Tirana’ in the capital.”

“Go and tell this over the microphone,” said a passenger sitting behind them. He stuck his tousled head on his very long neck over the seat and then withdrew it again.

“People want to hear more positive things based on principle,” said the young man.

The other man was silent.

“While we were dancing he asked me if we had a telephone at home,” one of the young women was telling her companion.

The two young men were speaking now of Lekë Dukagjini’s Canon.

The conductress passed punching the tickets of the passengers who had got on at the last two stations.

“Suppose I have a telephone,” I said. “Is it of much interest to you?”

“Very much,” he said

“Why?” I asked him.

“I thought you might give me your number. Or, at least the first three figures, if you are of the kind who don’t give things easily.”

“One thing I fail to understand, why Lekë Dukagjini, such a prominent fighter and strategist, should link his name with such a black stain as the Canon.”

“It is strange.”

“I don’t think he was the type to hate women.”

“On the contrary.”

“Then he telephoned three days in succession. The first two days father picked up the receiver: ‘Hello! Who do you want to speak to? The municipality? No! Wrong number.’ On the third day I picked up the receiver at last.”

“It is not a question whether Lekë Dukagjini hated the women or not. The Canon was dictated by the economic and social structure of the times.”

“Yes, of course.”

“He insulted me for being half an hour late and I decided not to go for a walk with

him anymore. 'You will be sorry,' I murmured to myself."

"The Canon has many dark sides to it, but anyway, the part which speaks of women is the most cynical of all."

"The part dealing with blood feuds is just as bad."

"Its deadliest poison is hurled at the women."

"Then he telephoned each day for a week asking me to pardon him."

"'What is this telephone, tser-tser all day long like cicadas in August?' asked grandma. I had to turn my head the other way to suppress a giggle."

"Tser-tser!!" murmured the folklorist to himself. "An interesting onomatopoeia." Then he pulled out his notebook and wrote it down.

"A comrade of ours at the Tractor Spare Parts Plant has written a one-act play on Lekë Dukagjini and his Canon. I have never read the like of it. It is half fantastic half grotesque. Throughout the play Lekë Dukagjini, who is preparing to codify the Canon, falls out and quarrels with the women of his quarters. This squabble ends in cudgels. The women beat Lekë Dukagjini black and blue.

"Take it, you son of a b..., you scoundrel, impostor! Take it for the sufferings you will cause us, our daughters and sisters who will be bought and sold off for centuries hereafter! Take it you wretch, villain and rogue!"

"It must have been really quite a play."

"Excuse me," he said when we came face

to face at the bus station. "Please excuse me. I am sorry for being so rash."

"That's enough! Spare your tears."

"You know what happened in Kavaja?" the man behind stretched out his tousled head on his long neck again. "The people in one family there had been worshipping a holy inscription embroidered on a piece of canvas for a whole century. When a student who had studied Arab literature in Iraq translated it, it turned out that it was not a holy scripture at all but a poster which read: 'Smoking is prohibited in the custom house.'"

They all burst into laughter, the peasant included.

"Who knows in what customhouse office of the Turkish Empire it had been posted a century ago!"

The untidy head disappeared again.

"Now that the youth are razing the shrines and the so-called sacred tombs to the ground they often find ridiculous relics there."

"In two or three cases they have found bones of animals in them."

"You don't say!"

"Some fantastic things have happened in churches and monasteries. Did you read something about the St. Vlashi church in yesterday's '*Zëri i Popullit*'?"

"Yes!"

"There are a lot of other things that haven't been written about yet."

"Religion has wrought havoc, don't you think, uncle?"

The old peasant lifted his eyebrows.

“What can I say, son. The Party always tells the truth and we believe the Party. But there have been cases in which the monasteries have done some good.”

“Which monastery, for instance?”

“Well, somewhere here about there should be one of them.”

The old man looked through the window in the dark winter night for a while.

“Somewhere here about,” he repeated. “We may have passed it. A very old monastery. Until a year ago people from all parts of the country used to come here to find relief.”

“To find deceit, poor folk.”

“By God, no!” said the peasant. “Sometimes they performed miracles. Take the case of my daughter-in-law. She gave birth to no children for four years in succession. Believe me. She went one night and slept in the monastery. Nine months later she gave birth to a healthy baby son.”

“Is that so?!”

The boys exchanged glances. One of them was about to say something but the words stuck in his lips.

There was a heavy silence for a while. Only the two girls continued to whisper to each other like two conspirators. Two or three times they pronounced the words: “blue stocking.”

“Believe me!” the peasant broke the silence. “I swear by these two eyes that this is true!”

He looked at each one to see whether they believed him or not. But their faces reflected

only hostility with a touch of pity for the victim.

Someone from the broadcasting centre was relating something about dervishes.

“The Party is right,” said the peasant, “but there are certain things we peasants cannot do. For instance, they tell us to eat out of separate dishes, that is, each one by himself.”

“Right they are too,” interrupted one of the younger men.

“Why do you say that, son?” the peasant flared up. “Dogs eat in separate troughs not men!”

“Do you take us, city folk, for dogs because we eat in separate dishes?”

The peasant was nonplussed.

“And why should we part from one another alive?” he said in a more congenial tone. “To-day we are alive, tomorrow we will be dead. One day we shall die, we shall part from one another.”

“That is not the way to look at it, uncle!”

Just then the conductress passed by. Two youngsters coming from the corridor looked at her feet.

“Hunks!” said one of them.

“What a way of speaking!” the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore murmured to himself. “He pulled out his notebook and jotted down the word ‘Hunks!’, a word heard in a night train.”

The conductress passed by again.

“Excuse me, comrade! Does this train stop at the station without a name?”

“Yes, it stops for one minute.”

The conductress looked at her watch.

“In five minutes we will be there.”

The folklorist stood up and placed his brimmed hat on his head. He gave a slight nod by way of salutation to those around and walked to the door.

The train was rolling on at full speed. The dark contours of the night rushed by like turbid waters behind the window panes. He stood there for a while thinking of the many surprises that lay in store for human beings, thinking how he, a veteran Fellow of the Institute of Folklore, was going this damp winter night as an uninvited guest to a nondescript wedding taking place somewhere in the centre of a plain, at a place where there are only some rails and some temporary barracks.

His thoughts turned to the quiet offices of his Institute where long rows of files held thousands and tens of thousands of records and kilograms of magnetophone tapes in which were carefully noted down all the customs of the people ranging from the cradle to the grave. How often he had stood aghast in front of those gigantic shelves of files trying to get an idea of all the grandeur of the people! In those numbered files, scholars had amassed and classified all the rites, customs, usages and superstitions connected with weddings, funerals and so on for years. They stood there side by side like a catalogue of human life. Those card indexed records and rolls of magnetophone tapes contained everything: the beating of drums till dawn next day, the escorts on horseback, the bridal

veil, the crack of rifle shots in a blood feud, the wailing of women on the staircase, the up-turned coffee cups with their black, foreboding, mystic lining on the saucer, the bugaboos, prophecies, spells, ceremonies of conciliation, knocks on the door by guests at night, shrieks of victims stabbed on the back, the solitude of go-betweens gone astray, going back on one's word, the shot fired after that, the murdered man at the crossroads, again the beating of drums, the go-between who reached his destination on time, a shot fired to give the good tidings, the silent piles of stone over strangers killed on the way — in short, the whole cycle of human life which spins unceasing through the centuries like an endless whirlpool.

Now he was going to a queer wedding and, after some days, when he returns from his mission, the truth of this wedding, carefully formulated into two or three short sentences, would be transcribed into a card which would be placed in one of the files on weddings next to the thousands of its older companions. Thus, something of this wedding would be inserted into the big history of the people just as a drop of water adds itself to the spacious ocean.

The train came to a stop and the folklorist alighted on the platform. He stood there for a moment as though lost. The siren sounded again and the train moved away, taking with it its lighted windows and its music. When the train had rolled away he became more aware of the wetness of the night. No other passenger had alighted from the train. Looking around

he discerned some twinkling lights in the distance. Then came the rumble of a drum.

In rain and through mud, stumbling over the rails, he directed his steps towards the wedding party.

CONCRETE LAYING NIGHT AND SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S NIGHT

At the table where S.K. was sitting the workers were drinking toasts.

“To the Nitrate Plant!”

“To the Brewery!”

“To the big Broadcasting Station and to Dhori's health!”

“We forgot the Asbestos Board Factory. We sweated there.”

“I'll say we sweated!” said one of them. “Sweat of the sixth grade.”

“Write something about the working class,” said a red-faced mechanic to the writer S.K. “The working class leaves no one in the lurch! We are very fond of books but you write too little about us.”

S.K. smiled and nodded in affirmation.

“You are right!” he said.

“Excuse us, won't you? We are plain workers; whatever we have to say we say it outright, bluntly. We don't speak behind your back.”

“They are a fine bunch of boys, upon my word!” said the man from Labëria in an intimate way. “They are frank and give themselves no airs. When I first came here some six months ago I thought it was very dull. This deserted plain with its mudholes seemed so dreary. I felt homesick and was almost weeping for the rocks of Labëria. But do you know that I got used to this place! Now I can't part company from these boys. My word of honour! I will go with them wherever they go.

There is one thing they can't do though: they can't sing the way we sing back home. I have tried to teach them our songs but to no avail. They sing some songs which don't excite me. O, for those songs of ours! Poor Selfo, when he sang them!"

"To the friendship of workers and writers!" They touched glasses.

"Is it true that a revisionist poet, called Yevtushenko, has insulted Albania in one of his poems?" asked the red-faced mechanic whose name, it seemed, was Dhori.

"Yes, it is."

"What is he, a Greek?" asked the man from Labëria.

"No, from the Soviet Union."

"Devil take him!" said the man from Labëria.

The chap, whose name was Dhori, held out a package of cigarettes to the writer.

"I want to tell you what I think about the books which are published," he said. "You will excuse me, I know nothing about literature but I read a lot, especially now that I have plenty spare time."

"Aren't you a mechanic?"

"I used to be," he answered. "But I had an accident. That's that. What I was referring to was books. It seems to me that in the books that are published there is always something old, something that doesn't fit in with actual life. You understand what I mean. It looks as if books are based on some older books and not on real life. Am I making it clear?"

"Very clear, indeed! I understand exactly

what you mean.”

“As I said,” butted in a short men with a peculiar staccato manner of speech. “We are of the working class. We don’t beat about the bush. We say it bluntly.”

“Keep quiet, man! You are becoming a bore!” said someone.

“What I wanted to say,” Dhori continued, “is it not possible to write novels in which we could find something that’s close to us, how should I put it, there, for instance, something like the conversation we are carrying on right at this table.”

“It is not only possible but it should be done,” said S.K.

“So that the book may be like a new structure smelling of timber and mortar and not of mould and decay.”

The writer smiled.

“You said it very well.”

“And then, we have seen writers who are unduly sentimental when they come into contact with us workers,” Dhori continued. “Please don’t take it amiss but, to be frank, we don’t like this at all.”

“As I said,” butted in the short mechanic again.

“This shows a tendency to stand aloof from life,” said S.K. “I understand full well why you do not like this sort of treatment. Pity and compassion belong to Sunday mass not to revolutionary literature.”

“Now you have said it well, Dad!” said the one with the machine gun speech.

“Then, there is that matter of paintings,”

said a tall mechanic. "There are some painters who always paint workers with brawny muscles and square set jaws presumably to portray physical strength. But it is becoming boresome. I may be mistaken but that is my impression..."

"I have noticed this too," said S.K., "particularly at the recent Exhibition."

"For, after all, we workers have our sinews in our hearts."

"Hear! Hear!" said machine gun.

"I would like to have a longer talk with you," said Dhori. "Why not come to us at the hydro-electric power station some day?"

"I will most certainly do so," replied the writer.

At the adjacent table they started singing. But just then someone beat the drum to call for order. A girl appeared on the little stage of the Red Corner.

"Comrades, the amateur group of players will put on a sketch for you on 'Breaking Off Underage Betrothals.' Please keep order!"

All burst into laughter when the amateur players in breeches and greasy faces appeared on the stage.

"They are painted with engine oil!" shouted one of the spectators.

"Quiet! Quiet please, comrades!"

There followed some sort of order but it was impossible to hear all that the actors said.

The sketch was over in less than ten minutes. The orchestra struck up a gay tune and many workers started dancing. The writer S.K. turned his chair around to watch. Sud-

denly he saw the bride dash past, again obviously highly perturbed. She, the groom, and two or three mechanics disappeared into one of the rooms of the administration. Once again there was that ripple of alarm spreading ever wider through the gathering like in a pool when a stone has been dropped into it.

“What’s going on?” was on many lips. Others shrugged their shoulders.

Springing to his feet the writer hurried through the crowd to the kitchen door. A garrulous drunk with his head dripping from the tap came out of the kitchen insisting that he wanted to discuss the main problem...

“Throw him out!” exclaimed one of the crowd.

“Where is he from? Is he one of the dyers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Call a meeting of the collective at once!” insisted the drunk.

“A big character poster should be written up against those who drink to excess!” said another. “It is a disgrace for a worker to get drunk.”

“You won’t see any one from the Nitrate Fertilizer Plant get like that.”

“Nor from the Caustic Soda Plant.”

“That is hard to believe.”

“You wait and see.”

“What’s going on?” asked S.K. a couple of times but no one knew. There was more dancing. Making his way back through the couples, S.K. caught sight of Pranvera again and smiled. She and her companion were standing by a group at a table where conversa-

tion was at its height.

He nodded to her from a distance and framed the words "How are you getting on?" but since she could not possibly hear him she took it for an invitation to a dance and walked towards him. He smiled to himself as she put her hand on his shoulder and they started to dance.

"Excuse my asking," she said after a little while. "But you seem to have something up your sleeve, you always seem to be looking for something."

He noticed that she had beautiful eyes, somewhat slanting eyes that became more beautiful when she cast a sideways glance.

"Do I look tipsy?" he asked. "I have had a lot to drink."

"No, I don't mean that," the young woman hurried to excuse herself. "I swear I don't!"

"All right! All right!" he said.

They danced for a while without exchanging a word.

"You did not tell me why you are so wrought up."

"I am not wrought up," he answered. "But it seems to me that the wedding party itself is under a certain strain. Don't you feel that a current of excitement runs through from one door to another?"

"What a picturesque form of speech you use!"

"And I don't like compliments," he said.

"I beg your pardon."

"I have often been to weddings," continued the writer. "A feeling of uneasiness,

alarm, fear reigns over almost every Albanian wedding. It hovers in the air, vague, yet its presence is everywhere.”

She stared at him with her big eyes.

“Does this sound like mysticism to you? No, it is not. It has a realistic background. Life itself gives rise to this tense feeling.”

“Please, make it clearer to me!” said the young woman. “It sounds so interesting.”

“Probably I can’t explain it as I should,” said the writer. “Weddings are as old as the world itself. Weddings have been taking place in our country all along for thousands of years. Each contributing its tiny bit, these tens and hundreds of thousands of weddings have made up the general features of our weddings.”

He did not want to go into such intricate explanations, but the girl had transfixed him with her luminous gaze. When he stopped speaking she said:

“We, girls, are very eager to hear about weddings.”

The writer laughed and she laughed too.

“What else is there for me to say,” he said. “Probably I can’t explain these things well. I am not an expert.”

“You were talking about the tense features of weddings,” she said.

The writer smiled as if to say to himself: “There is no way out of it, I must explain.”

“In my opinion, the features of an Albanian wedding are tense and fraught with fears because there is always some threat, some opposition, something negative hovering over

it," he knitted his eyebrows striving to find the exact word.

The young woman fixed his eyes on him.

"If we were to coin a new word, the most appropriate one to explain this thing would be 'anti-wedding.'"

"How wonderful!"

"That was set up as an offset to weddings by the contradiction of life. Betrothals from motives of interest, the pledged word and going back on it, insults, old feuds, threats to the clan, all these things went to creating those black contours which hovered like winter clouds over our weddings. And it often happened that in the midst of gaiety rifles were seized and havoc was wrought. The Albanian wedding could not be conceived otherwise. Gaiety and alarms were bound together like Siamese twins. It was only the revolution that pulled them apart."

"That is what I wanted to know," said the young woman, "All this belonged to the past, didn't it?"

"Of course! The revolution shook up everything, weddings included. But the old world keeps writhing still. It palpitates here and there but in old customs it is stronger than anywhere else."

"What queer customs we have!" said the young woman.

"The Albanian wedding has not yet been fully freed from the shadow of the old world," S.K. continued. Since he had started it he may as well explain this matter which seemed to him complicated. "That is why over our

present weddings there may still hover survivals of old fears, threats and alarms. They emerge from the depths of centuries just like an echo of one's voice coming up from the depth of a well."

"You frighten me!" said the young woman smiling.

"You need not be frightened," he replied. "They are weak and faded by time but, at a given moment, they may crop up again and become dangerous if we are not on our guard. Are you bored? I am giving you a whole lecture."

"I would not be bored if I had to listen all my living days," said the young woman. Realizing that he might misconstrue her words, she blushed.

"Something is going on," said S.K.

People were gathering in one of the compartments. Many had cut short their dancing and were moving in that direction.

"What's going on? What is happening?"

It was clear that something was actually taking place. Near one of the entrance halls where the crowd was thickest, some had stepped out, others stretched their necks to have a better view. Xhavid came out from somewhere and disappeared again. The writer and the young woman forced their way through at last. It had stopped raining. A group of mechanics were straining their eyes to peer through the dark.

"There! there!" they pointed with their hands.

"There!" said the young woman also and

stretched her hand.

Faintly he saw a tall silhouette moving away.

“Has he gone?” the one coming out kept asking.

“He has gone!”

“They say he cursed Katrina.”

“That’s not true. He never uttered a word.”

“In the dining room they said he was offended by the sketch. He may have thought it was directed at him.”

“Comrade Feizo was angry, I heard him give the man in charge of the players a telling off.”

“Sure enough! He must have felt offended at the sketch.”

“No one knows,” said another. “I heard he came over accompanied by another man, Katrina’s old fiancé or the go-between. But they lost contact with each other and now the old man has gone to look for him.”

“Really?”

“Yes! He waited and waited for him here and now he has gone to look for him himself.”

“Take my word for it! He was offended by the sketch. I saw with my own eyes how he frowned and stuck his hand to his belt.”

“Do you think he was armed?”

“I don’t know.”

“They will stir up some trouble.”

“Nothing of the kind!” roared Soda Caustica. “This is the working class here, do you know that? Do you know what that means?”

“Why, of course I do.”

“If you did you would have no misgivings.

The working class means revolution. Who dares raise a hand against the revolution?"

Indoors they beat the drum and five or six men had joined in a folk dance.

"Shall we go down to the factory?" S.K. asked the girl. "They are laying the plinths there."

"Let's go!" she said.

"The party is like an engine at cruising speed. At midnight, when the workers laying concrete come, it will flare up again."

"Why don't they put off the work of laying concrete till tomorrow and come to the party now?" asked the young woman

"Laying concrete is a continuous uninterrupted job."

They walked across the plain. It was a dark damp night. In the distance one could see the lights on the big crane and further away a still brighter glow.

"Hold on to my arm," said the writer. "There is no pathway here." The young woman took his arm rather timidly and they walked a distance without exchanging a word. It was the first time she had held to the arm of a stranger. Over where the lights were brightest the place seemed to be engulfed in a milky haze.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Eighteen."

They continued their walk in silence. Two or three times they had to detour around muddy places. He lit a cigarette.

They passed another row of barracks and came out on the open plain again. A dazzling

light which seemed to run parallel with the ground prevented them from seeing ahead. As they approached they heard the din of an engine, voices, a creaking noise. The works came in sight. It looked like a stunted giant. Here it had raised an arm, there an elbow and further away a couple of shoulders. Powerful lights revealed the heaps of bricks, steel, mortar, a motto in large characters reading: "THINK, WORK AND LIVE LIKE REVOLUTIONARIES!" There was a row of black squares into which the concrete was poured.

"This is a new annex."

They stood there, both of them, watching the process of the work. Now her arm hung lightly on his like a broken twig ready to drop off at any moment. Nevertheless, she did not draw it away.

"The Concrete Laying Night," he said

She shook her head enigmatically.

"People are used to hearing of Christmas Night, of St. Bartholomew's Night, of..."

"Walpurgis Night," she added.

"Yes. Men have thought up all kinds of nights connected with all kinds of horrors, pints, images and witches, whereas they have been sparing of work and too sparing at that."

The conveyor and ventilator were producing a monotonous noise.

"You hit the point when you said the Concrete Laying Night."

"But this does not yet tickle our imagination, it sounds too prosaic, don't you think?"

"Yes, that is so. The mere mention of St. Bartholomew's Night makes one's very soul

shiver.”

“Other times created their nights. It is up to our times to create our own Night, the Concrete Laying Night, the Superphosphate Extraction Night, the first Cast Iron Night.”

“You writers should be the first to help in this,” she said.

S.K. flung his cigarette stub away.

“Of course!” he said. “Of course!”

The workers continued pouring concrete. An engineer paced up and down the rows of black holes.

“Of course!” repeated the writer. “That should be our first concern. The epic of work is the finest epic in life.”

He lit another cigarette and started to walk.

“Hold on to my arm!” he said to her again. Someone whistled a tune.

“At the party there are some tens of mechanics,” said the writer pointing in the darkness. “Over there in that barracks you have nearly all the industrial map of Albania. In their dance, in their laughter and in their conversation I see the dancing and laughter of factories and power plants, of boilers and tall chimneys, of antennae they have installed or are installing all over Albania.”

“This is a wonderful thing!” remarked the young woman.

“But we often fill in time describing some minor plot or write up the legend of Rozafat Castle.”

The young woman laughed.

“Can the digging of the foundations of a

new factors be less interesting than the digging of the old foundations of a castle? What do you say?"

"Anyway, to me the foundations of an old castle seem more interesting," she said. "Or probably it looks to me this way because I have read a lot about them."

"Precisely because you have read a lot more about castles than about factories. Albania is filled with worksites and most of our literature with castles."

The young woman laughed out loud.

"Self-criticism is a good thing," she said

He laughed too, flinging his cigarette stub away into the night. "I think this will be done. No reason why it should not. It is the need of the times. And the call of time rings so loud that it is likely to split the very drum of one's ears."

The young woman muffled her ears with both hands and laughed again.

"What is there to laugh about?"

"Oh, nothing. I just recalled my military exercises."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry!" she begged his pardon.

She was embarrassed at having laughed for no explainable reason. He pretended not to mind. People in good humour sometimes laugh to no purpose.

"The main thing is that a writer must have a keen sense of the class spirit," he continued. "His love for the working class should run through his lines like the Shenmri waters of Tirana. Have you been at their source?"

“No!”

“To write about workers is neither the fashion nor the trend of the moment.”

They were now midway between the work-site and the barracks. Voices from the party could barely be heard.

“Are you getting bored?” he asked.

“No!”

The locomotive siren was heard in the distance.

“The train!”

“The last one tonight.”

“Which direction is the station?” asked the young woman.

“Somewhere over here.”

Now and then the moon peeped through the streaks of cloud.

“There is the monastery,” the young woman pointed to the tall cypress trees. He turned his head in that direction.

“I had a talk with that companion of yours,” he said.

“I saw you talking with her.”

The moon cast a dim beam on the pools of water. Towards the station, it was foggy.

“Look out! There is water ahead!”

She hung firmly to his arm as she jumped over the pool.

The locomotive gave another shrill blast. They heard the rumble of the train at first faintly and then louder.

“It is wonderful to think that in a few years a new town will have risen here,” said the young women.

He said nothing. His thoughts were fixed

on something.

"I will probably be working here," she added.

He smiled.

"Have you seen how they describe the foundings of new towns in the films?" he asked.

"Yes. Some members of the Party Committee come in a 'Gas 69' car, then a Minister or Deputy-Minister comes from Tirana, followed by a correspondent of the broadcasting station or from the Albanian Telegraphic Agency, and the town is founded."

"You are a keen observer," he said.

"Hasn't the same thing happened here?"

"Most certainly!"

"That is, the town is considered as founded?"

"Of course. In fact this party is its inauguration. Now it is a real town."

The young woman laughed

"Probably, here where we are treading will be its centre," she said. "With its theatres, department stores, show windows dazzling with neon lights."

"Probably. Careful?" he said after a while, "We are breaking traffic regulations. Can't you hear the policeman blowing his whistle?"

They both burst into laughter as they bypassed a pool of water. On they walked, making believe all kinds of noises and voices.

"The future town is already here with all its hustle and bustle."

"I hear it."

"There goes the second shift of the B. fac-

tory!" he said.

"A peasant is asking the whereabouts of the taxi rank. Here goes a cab. Stop it! Hallo, driver!"

They laughed again happily at their own nonsense.

"Please show me the way to the Post Office!" she said in plain English in the midst of that gaiety.

"What is this?" he asked.

"They must be friends from abroad. Don't you hear them asking about the Post Office?"

"Who are they? Are they tourists?"

"I think they are Marxist-Leninists."

"Where have they come from?"

"From Australia," the young woman said. "Or maybe from New Zealand."

They laughed again and moved further away.

"I am looking for you," he said suddenly. "I am here on a mission. For the last four hours I have been looking for you all over the town. Where have you been hiding?"

"Really?" she asked in quite a different tone and he felt she had turned her eyes on his, though he could not see her eyes but could only feel the slight pressure of her hand on his shoulder. This gentle contact bespoke a lot of heartfelt words, sounds and a bright future lying ahead.

Now they walked in silence.

From the distance came the rumble of a passing train.

"Look out!" he said. "The way to the station is full of people. We are going against the

crowd.”

He was about to say something more, but she pulled him by the hand.

“Look!” she said.

A tall silhouette was moving towards them in the dark.

“There really are people on the road,” he said.

They stopped and waited.

“Who can he be?” she asked. “The old man?”

“Who knows!”

“How sombre he looks!”

The man was approaching at a queer pace. They heard his feet plashing in the pools of mud and water.

“I think he has a brimmed hat on,” said the young woman.

The man approaching had not noticed them.

“I wonder where this odd looking character is heading?” whispered the writer.

The stranger stumbled past without noticing them, splashing through pools and mud.

Somewhat astonished, they followed his movements for a while.

“He is heading for the barracks where the wedding party is,” said the young woman.

“Probably he is attracted by the drum.”

“Who can he be?”

He shrugged his shoulders again.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he spoke in Sanskrit,” he said jokingly.

“Can he be the go-between?” the young woman asked. “At the party the people said

that he was wandering somewhere around this place.”

He laughed.

“What kind of a go-between can he be? Didn’t you see his brimmed hat and a satchel in his hand?”

“A queer person!”

The stranger disappeared going towards the barracks.

“Shall we go back?” said the young woman. “My companions will be wondering where I am.”

They turned towards the barracks, plodding their way back in almost complete silence. She held on to his arm as before and as they walked she was thinking that this town would probably have other customs, that the girls here would probably walk in company with their boyfriends, arm in arm, without being afraid of gossip. The nearer they came to the barracks the looser became her grip on his arm. When they reached the entrance she pulled her hand slowly away without knowing herself why she did it and heaved a deep sigh as if she felt tired.

Indoors, the orchestra was in full swing.

GOOD NIGHT, UNCLE SHURKO!

Splashed all over with watery mud, the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore stood in front of one of the entrances to the brightly illuminated barracks. Three or four workers were standing around to get some fresh air, smoking and cracking jokes. He was about to ask them a question but changed his mind and stepped in.

The long barracks were filled with people, light, noise, songs and voices. In one of the wings people were dancing and others sitting at the tables were singing and drinking. Others, especially the young men and girls, were standing and chatting. Some moved to and fro between the rows of seats bringing bottles of beer or taking away the empties, giving orders to some or whispering something to others as they passed.

He stood for a while looking around to get a glimpse of the bride and the bridegroom. He tried to distinguish among the guests who were the bride's and who were the bridegroom's people but he failed to tell them apart.

"Please, comrade," a slender girl with a worried look on her face accosted him. "Can you play Johnson's role? I am looking for the man who was supposed to play that part but I can't find him anywhere. Now it is our turn on the stage. Comrade Feizo will bawl us out if we delay."

"What?!"

"Johnson's role," said the girl. There are almost no words to it. Just a couple of gestures

and that's all."

"What?!!" repeated the folklorist with a frown on his face.

"I can't find the mechanic, you understand? You are tall and more or less... Excuse me, I didn't mean to..."

Seeing the expression on his face, the girl moved away without finishing her sentence.

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore forced his way through the crowd and took a seat at a table in a corner the occupants of which were apparently dancing. He opened his satchel, pulled out a large notebook and began writing in it at once.

"I am at a wedding party of extraordinary interest from the scientific point of view. Being unable to inform the Institute and ask them to send over the other colleagues at once, I am recording in detail everything I see and hear. It is 11:11 pm."

The writer S.K. and the young woman in cream-coloured slacks made their appearance at the door.

"What did you talk about?" asked the girl's companions when she had joined them.

"O, many things."

"Interesting things?"

The young woman nodded. She felt that her companions were canting inquisitive glances at her and she herself was at a loss which way to look.

"What has been going on here?" it was her turn to ask.

"Merrymaking, as usual!"

"We saw a phantom-like man coming. Has

he joined the party?"

"Yes, he came in some five minutes ago. There he is! He is seated there and keeps writing down things."

"Really?"

"He seems to be an eccentric."

"We thought as much from his way of walking."

"Well, tell us something."

"What, for instance?"

"What did you talk about?"

She turned her head towards the tables and saw the writer take a seat again among the mechanics. She smiled to herself as if recalling something.

"We talked about the new town that would spring here with its streets filled with people, with its department stores and taxi-cabs."

She smiled to herself again.

"There is a gleam in your eyes!" one of her companions remarked.

"Really?" she was at a loss what she should say and bowed her head.

"Did you smoke one of those filtered cigarettes?"

"No!"

"What else did you talk about?"

"There is a gleam in your eyes," remarked another.

A tall mechanic came along and took her for a dance. As they were dancing she caught sight of the writer S.K. again and cast a smile at him as he downed a beer.

The writer fixed his gaze on the nearby table where the manager, Xhavid, the Chinese

and a number of others were sitting. Katrina was dancing with Soda Caustica, smiling and chatting. She was obviously trying to put on as cheerful a face as possible.

“We should have done better with the old man. We should have worked on him with more patience,” said the manager. “We made a mistake in letting him go. We made a great mistake.”

“He may be coming back.”

“I don’t think so. This, of course, is not an antagonistic contradiction, yet we should be careful for, as you know, non-antagonistic contradictions may easily turn to antagonistic ones. In short, we should have done more to clarify the old man.”

“It was all because of that damned sketch on the stage.”

“I have said before that literature often does more harm than good,” continued the manager. “For instance, look at that writer prying about here! Do you see him? I’m afraid he will raise some trouble.”

“The old man should have stayed on,” said a short, fat mechanic. “If he had any complaint about the sketch, he should have written it in a big character poster.”

“Rubbish!” said the manager. The writer laughed under his breath.

“From blood feuds to flash-posters!” he said to those sitting next to him. “What a beautiful title for a book on our sociological problems!”

Rudi came with a bottle of beer in his hand.

“Comrades! I propose a toast to our manager, Comrade Feizo, our worthy cadre who is always on the go!”

“That’s enough, Rudi!” said the manager frowning.

“To be frank, comrade manager...”

“Don’t talk in ambiguous terms like the oracle at Delphi!”

“Do I look like a capitalist phenomenon?” protested Rudi. “In re-educating me, Comrade Feizo...”

“Rudi!” said the manager with a stem look on his face.

Rudi was offended.

“You have insulted me,” he said. “You did not respond to my toast.”

“Oh, come here, you devil!” said the manager. “Good luck!”

They clinked glasses.

“He is a good chap!” remarked the manager when Rudi had left. “But he is a bit of a clown.”

“At times he calls himself RR, Rudi the Reformed,” said Xhavid.

“He comes from a good family,” the man from Labëria explained to the writer S.K. “They were connected with the war. But bad company seems to have spoiled the child.”

“Work will improve him, don’t worry!” said someone.

“As for that, he is a damned hard worker!”

Further away people were laughing at Rudi’s jokes.

“Do you know what is the acme of mooching?”

“No! What is it?”

“Tell us, Rudi!”

“When you eat off another fellow’s plate at a free banquet!”

They all burst out laughing.

“Do you hear?” said the manager. “He is back at his old tricks again. It is impossible to make him quit clowning. It is a long process.”

Soda Caustica accompanied Katrina back to her seat and made a reverential bow to Xhavid.

“Hear! Hear! Since when have you become so polite, Soda? Take a seat.”

Soda Caustica sat down.

“I don’t like that type over there!” he said pointing to the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore who was writing in his notebook. “I don’t like people who keep taking down notes. If he has some complaint to make why doesn’t he do it openly? If this party is not being conducted according to Hoyle, then let him say so. Let him criticize the collective in the open. Don’t you think so, comrade Feizo?”

The manager hesitated.

“It is a bit odd, his taking down so many notes, but you should not jump to conclusions. That is science and science can’t be tampered with.”

“Why, will this man write his thesis for his degree about this wedding party, Comrade Feizo?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions!” advised the manager.

Soda Caustica saw that it was futile to continue this discussion so he turned to the Chi-

nese guests.

“Comrade Tsin, you have taken no drink at all. That’s very bad, very bad!”

The Chinese guests smiled and put their hands over their glasses as Soda Caustica was about to pour in some liquor.

“We soda water, soda water! Very good, ho!”

“Soda water too soft a drink.”

“Soda water very good. Liquor bad!”

“Comrade Tsin, you disappointed me!”

“Now we sleep,” said one of the Chinese, making a gesture of leaning his head on the palm of his hand and closing his eyes.

“So early?!”

“O, late, very late!”

After a short while the Chinese guests stood up, said “good night” to those sitting at their table and left.

“What time is it?” asked the man from Labëria.

“A quarter to twelve!”

“I have to be going very soon too,” said the man from Labëria.

“Why?”

“At twelve the concrete layers change shifts and I will take my turn. I think I told you that I was night watchman.”

“O yes, yes! I forgot,” said the writer.

“This is my job, son. I stay every night in that little cabin at the entrance to the worksite. I have a little brazier. The boys never forget to supply me with a fire. But I have been used to the cold, to the snow and rain, since I was a little boy when I used to herd goats on the

mountainside. Have you ever been to our part of the country? The winter is chill there. It is a rugged place where chickens feed on pebbles, as the popular saying goes, but we are very attached to it. At times I watch the burning coals in my brazier and my thoughts fly there. I recall the house on the rocky hillock, the well we drew water from and the tinkling bells of goats. I recall Selfo sitting there with me in the evening, chatting for hours at a stretch. For, as you may know, son, I am all by myself in this world. I lost my parents during the war after I joined the partisan ranks. After the war I never married. My friends urged me to get married but I declined. ‘Shurko was good at fighting but not good at picking a wife,’ they used to say of me. Now I am with these boys. I go everywhere they go. I never get bored with them. I lean on the muzzle of my rifle and murmur to myself: ‘This is your old age, Shurko, your pipe and your chin leaning on the rifle.’ But at heart I feel happy. What can be better than to get old and still bear a rifle? Don’t you think I am right?”

“Quite right!” said the writer.

“We started life with a rifle and we will wind it up with a rifle,” said the man from Labëria. “I recall the time we took to the mountains with Selfo and joined the partisans. It was mid-winter and we could hardly force our way through the snow. We were all alone and it was afternoon before we suddenly caught sight of a man standing at the turn of the road. ‘Who are you?’ we asked with our rifles ready. But the man did not move. We

called again but he still did not move. We approached and what to see! He was an Italian who had been shot dead. The snow had prevented him from falling and he stood there like a candlestick. He looked as if he had just been aroused from deep sleep and was about to start walking, half asleep as he was. Shades had started to hang over his eyes. We walked ahead and from that moment we realized that this would now be our life: rifle in hand, an enemy making a sudden appearance at the turn of the road. Keep the finger on the trigger for the enemy might shoot first. That's how Selfo was killed. I think I told you that he used to compose verses."

The writer nodded in confirmation.

The man from Labëria pulled out his tobacco pouch. "Help yourself!" he said.

The writer took the tobacco and started to roll a cigarette.

"I'm sorry to have to leave you now," said the man from Labëria. "A wonderful wedding party! I'm never bored with these boys. Even if one of those high ranking blokes came and said to me: 'Come along, Shurko. We will appoint you to some job with a fat salary because you've fought in the war,' I would tell him that he wouldn't be able to find a better job than this and better boys than these for me. I have bound my life now to these factories and I don't hanker after important jobs and fat salaries."

"What is your pay?" asked S.K.

"Four hundred and fifty new leks," he replied. "That's plenty for me."

The writer cast a sympathetic glance at him.

“I never get bored with these boys,” he repeated. “They tease me now and then, ‘Uncle Surko,’ they say, ‘Where is that long cap of yours with an aerial on top? Do put it on!’ Have you seen those caps of ours with a stem sticking out on top? That’s what the boys call an aerial.”

The writer laughed.

“‘This is the way of us from Labëria,’ I tell the boys, ‘a rifle in hand and an aerial on our heads for with a couple of goats on rocks, a man from Labëria has always craved to find out what is happening far and wide in the world.’ Don’t you agree, son?”

“You have said it very well indeed, Uncle Shurko,” remarked the writer.

The man from Labëria felt tickled.

“Have you been to our part of the country?” he asked again.

“Yes, I have,” replied the writer.

He recalled the night he had spent at a village in Labëria, some time ago. On the village highway, some old women in coarse black dresses were talking, beating their knees with their hands and grieving over Lumumba’s death. “Woe poor Lumumba! What a misfortune befell him!” The news of Lumumba’s murder had just become known. He had watched the old women for a long while and had been deeply moved. There was something tragic in the way they were beating their knees with their hands with the name of Lumumba which was so remote from them that they

found it difficult for the lips and tongue.

"I must go now," said the night watchman.
"It is getting late. Good night, my boy!"

"Good night, Uncle Shurko!"

"Good night, boys!"

He passed through the crowd, a small figure slightly bent by age. Everyone seemed to call: "Good night, Uncle Shurko!" The writer followed his movements until he stepped outdoors.

A stout young woman, her face glowing like the Red Corner, appeared on the improvised stage and made the announcement:

"Comrades, we invite you to see our sketch 'The Bureaucrat and the Big Character Poster.'"

The sketch was put on all right but none of them saw it through to the end for there was an influx of backshift workers from the site into the hall. This gave rise to a great turmoil of moving chairs and cleaning tables, of beer bottles and glasses, of greetings to newcomers, of cracking jokes and invitations to sit here and sit there and so on.

The curtain fell on the show before the end and the orchestra started playing again. The din of the drums sounded like thunder in May. The notes on the oboe rose shrill and brittle above the rumble of drums.

"What a wonderful wedding party!" exclaimed a man who was just entering the hall.

XHAVID — II

If they had told me five months ago that my wedding would be taking place right here in this barren place covered with muddy pools of water, I would have laughed at them. Five months ago we had just completed installing the Tractor-Spare Parts Plant in Tirana and had come straight to this barren plain. Either because we came from Tirana or because it was October and bad weather, it seemed especially desolate and dreary. But it was not only because we came from Tirana or the time of year. We had been to all parts of Albania, from north to south, and we had worked on installations at all seasons and in all kinds of weather the year round. The real reason lay in the gloomy landscape that reminded one of solitude. It was probably the monastery with its green-painted dome and its open portal with frightful paintings on the archway and the two or three tombs covered with ghastly sheets. Or probably it was the desolate cart trail rarely beaten by the peasants and some gypsy tents in the distance. Perhaps it looked to us this way because we knew about the backward villages round about where savage customs still prevailed. And if they had told me then that I would not only marry here but would take a woman from this part for a wife, I would have thought them crazy.

But there you are! I came here with my companions, got engaged and there you have the beating of a drum announcing my wedding.

When we came, they told us that a new town would be built here. This isn't our first experience of working at the foundation of towns-to-be, being their first inhabitants. We have left when our work has been completed, taking the portable barracks with us.

Probably none of the present inhabitants of these towns know who were their early fellow residents. Now buildings spring up every day, streets are asphalted, stores and picture theatres are set up. Towns grow in size and become more beautiful, but we always remember their first appearance, when they were still baby-towns just as we cherish the pictures of our childhood days.

And if you happen to be in such a new town where you have been one of its early inhabitants and walk through its busy streets with people who do not know you, you try to sidetrack the stately buildings lining the streets and rebuild in your thoughts the long barracks that are there no longer. In your imagination you remove the asphalt from the streets and the slabs from the sidewalks and replace them with the mud-covered alley with its pools of stagnant water and the tracks of boots, remove the cultural centre and raise in its place the old clubhouse with its crooked wooden benches, its red cloth on the bulletin board and a tune which some one is trying to play on an accordion. Thus, you walk through the town and smile up your sleeve for no one knows that you are changing the whole appearance of the town to suit your fancy, that you are lifting buildings and deviating streets,

that you are opening up a pool in front of the entrance of the Concert Hall and putting up barracks right in the public square. And you do all these things not out of eccentricity but because you like to recall the days and months when you worked for this town, reminding yourself of your companions now scattered all over the country, recalling an October afternoon with a clear sky overhead, a loving glance, tunes from an accordion in the sleeping quarters.

Perhaps years from now Katrina and I may alight from an "Albturist" bus at this same place one July day and together with other excursionists (I always picture them eating ice-cream behind some show-window) we will stroll on the sidewalks under the scorching sun. Then we will discuss where this barracks used to be and passersby hearing us will wonder if we are having daydreams and some will certainly think we are sunstroke victims for how can they imagine that we are picturing to ourselves some light and distant walls in front of the stately building of the public square — the light walls of the barracks where we had our wedding party? But we will picture our old barracks blended in with the building of the Party Committee or Executive Committee, or with the department store or with the picture theatre, just as in a film when one picture may be superimposed on another. Having put up our barracks (it will be an unstable one like something reflected in the surface of a pool just moving with the breeze) we will recall all the hours of this night. We will certainly

confuse them just as my comrades round the table now are confusing dates, events, accidents, minor and major occurrences. And that is understandable because we have worked on tens of projects. Who knows how many hundreds or thousands of details we have assembled, how many kilometres of tubes we have installed, how many boilers, chimneys, endless numbers of valves and faucets, flanges of metal we have fitted together. We have walked numberless highways and pathways, we have eaten in numerous dining rooms, we have slept in many barracks, we have taken part in many meetings and have posted a countless number of wall newspapers.

The song puts it beautifully: "O, Mechanics, Roving Bird of Five-Year Plans!" except that the word "bird" does not seem quite fitting for some one like Soda Caustica. His arms have very little resemblance to the wings of birds. But never mind, that doesn't cut any ice. The song is a remarkable one and it's a pity that we only know its two first lines. This is quite a new song and no one knows who brought it over to us.

The orchestra is too loud to let us hear the words clearly. The workers who just came in from their job of laying concrete are all up and dancing already.

Now I am thinking of my comrades who volunteered to fix up that small barracks where Katrina and I will be housed for the time being. By the time they have finished there will be so many installations that the place will be in danger of looking like a submarine. Among

other things they will put in a hot shower. A shower bath for Katrina. She is very fond of them. They will install a stove, bedsteads and everything necessary and the little temporary barracks set up for us by my companions will seem to us like the best of villas.

And then, as always, we will be bidding goodbye to this worksite too. Where will we go? That's of little importance. Roving as usual. There are certain people who are scared to hear the word "circulation of cadres." We mechanics feel like laughing at these fears just as we laugh at those who are afraid of the devil.

I, myself, hail from the city of Tirana and I am very fond of my native city, especially at the beginning of October when the sidewalks are filled with co-eds in black blouses, when one walks along the streets breathing the fresh air with a feeling of serenity and joy in one's heart. They are still serving ice-cream at the refreshment rooms of the NTSHUS and one wants to go into every one of them to order ice-cream, for after a few more days they will not be serving it any longer. Then you betake yourself to the Boulevard of the Martyrs of the Nation, cross over to the "Rinia" Gardens, come out on "Marcel Cachin" Street and all at once you notice that they are closing up the summer gardens. The waiters remove the chairs and tables and stow them away in a corner. You watch all these motions, the faded leaves dropping all around on the pathways, on the railings and benches and on the water of the fish pond in which the marble pelicans

seem to feel the coming chill. Thunder roars in the distance. You take out a cigarette, strike a match, but the wind blows it out. You strike another and in the meantime the garden is stripped bare and the dance floor looks larger but of no significance. Tirana is beautiful in October.

Yes, Tirana is a beautiful city and I wouldn't give it up for any other place in the world. Nevertheless, I don't regret spending most of the years of my youth away from it. I work so that I may take industry, progress and Tirana itself to the most remote and humble regions of Albania.

There they go again confusing dates. Lulzim Rama became a party candidate not when we were installing the second turbine at the hydro-electric power plant but when we were installing the ventilator. And the hurricane which blew down the barracks that night occurred when we were mounting the boiler at the machine shop, not when we tested the pressure gauge. And it was not on that night that the thunderbolt killed the best cow of the cooperative before our eyes. That was another night. The milkmaids crowded round the dead cow weeping over it while it rained cats and dogs and we had a hard time to persuade them to get into the cowshed. Immediately following this, some of us went to work installing tubes for naphtha conduits and pumping stations between Cërrik and Stalin City, precisely on the spot where Muhamed Shehu and Myrteza Kepi were burned to death last year.

There is nothing more fantastic than when

companions get together. It is not often that we mechanics can get together as we have done today. All day yesterday and today I was worrying. What if they failed to come? What if only a few of them came? But at mid-day the first batch arrived. Others came by the next train. Then came the first truck load. The barracks seemed to make room for everybody under the sun. And now as I watch them sitting at the tables, dancing, singing, cracking jokes, I feel such a warmth in my heart as I have never felt before. I don't see any sense in people striving hard to accumulate money in order to buy a house and shut themselves up in it like a snail in its shell. There are others who worry themselves day and night to make a career, to shove out their chiefs or deputy-chiefs and assume their posts. I do not understand these types. Why don't they strive to make good friends, genuine friends, good, unpretentious companions? Good companions are the iron framework of one's house: they never leave you in the lurch, they never let you down. There are my companions. There is no industrial project in which I don't have companions. And what can Rockefeller boast of more than I? On the contrary, he has much less. If Rockefeller had this wedding party today in his palatial halls, he could pour out bagfuls of dollars, he could gather all the artists in Hollywood around him, he could have all the drinks and eatables and music, but one thing he could not have, he could never gather as much sincere affection as is gathered here, in this barracks, tonight. He could not purchase all this love for all his

gold.

But a mechanic now, no matter how things turn out, is never alone. Mechanics and solitude are not bedfellows because if it does actually happen that a mechanic is left alone, that his companions have all died one after the other, everywhere he goes he will meet, right and left along all the streets of Albania, chimneys of factories he has helped build waving to him like old acquaintances, reminding him of the cup of fernet he sipped at the bar, of the angry words he exchanged with the manager or a chance acquaintance with a girl. Then he will not feel his solitude, for what he has left behind, all those workshops and chimneys are not empty words or futile writings, or intrigues, but they are the armature of socialism, bread and butter for the people.

There they go again mixing up dates and events. Katrina and I will surely be mixing up the events of this night at some later date. Now she is sitting listening to their conversation, to their jokes and their songs. She seems calm now. Her father's arrival upset her, while his departure grieved her. Nevertheless, she never betrayed her feelings. I feel she is continually casting a furtive glance at the entrance hall. I do the same now and then. It looks to her that the man with the goitre may appear at the door at any moment. He has become an obsession in her mind. I feel like laughing but she still fears him. Two hours ago when that queer looking man with a brimmed hat and a satchel came in, the one who sat at the corner table and began to take down notes, I asked

Katrina in a jocular way: "Is this the man?" and she smiled with that innocent smile that I saw on that first day I was welding something for the second time. I welded and whistled, I forget what tune, when a crowd of girls from the railway who had been visiting the work-site passed the concrete columns. They were with a man of our administration who was explaining things to them. The girls admired everything their eyes fell on. What attracted their attention most was the welding rod in my hand. The girls had come from our mountain regions judging by the clothes they wore and their tresses though some had had them cut probably at the railroad construction headquarters. The girls walked cautiously between the columns, looking all round in wonder. One of them lagged behind to watch me. I lifted my dark mask to my forehead and caught sight of her pretty eyes which were as clear as a day in September. Then I pulled down my mask again and got ready to weld while the girl watched me. Her eyes showed astonishment and grief at the same time.

"Katrina!" her companions shouted from a distance. She went turning her head now and then. I waved to her and she waved back.

"Kate!" called Rudi appearing from behind a column and changing the accent: "Kate! What a wonderful name!"

When the girl heard her name mispronounced, she turned her head again.

"A real Venus!" said Rudi in admiration.

"Shut up, you fool!"

"Kate, o Kate!" he shouted again. "Are

you engaged?”

At this she lowered her head and hurried after her companions.

“Are you crazy, man?”

“Why, don’t you know? They are all engaged to be married. They are breaking off their engagements every day. What a joke!” said Rudi. “Anyway, what about you?” asked Rudi with a broad smile on his face. “On one hand, you weld and, on the other, you strike up acquaintances with strange girls. Or is it because the youth should strike up acquaintances while at work, as Comrade Feizo recommends?”

This is how I came to see Katrina. I would have forgotten her, just as a man forgets many things in life, had there not been a meeting of the collective. At that meeting we mechanics were called upon to do two weeks of volunteer work at the railroad site. I was among the first to volunteer. We were to install shower baths and other fixtures in the new sector. It goes without saying that as soon as we arrived my thoughts turned to that pretty mountain girl and I looked around for her. Her brigade was working at another sector some twelve kilometres away. One day I went there on foot. It was bad weather but the workers of that sector didn’t seem to mind it. Boys and girls were moving about amidst the buzz of the loudspeakers. I didn’t see Katrina anywhere. I went into the clubhouse. The group of amateur players were performing on the stage. The long club building was filled to the brim. I searched around for a while and finally

caught sight of her. She was sitting in a corner concentrating her attention on the stage. I forced my way nearer through the crowd. At last she turned her eyes and recognized me. I smiled and she smiled too. The show continued. There was loud applause in the hall accompanied by laughter. Now I was by her side. She felt this without looking up and sat there motionless. All at once her face looked stern. Outdoors it was raining cats and dogs, drumming on the roof.

“What is your name?” I asked though I already knew it.

“Katrina,” she said.

I told her my name. A burst of hilarious laughter and applause reigned in the hall, drowning the noise of the rain. When the performance came to an end, the boys and girls left in groups, calling one another and sharing the raincoats of their companions.

We found ourselves side by side again at the entrance under the eaves.

“Is your dormitory far?” I asked.

“Yes!”

I whipped off my jacket right away and threw it over her shoulders. She started to protest but I paid no heed and was the first to step out in the pouring rain. She followed. I threw my arm around her shoulder and we hurried along together.

Next day I wired to Soda Caustica: “Motorcycle urgently needed vital matter stop!”

Now I began to pay more frequent visits to their sector. I would meet Katrina either at the club, on the volleyball court or at a social

gathering. She was lively, cheerful and very keen. In general mountain girls are very keen. In addition, Katrina had a very fine enunciation in her speech. In her liveliness and behaviour, however, there was a touch of nervousness, the cause for which I learned only later. Nevertheless, her conduct towards me was very warm. She did not feel embarrassed to meet me before her companions. "A companion of mine." I noticed that she was very fond of calling me her companion. We became closer when she told me the story of her life. I was deeply moved. This was the last night of my stay at the railroad site. She came to see me off and we walked a long way together. I told her that I would come to see her again and she said that she would be waiting for me. When I started to stroke her hair with my hand pulling her head against my shoulder, she was frightened. She explained to me afterwards she had thought I might strangle her. Women and girls from the mountain regions knew little of caresses.

We could delay no longer. I put on my goggles and hopped on the motorcycle. At the last moment, I stroked her hair with one hand pulling her head close to mine. She opened her eyes wide like a child dumbfounded. She had no idea of what I would do. In the mountain regions girls are not hugged. When a man wants to express his love for a woman he touches her elbow and says "I am fond of you." Katrina looked at me with astonishment and sorrow at the same time.

"Well," she said. "Spark up!"

At first I could hardly guess what she meant. But when I got wise to it, I laughed out loud. When she saw me put on the goggles and start the motor she thought I would amuse her by sparking off a dealing flame like the welding rod.

I hugged her loving head, stroked her hair, kissed her on the forehead and, without saying another word, tore off down the road at eighty kilometres an hour.

THE WEDDING PARTY CONTINUES

The writer S.K. caught sight of the newspaperman and beckoned to him.

“Well?” said the newspaperman.

“Where have you been?” S.K. asked him.

“Strolling about. This turmoil is turning my head around.”

“What kind of a newspaperman are you not to be able to put up with noise!”

The newspaperman laughed.

“There was a real racket a little while ago.”

“When the backshift came in,” added S.K.

“It’s a bit better now.”

“I have noticed that weddings are subjected to some marvellous fluxes and refluxes,” said the writer. “I recall that the teacher of astronomy at my school used to speak of certain stars which swell up sometimes and become more radiant and then seem smaller and less radiant at other times. Weddings are exactly like these stars.”

The orchestra was playing but not as boisterously as before. Some workers who had started singing at one of the tables were even trying to smother it but to no avail. The singing predominated at intervals but the drum beat it off again as if with a stick and the singing spread over wave after wave like a fog which descends from the mountains and hangs over the plain.

“This song is as soothing as a dream,” said S.K. almost dozing for a moment as if really sleeping wrapped in a blanket of these sounds.

“I am going over to that worker to have a little chat with him,” said the newspaperman. “He is a volunteer correspondent of our paper.”

“What do you want to write about?” asked S.K. “That ‘the workers of N workyard, mobilized on the occasion of the elections of people’s assistant judges, have mustered all their efforts...’?”

The newspaperman laughed and walked away without replying.

The writer saw Mira dance with a tall worker. She waved to him and he nodded back. Then he caught sight of that queer fellow who had been taking down notes for a long time at the table in the corner. He had now put aside his satchel, his brimmed hat and his overcoat and had started drinking at the same table as Soda Caustica and others.

“The people’s intelligentsia are drinking with the masses,” said Soda Caustica when the writer passed by.

The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore stared at them and raised his glass.

“They had a hard time persuading him to sit down and have a drink,” said a carpenter standing by and casting an inquisitive eye on the folklorist.

S.K. tiptoed his way between the tables.

“Have you happened to be in Kavaja during the month of Ramadan when the faithful practice fasting?” the freckle-faced warehouseman was asking his companions at the table. “You have no idea what odd things happen there. I had to go down there recent-

ly to get a supply of nails. You can't imagine what was going on. A staff had been set up to conduct a campaign against fasting. Agitators, couriers and activists went from house to house, knocking at doors, writing down reports, telephoning their headquarters: 'Hello! Success! Old Makbule finally ate something and drank two glasses of water. I saw her do it with my own eyes!,' 'Hello! Success! Sul Bulunga devoured a whole roasted turkey with rice!,' 'Hello! Ram Tufja can't be prevailed upon. He sits in front of dishes like a man out of his wits and murmurs something. What am I to do?,' 'Keep trying, change the menu! By 5:00 pm he must have broken, his fast!' 'At your orders, comrade chief!'"

S.K. moved along

"Comrade writer, take a seat!" invited Dhori at another table. The others moved their stools to make a place for him.

"Am I intruding?"

"Not at all! On the contrary, we are very pleased to see you," said Dhori, his broad reddish features, flushed partly by the wine and partly by heat, glowing like a lampshade, like one of those shades over a desk lamp which softens the lamplight and never leaves one in the dark.

"I was telling them about a friend of mine, a geologist now at Rrush i Bardhë," said one of the workers. "Did you know that they are prospecting for phosphorites there? It is quite a distance from here."

"Nevertheless, friends are never forgotten," said Dhori.

“Comrade writer, your health!”

“To your health!”

“Friends are never forgotten!” repeated Dhori. His warm bass voice seemed to come from afar: “It is wonderful at night when it is your turn at the switchboard. You sit alone in the silent hall with a whole range of keys and signals. Nothing astir except the distant swish of turbines rotating down below. You sit and meditate. It is midnight. In the darkness below, the turbine comes into contact with water and produces electricity. You look at all that switchgear through which the light is transmitted to all parts of Albania and your thoughts fly to all those to whom this light is transmitted. You recall your comrades. Some of them are near, others are further away. Some of them may think of you, some may have probably forgotten you. In spite of that you send light to all of them. You send light to magnificent concert halls as well as to hearth of culture in some humble hamlet. The vibration from the turbines is monotonous. You stand guard the whole night in this silent hall so that light may be burning; so that darkness may never loom over human beings. You think of all these things at the switchboard and your heart throbs with joy.”

“Well said, Dhori!” remarked one of the workers.

Another worker, somewhat exhilarated by liquor, stood there and stared at Dhori sympathetically.

“Just think of it, comrades! A man before the switchboard thinking of his comrades just

when the modern revisionists are doing the contrary! This is a subject for a drama. Don't you think so, comrade writer?"

S.K. smiled.

"Let's join in a round dance!" proposed one of them.

"We are all for it!" they said.

They formed a circle, throwing their arms around one another's shoulders. During the dance, the writer caught sight of Pranvera standing together with a group of her companions. This time she was in a meditative mood, a slight haze over her eyes as if some mysterious being had befogged them. He caught her glance for a second but she withdrew her eyes and he saw only their corners like two restless swallow tails hurrying to nest before an approaching storm.

The writer felt someone standing near him. It was Dhori. They exchanged a smile, S.K. offering a cigarette which Dhori accepted and lit.

"Xhavid is a close friend of mine," said Dhori, giving a shake to the box of matches in his hand, "an old companion."

S.K. lit his cigarette.

"We had another companion but he died two years ago."

S.K. lifted his eyes inquiringly.

"He died of an electric shock," continued Dhori. "He was the youngest and the best of us."

"An accident?"

"There was a serious breakdown somewhere. The current had to be stopped at once

or the whole town would have been turned to ashes. He was first to climb the high tension pole when all at once 'Bang!'

Dhori heaved a deep sigh.

"I don't know why I should think of this just at this wedding party?"

"It is usual at wedding parties," said the writer. It was the second time tonight he heard such sad news.

"He was carbonized instantaneously. It was unbelievable. His ashes began to drift down from the cable. Can you imagine? There was no corpse, wounds or burns. Only his ashes fluttering down to the ground."

"How sad!"

"We could hardly believe that he was dead. A living man was on the cable, speaking, moving his arms, whistling when, all at once, 'Bang!' and he was turned to ashes, just as quick as that."

Dhori heaved another deep sigh.

"We couldn't believe it," he said again. "It looked as if he suddenly flew away from the wires like a bird and blended with the horizon. Have you ever lost a close friend?"

"Yes," said the writer, "in an air catastrophe."

"Then you understand how I feel."

"I do, indeed!"

"He was very fond of electricity," said Dhori in a pensive mood. He wanted to continue but someone called him to another table.

"Excuse me!" he said. "Someone wants me." The writer nodded.

On the little stage in the Red Corner they

were apparently getting ready to give another performance for the amateur players were moving to and fro.

Soda Caustica passed by, elbowing the people left and right.

“Where has he gone?” he cried out addressing no one in particular. “Apparently, he is joining the troupe; at least that’s what he said. He said he would play Johnson’s role.”

Soda Caustica came face to face with the writer.

“Have you seen which way he went? He’s dead drunk.”

“Who, that stranger?”

“Yes! He is not a bad man, you know?”

The writer turned his head towards the chair where the folklorist had left his belongings.

“He must be somewhere around.”

“I will see if he is backstage.”

“His hat isn’t here,” said the writer. “He may have gone outdoors.

But right then he caught sight again of that drunk who insisted on discussing about the main topic. He was coming out of the kitchen, as usual, with the folklorist’s hat on his head.

“Get the collective together at once!” he shouted at the top of his shrill voice.

The writer burst into laughter.

Three or four workers had turned on the wireless and were listening to the foreign news from Radio Tirana.

A plump girl appeared on the stage and announced the name of the sketch which was about to start. The folklorist was actually tak-

ing part. He butted in at the wrong moment, staggered and mixed up everything.

The hall resounded with laughter.

“Whoever put it into his head to go on the stage?” said Soda Caustica in an angry tone. He considered the folklorist as a friend of his now and did not like to see him make a fool of himself. Soda Caustica caught sight of his friend’s brimmed hat undulating over people’s heads. He hurried in that direction and pulled the hat off the drunk man’s head angrily. The latter looked completely taken aback at this gesture, but he met only a contemptuous glance from Soda Caustica.

“Call the collective together!” he shouted in his shrill voice. “The collective, do you understand!”

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself!” Soda Caustica reproached him. “You’re full of beer! The pressure on your belly has certainly reached the 15 atmosphere mark.”

The drunkard blinked at him.

“Are you engaged in scientific experimentations?”

The performance on the stage staggered to an end. Soda Caustica went to rescue his new friend.

“Some think that to drink fernet and speak the Tirana dialect is the most up-to-date thing to do.”

The writer turned his head to see Rudi speaking to a group of young women. Primavera was among them. Rudi’s lips wore a conspiratorial smile.

“Why did they expel you from school?”

asked S.K.

“I failed in Albanian literature.”

Rudi hesitated.

“Why don’t you say how you failed?” asked one of the young women.

Rudi made a gesture to S.K. as if to say: “Don’t pay any attention to her, she is silly.”

“Let me tell you,” said one of the young women. “When he was taking his exam in Albanian literature, he mixed up the names of authors.”

“I was confused,” said Rudi looking embarrassed. “It was a difficult examination. The question befuddled me.”

“Well, how do you feel here now?” asked the writer in a serious tone.

“Oh, here I feel first rate,” said Rudi. “Truly” he paused and added: “It is far better here and I feel quite at home. Better than in my own home.”

“Where does your family live?”

“In Tirana. My father is an employee at the Ministry of Industry. He is the head of a department there. Comrade Feizo and he used to work together in the same office.”

Rudi lowered his head.

“I used to hang around the ‘Dibra’ Street. From morning till evening we used to stroll from one sidewalk to another. But most of the time we spent standing in front of the flower shop.”

“Facing the Palace of Culture?”

“Yes. At first we used to stand at the entrance of the beer hall in front of the Vjosa Hotel, later we crossed over to the sidewalk

where 'Dibra' Street crosses the Street of the Barricades. The flower shop was our last choice. This offered a better vista."

"Why?" interrupted the writer.

"Because it was to this spot that 'Dibra' Street seemed to suck in most of the people strolling on Skanderbeg Square and the big boulevard. We tried the sidewalk in front of the 'International Bookstore' next to 'Bar Crimea' and the one in front of the "Flora" Coffeehouse, the present terminus of the Lep-raka busses; but none of them were as good as in front of the flower shop. That is where everybody passes as they swarm around the department stores, or go to the '17 Nëntori' picture theatre. It is here that the co-eds of the secondary schools at the centre go by wearing their hair straight like the tips of stage curtains at the theatre and sticking out their lower lips a little to look smarter. In short, the choice of Tirana passed this way."

"What did you talk about all day long?" interrupted the writer.

"Oh, we talked about trifles. Tape recorders; Austrian trench coats, the "Beedles." But mostly we talked about girls. In reality, we hadn't scored much success with girls, though we posed as the most prominent dandies of Tirana, but we delighted in seeming to make a hit, to make others think we broke their hearts. There we used to stand leaning against the wall with one leg slightly bent and smoking our cigarettes in a carefree way. We seemed to be persuading our own selves that we were real smart hits though we knew that

we were not as dangerous as we looked.”

The writer lacked out loud.

“And so!” Rudi continued. “There were also moments when we didn’t exchange a single word with one another. We just stood there, sullen and indifferent, watching the passers-by through our dark glasses. Some of the girls were crazy about our pasture, especially about our dark glasses which we kept on even at night. Mostly these were provincial girls coming to boarding schools carrying wooden valises and whispering to one another ‘Look, look! What smart fellows they are!’ At first I caught the fancy of one of these girls but only for a time. We had a few dates but then she got fed up with me and that was that.”

“And then?” the writer interrupted him again.

“And then? Nothing. Fewer people were on the streets. We ran out of cigarettes and were penniless. We used to wait till the last session in the ‘17 Nëntori’ was over and after wishing one another ‘good night’ wended our way homewards. At times things did not go so smoothly: it rained and you went home whistling a pop tune, and when you entered the house everybody looked at you as if to say ‘Are you here at last, you parasite?’ Mother turned her head towards me rather reluctantly, auntie bit her lips. ‘Enough of your whistle!’ said grandma. But this was not all. The worst of it was when father was not working in his studio and had a free evening. Then followed the usual story, namely, that I was living like a parasite, that, at a time when the workers

of all the Tirana enterprises were mobilized to accomplish the tasks they had promised to carry out and so on and so forth, I was roaming the streets and so on and so forth. On such evenings there was real pandemonium in our house.”

“How so?” interrupted the writer.

Rudi smiled.

“Father used to pick phrases from the worst articles in the newspapers, just as Comrade Feizo does at times. They are old friends. At home, just as at conferences, he used the same style of speech. I just let his words go in one ear and out the other.”

“What about the other comrades? Your schoolmates or...”

“We rarely came in contact with our old schoolmates from the Technicum. But even if we did our meetings were none too friendly. After graduation some of them were assigned to jobs in other districts. When they happened to come to Tirana on business, they spoke of meetings and reports at the Ministry. New things had entered into their make-up. We saw two of them who had majored in electricity mentioned in the papers. They had taken part in mounting the huge antenna at Radio Shijak while another one was sent last year to pursue his studies abroad. A crack profession, a TV specialist! What marvelous good luck! We hadn't even been to the Rinas Airport. The only thing of a certain national importance that we did was our participation as extras in the film “The Early Years.” But even that seemed a hard job for us. To have the pro-

ducer bawl us out and to stand two hours at a stretch in the sun was intolerable. Two days as extras and we were fed up with that job.”

“Did you ever turn your thoughts to those who had done actual work in draining the marshes?” interrupted the writer.

“We did, in our own way. We were astonished to see that wide plain drained. ‘There is nothing a Pelasgian can’t do,’ we used to say. It was clear that this was no job for us. All we wanted was that little sidewalk in front of the flower shop. We did not feel the want of anything more in this world. They used to tell us that this was a closed, shabby life but we liked it. You want a broader life? Well and good. I want a closed one, What damage does it do you? Are we all in favour of socialism? Yes. Then you mind your own business, my friend. Why worry because I stand two hours at a stretch in the rain before the flower shop waiting for Sonya to pass by? Does this hamper socialism in any way? No. Then... This is the way we reasoned things out.”

Rudi placed his hand over his mouth and giggled.

“We used to have a good opinion of you, writers though,” he said.

“And why?”

“We happened to go to a literary forum one day and we heard there, among other things, that our sort were not typical for literature. If a writer took it into his head to write about us, then his work would not be considered typical. Very well, we used to say, writers at least would not be pestering us. There is no gain-

saying the fact that writers are clever people. They do not deal in trifles.”

S.K. laughed aloud.

“To be frank,” Rudi continued, “we were often downhearted. We had no money. Sometimes the girls paid no attention to us. We stood there watching them pass with their noses in the air. The climax came when even Diri let us down. She was a lanky girl we had nicknamed “the general crisis of capitalism.”

The girls round about laughed themselves hoarse.

“Rudi, what nicknames had you given us?” asked one of them.

Rudi whispered something to her ear and the girl laughed and laughed.

“Who put up a big character poster about you?” asked the writer.

“The students of an 11th grade school. There is no doubt that the girls were the initiators. And they were justified in doing so. We had teased them a lot. The first big character poster appeared near the shoe shop. As a matter of fact, even before that we had begun to feel uneasy. We were out of step with the atmosphere of the country, particularly, after February 6. The first big character poster appeared on February 8. I was at home when Sala telephoned. ‘Hello, Rudi, did you see it, at the shoe shop. We are done for — it was as big as a sheet. We are nothing; we are the dregs of society, it said.’ I did not understand anything. It took me a quarter of an hour to guess what it was about. I put on my clothes and hurried out. Before reaching the place I

realized that everything was lost. A big crowd of people had blocked the sidewalk. People read the poster, shook their heads, wended their way and others crowded in. I recall that a cold wind was blowing that reached to one's marrow."

"Rudi, o Rudi! Have you seen Rudi?" someone was asking.

"Somebody is looking for me," said Rudi. "Well, this has been my life. I am well off here. I say it in all earnestness. There are other people here, sturdy people, capable of doing things, without flattery and empty words about them. A friend here will never leave you in the lurch. Look at Soda Caustica. At first sight he gives the impression of being a brute but do you know how gentle he is really?"

"Rudi, you devil, where have you been hiding?" said the chap who was looking for him. He whispered something that immediately aroused Rudi's greatest interest. He came back to the writer.

"They say that two doubtful-looking characters have been seen around here. They may be Katrina's father and the go-between. Comrade Feizo has told this carpenter here and me to go to size up the situation."

He smiled and hurried off after the carpenter.

"Can it really be Katrina's father and the go-between?" murmured the writer to himself and cast a glance around. The merrymaking continued and probably no one of the dancers ever thought of Katrina's father and the go-between. In the midst of laughter, Xhavid was

teaching Katrina a new dance. She took some steps, got mixed up, placed her hand over her mouth and, turning her head aside, giggled. Then they started again from the beginning.

The plump girl appeared on the stage.

“Now we invite you to see different types interpreted by the Nitrate Fertilizer Plant worker Lulzim Rama. We ask you to keep silent. Comrades, here we go! ‘The man who brings bad luck!’”

The actor appeared on the stage carrying the folklorist’s satchel under his arm. While talking with Rudi, the writer had noticed that satchel, coat and hat of the folklorist had been laid on the chair and were often borrowed for the various sketches and parodies. The players helped themselves to them just as they helped themselves to the folklorist’s overcoat when they went out into the rain. That is why this overcoat was always wet, though his hat was wet inside for quite another reason, because the drunk had been wearing it when he cooled off under every tap in the kitchen.

The sight of the folklorist’s belongings on the stage reminded the writer of this queer type and he turned to look for him at Soda Caustica’s table. There he was, sitting among the workers somewhat pale about the face. The writer moved over and sat down on the edge of a stool.

“Don’t drink any more! You have had enough!” Soda Caustica advised him.

“Comrade Acid, excuse me, if that is not your real name,” blabbered the folklorist, “don’t be a killjoy. You are my best friend, are

you not?"

"That's enough, I said!" said Soda Caustica, grabbing his glass. "You will become a laughing stock, do you Understand? A laughing stock. Is this the way the people's intelligentsia drink? You had better take a nap. Do you want me to take you to the sleeping quarters, to my own bed. Don't worry, the sheets are clean. What do you say?"

"No!" said the folklorist bluntly.

"Well!"

"Comrade workers!" the folklorist began in a solemn tone. "I have been making a special study of weddings for the last twenty years as a Fellow of the Institute of Folklore and I have written down the name of this liquor I have before me thousands of times in my records. But it is only now, this happy evening, that I have tasted this wonderful drink during all the days of my life as a Fellow of the Institute of Folklore. What is going on over there on the stage? Am I wanted to play another role? Just tell me and I will do it forthwith."

"That is enough I said!"

"I will tell you, comrades, about Eskimo weddings. Does that interest you? Then I will treat some aspects of the weddings in the uplands of Africa."

"Oh, shut up!"

The folklorist wiped his perspiring forehead.

"In this region they lift the bride up by her hair a number of times."

Soda Caustica was looking rather apprehensively at people's heads.

“That drunk has grabbed the hat again!”
he murmured angrily.

PRANVERA

You told me that soon this town will see its first October, its first advertisement of a concert, that the first errand boy will be bringing the rent and light bill to your apartment, that this town will see its first winter and snow, that from the large crowd a young man will be the first to tell a girl "I will be waiting for you at a quarter past six at the corner by the Post Office." Just who this man will be, nobody will ever know. This is what you told me.

You added something else but, at the time you were speaking, you little suspected that I was already walking the sidewalks of this town. I was getting to be fond of this town. I want to walk on its sidewalks. I want to be caught in the rain and to seek shelter under the eaves of a building, among the crowd of pedestrians hurrying along at the crossroads, to catch sight of you. You will have come from far away, as usual, and I shall cross the street amidst the whistle of the police and all at once you will see me by you. And then you will become so intimate as to say: "I am here on business and have been looking all over town for you for the last four hours."

Will you really be saying these words to me again or have you forgotten them already?

KATRINA — II

Every time a door opens I turn my head hoping to see father. But, apparently, he does not intend to return. I must restrain myself or I might spoil this merrymaking be it ever so slightly. I laugh, dance, crack jokes, nevertheless I can't get father off my mind. It looks as if everyone present here has altogether forgotten that he came and then left again. He came and left like a ghost without uttering a single word. All the time he sat here by my side I was afraid he would be leaving. When the performance began I had a sudden presentiment of what would follow but it was too late.

There now, he is away. It is rumoured that two other people have been seen roaming round about this place. They could be the go-between and my former fiancé. Father is wandering in the rain and maybe they are following him. He tries to avoid them but they won't give up the chase. They hover over my wedding. This is how I pictured spells when I was a little child. Mother had told me mysterious people had cast a spell over her wedding. She had tried hard to explain to me what this spell was and I had a vague picture of something evil which hovered over my mother's wedding trying to get in and poison everything. Father too had told me about this evil spell at his wedding. It harassed his brain that day. It cast a shadow over the merrymaking for it emerged from darkness and fell upon his destiny, his bride and the children that were to be born from this wedlock. He used to tell

me how he had burnt with the desire to come to grips with the spell, but it was invisible and untouchable.

And here tonight after many years, it is father himself who is hovering over my wedding like a gloomy, inconceivable ghost, like a spell from long ago.

IN SEARCH OF A MAN WITH A LUMP ON HIS NECK

“Then we saw him again moving away towards the cypress trees standing by the roadside,” said Rudi.

The manager and the others were all ears.

“We hid behind the embankment and waited. He returned and sped up towards the worksite. Then, apparently, he changed his mind and walked towards the railway station. We followed him hardly able to make him out in the dark. He walked fast and tired us out.”

“Once we lost sight of him altogether,” cut in the carpenter, “but then we heard him trip and fall. He had most probably stumbled on the rails.”

“We heard him swearing as he rose and, murmuring and cursing, he walked towards the station building.”

“He stopped there for a while.”

“We had not seen him stop and all at once came face to face with him. I have never seen a tougher looking man. He fixed his eyes on us and I was about saying to him: ‘Why do you look at me like Macbeth but my mate here checked me.’”

“Rudi, don’t diddle-daddle about literature but get straight to the point.”

“To ward off any suspicion on his part, we pretended we were drunk when he saw us,” said the carpenter. “We started singing, blabbering our words and holding on to each other. He stepped into the waiting room of the station and we followed suit. Apparently his

companion was waiting for him there.”

The manager signalled to the carpenter to stop but it was too late. The dancing was over and Katrina and Xhavid had come up unnoticed close to the small group. The manager pulled out his cigarette package and groped in his pocket for a box of matches.

“Continue!” said Katrina.

The carpenter looked right and left and tried to force a smile.

“We were just cracking jokes.”

She looked at their wet clothes with her big grey eyes.

“Did you see his face?” she asked in a quiet tone. “Was there a lump on the left side of his neck?”

They all stared at one another.

“No!” said the carpenter in a clear-cut tone. “We could not get a full view of his features. He might have had such a lump as you say but we could not get a full view of him. He sat down by his friend on the seat furthest from the light and, in addition, he leaned his head on his companion’s knee so we could not catch a full view of his features. We continued to pose as drunkards and he looked at us disapprovingly, probably guessing that we were wedding guests.”

“Katrina!” said Xhavid. “That dance again. Come and learn it.”

He took Katrina by her hand and they left.

“Carry on!” said the manager.

“Two peasants were dozing on one of the benches and on another sat those two young women of ill-repute who used to stroll around

here. Do you recall the two who were always together, one wearing cream-coloured boots and the fat cross-eyed one? Don't you remember? The two who were familiar with the monks and whom you yourself called here a couple of times and said 'either take a hand in mixing mortar or get out of here!'"

"Yes, I remember something of the kind," said the manager.

"It was those two. They were whispering to each other, as girls do. Though what the devil had brought them here at this hour of the night is beyond my understanding."

"More to the point!" insisted the manager.

"We could have lingered a longer time there," continued the carpenter, "but, by hard luck, the one with cream-coloured boots recognized me and said in a loud tone: 'What is the news, comrade brigade leader?' I pretended not to have heard her but she kept singing the same tune. 'How are you getting along with the planned targets?' I still took no notice but she insisted. 'You are tipsy, comrade brigade leader. Tell us what all this is about? Is Comrade Xhavid getting married?' I am sorry!" said the carpenter.

The others could hardly suppress a laugh.

"Cut it short!" said the manager with a frown on his face.

"We left in order to avoid getting into trouble. As we left we heard one of those two mystery men ask the girls whether they had seen a tall old man with a shawl wrapped round his head."

"Is that so?" asked the writer S.K. who

had joined them.

“What need was there for all that long introduction?” said the manager. “This is the main thing. They are looking for one another.”

“Perhaps they had previously agreed on a rendezvous but may have mixed up trains,” said someone. “This is a new line and it is easy to mix up trains, you know.”

“There is another probability,” said the writer. “They may be looking for the old man and the old one knows it and is evading them.”

The manager cast an inquisitive eye on him.

“That may be so,” he said.

“Anyway, we should be on our guard.”

A young woman worker bowed ceremoniously before the manager, inviting him to a dance.

“Comrade manager! Can you afford to put aside the worries of your work for a little while?”

He smiled, nodded and casting a glance on all those present, joined the crowd of dancers with the young woman.

“Worries!” said someone in a hoarse voice. “It’s not worries but revolutionary concern we should have.”

The small group of people standing together dispersed. The writer reflected that such small groups of people are often brought together at parties either by someone breaking the news of an extraordinary event or by someone telling a funny story. But the groups don’t last long; they soon dissolve in the great cauldron of the wedding party as the little

flour balls dissolve when a big ladle stirs the porridge pot. This reminded him of his childhood days when grandma used to place the porridge pot on the tripod and stir and stir without a stop.

On the stage, a worker of the dyeing industry sang "We Are Three."

The freckle-faced warehouseman passed by with three of his companions.

"Have you been to Bubullima of Lushnja where they are prospecting for oil?" the speckle-faced man was asking his companions. "You have not? You have no idee of what is going on there. The earth is as full of holes as a sieve. Don't be surprised if your foot slips down into one of those holes."

The singer's voice carried over the din:

"With the poet we are three
Old in friendship, young of age!"

Nearby two people were speaking of books:

"Have you read 'Oliver Twist'?"

"I don't know Oliver Twist from Oliver Rock'n'Roll. Don't mix me up with twists and rock'n'rolls; give me a tango and I will do justice to it."

"But this is the title of a book not of a tune to dance to. You have been awarded a badge 'a friend of books' too."

"I told you not to mix me up with 'Charleston' or else I will put up a big character poster the size of a sheet."

"I think you have had a little too much to drink. I am posing a serious question while

you...”

“Get away with your twists, that’s what you should do. Whether I am drunk or not drunk, drunk or sober, that’s none of your business!”

“It is my fault for picking up a conversation with you.”

“I tell you once for all. Don’t get me mixed up with your twists and Hollywoods. Tell that to the others. You can’t humbug me!”

Moving around, the writer met Dhori.

“I am looking for you,” said Dhori.

“Well, what’s up?”

“Nothing. Just looking for you, that’s all.”

He smiled, making a gesture with his arms to signify that he had nothing special to talk about but the writer guessed that he had something up his sleeve.

“The place is quite crowded here. One can hardly move.”

Couples were dancing all around and one could scarcely find room to move indeed.

“Why do we think of people we miss at wedding parties?”

The writer fixed his eyes on Dhori’s broad face.

“What people has that friend of yours left behind?”

Dhori did not move his head at all, as if he was expecting this question. S.K. noticed a few grey hairs on his reddish head.

“His parents and his fiancé.”

Usually grey hair is likened to snow, S.K. thought to himself, but tonight this sounds too commonplace.

“I think I told you that he was very fond of

electricity.”

Those two grey hairs were like two spears stuck there by this loss.

“Xhavid and I are busy designing a small village hydro-power station” smiled Dhori. “You think it is too daring a project? We have been working at it these last months. We have had occasional meetings together. It is a small station of about twenty or twenty five kilowatts. Are you listening?”

“Yes, I am.”

“We will put it up ourselves. We may take another comrade with us: Soda Caustica or Rudi.”

The writer listened attentively.

“And we will name it after him.”

Dhori shrugged his shoulders.

“We cannot write books. This is our way of commemorating a comrade.”

He lit a cigarette.

“You understand what I mean. You told me a friend of yours had lost his life in an airplane crash, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Far away?”

“Yes, he was returning from abroad.”

Every time he travelled by air and heard the roar of the engines he always thought of his friend.

“Dhori!” said the writer catching hold of his elbow as a sign of intimacy. “Tell me more about it.”

“Well, we have decided to set up the hydro-power station, you know where? At Katrina’s home village. It is a village in a remote

region. Katrina has told me a lot of interesting things about it.”

“Blood feuds?”

“Yes. A real slaughter house. Twelve people killed during one day. Mourning. Lamentation. Ambushes laid at every spot. At the spring fountain, at the turn of the road, at the Three Poplars, at the water pipe. We will install electric lights at all these spots.”

The writer lit another cigarette.

“Katrina objected at first. ‘They will kill Xhavid’ she said,” Dhori laughed. “Imagine a touching scene like this: Xhavid hit by a bullet and me walking through the village carrying his body on my shoulder in complete silence. Ridiculous, don’t you think?”

S.K. laughed.

“I have heard the Canon has been published in book form,” said Dhori.

“Yes, it has.”

“I don’t think that typesetters should have turned out so terrible a book as that.”

“It is not a book. It’s a monster in book form,” said S.K. “People imagine monsters with all sorts of fails, claws and horrible heads. This is a monster of a new pattern. Paragraph after paragraph carefully written in concise terms.”

“Could Lekë Dukagjini have really written it?!”

“I don’t think so. He was a great soldier. He had often seen people murdered in front of his own eyes. He could not have hated and thought so little of women. He knew what a soldier’s mother and a soldier’s wife meant. I

don't believe he wrote it."

"I don't believe it either," said Dhori. "The clergy might have had a hand in it, don't you think?"

"Certainly, they had a hand in it. In medieval times religion dictated laws both in the East and in the West. But in this case all the other social and political forces of obscurantism have taken part in it."

"Excuse me for interrupting your conversation. May I ask you for a dance!" someone addressed Dhori.

It was Mira.

The writer greeted her with his head. She and Dhori joined the dancers.

The writer caught sight of Pranvera's hair behind a worker's shoulders. She smiled and when the dance finished she came over.

"Is it true that someone is roving round outside again?" she asked.

"Who told you?"

"I heard two people speaking at the door. Do you think something will happen?"

"Nothing will happen," he said.

"But who is the man roving about?" she asked. Her slanting look became more beautiful when she was curious.

"This wedding party is like an open bonfire," said the writer, "bigotry, ignorance and religion hover round about but do not dare to come too near, just as beasts do not dare to come near a shepherd's bonfire. Have you ever seen shepherd's bonfires?"

"No!"

"Nor wolves either."

The young woman laughed.

“Not yet.”

“Precisely like a bonfire in the open,” S.K. repeated as if to himself.

“This is a wonderful wedding party,” said the young woman.

NIGHTHAWKS — I

“We are out of luck!” exclaimed the fat cross-eyed girl. “Not a single train is passing.”

“I don’t think there is even a freight train at this time of the night.”

“We are up against it now.”

“It’s all your fault, darn you!” scolded the one in cream-coloured boots.

The two peasants were dozing, leaning on their bundles while the other sat stock-still on a bench, his head in darkness.

“There goes the drum again!” said the one in cream-coloured boots, “One of the factory girls is getting married.”

One of the peasants awoke and rubbed his eyes, muttering to himself.

“The old man’s up!” said the plump one, smiling through the darkness at the third man who sat like a piece of marble frowning and casting a sour look at her.

“Have you a watch, dearie?” asked the peasant. “No!” answered the one in cream-coloured boots. Silence fell again on the waiting room, except for the slight snoring of the other peasant while the third man sat up, a frown on his barely discernible face. One could hear the distant beat of a drum.

“Whose wedding can this be?” asked the plump one. “Why didn’t we ask those two tipsy birds?”

“Who knows. It might be the wedding of one of those girls in slacks. You remember when they made their first appearance here?”

“O yes! They started opening up some

huge foundations.”

“First they put up their barracks.”

“Then came their chief, what was his name?”

“I think they called him Feizo.”

“That’s it. He told us either to work or to get out.”

“It was silly of us not to take a job.”

“What happened then? I have forgotten,” asked the plump one.

“Then those wandering gypsies got into a skirmish and we were summoned to court as witnesses.”

“O yes!” said the other. “They got into a skirmish with whips on the eve of a fast day. You seem to have a good memory, darn you.”

“How long is it since we left this place?”

“A year or more.”

“No, it’s not even six months, you numb-skull!”

“Really?”

The peasants were snoring loudly, their heads hanging sideways. “Probably it was a mistake to go away from here!” said the fat one.

“What else could we do?” the one with cream-coloured boots answered. “The gypsies left too.”

“Do you remember how they filed away, the women carrying their babies on their backs? A dreadful sight!”

“We laughed at them little suspecting that we would be leaving too.”

“Probably we made a mistake in going away,” repeated the fat one.

“But what was there for us to do?” asked the one in cream-coloured boots. “Very few people frequented the monastery. And then once they started work at the factory the monks didn’t pay much attention to us.”

“They were afraid to.”

The fat one rested her head on her companions shoulder and meditated.

“Do you remember how this began? Do you remember the first night at the monastery?”

“Hm!”

“I will never forget that horrible night.” Her sad eyes squinted at the wet darkness beyond the doorway. She heaved a sigh and tried to recall that sultry afternoon three years before when, as fifteen year-old orphans they had ridden in a peasant’s cart taking this road through the barren plain for the first time. They were with the old woman. She had told them about the monastery and was accompanying them to it. The peasant was humming a mournful tune and his song together with the barren landscape and the sultry afternoon brought about a feeling of depression in one’s soul. The cypress trees of the monastery of which they had heard such wonderful things made their appearance in the distance. This was the famous monastery in which “if one slept a night one’s wishes would be fulfilled.” And here she was now accompanying her mate who was worried for fear of losing her sweetheart’s devotion to her. The monks would see to it that her sweetheart would always love her and would never betray her. They know how

to go about this thing. Her lover, an athlete, was quietly practising on the athletic field and would little suspect that his sweetheart was taking that long pilgrimage through the barren plain behind the droning cart driver. She would never tell him. At last they arrived and trembling in their hearts, entered the monastery. Inside was great animation. It was a religious festival and many people had gathered to spend the night at the monastery. Among them there were rheumatic old people, barren women, cripples, nervous wrecks, pale looking bigots, idiots, dubious characters and a host of other people. At dusk they began playing the tam-tam and the monks started dancing and howling like demons. The girls looked on bewildered. Never had they seen such a dance before. The monks seemed to be under a spell, jerking their heads, backs and all their limbs to and fro in a rhythm of the tam-tam that paralysed their brains. They stamped on the floor with their bare feet. This weird dance seemed to be without an end. The girls looked on bewitched as if their senses were abandoning their bodies leaving them at the mercy of this incantation. The dance continued for two hours nonstop, the monks becoming paler and paler all the time. Their eyes, however, were glowing red as burning cinders. Their faces lost all colour, leaving them ghastly. Their faces seemed drained of blood. Then they took long daggers and ran them through their cheeks for all to see. They kept up their dance puncturing their skin as they danced howling until midnight. They came to a sud-

den halt: a weird silence fell upon the hall and people began to lie down to sleep. The two girls felt numb as if they had taken a dose of hashish. The old woman appeared only to disappear again. Whatever happened after that seemed like a hazy dream. It was only next day that they fully realized what had taken place. When they left the monastery they realized that their young lives would take another course from now on, just as a river changes its course after a wild and stormy night.

“Do you remember how we walked back and you wept all the way?”

The other shuddered.

“Eh? You frightened me,” she said. “I was just dozing.”

“I was talking about that morning when we returned.”

“Do you mean the monks? Why bother about the wretches!”

“In spite of that we came back a month later, following the old woman’s ways. We misled others, just as she had misled us.”

“We ran across silly girls like ourselves and led them astray.”

“We have really been very wicked.”

“Yes, I feel sorry about it, particularly for one of them.”

“Which one?”

“Do you remember a student of the Technicum, an attractive girl with bobbed hair whom Bali introduced to us?”

“O, yes!”

“Well, that’s the one.”

“I think her name was Mira.”

“Probably. But she got away unscathed. I heard two monks speaking about her one day. ‘She fought like mad’ one of them said.”

“Good for her!”

“I saw her in the bus one day. I pretended not to recognize her. She didn’t recognize me either.”

“How wicked we have been!”

“Just to please those cursed monks.”

“And now they are so unfriendly to us,” said the cross-eyed one.

“Nowadays they are afraid.”

“Ever since this station was put up and they began to build here, the monks have been ill at ease.”

“Didn’t I tell you so the first day the workers started on those barracks?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Heigh-ho! Didn’t I tell you they would cause us trouble?”

“You did but I didn’t believe it.”

“Do you remember when the first barracks were up and that correspondent of the Albanian Telegraphic Agency had lined them all up along that ditch over there to take a picture of them?”

“What a fool that correspondent was!”

“We wanted to be photographed with them but he wouldn’t have us. He just said, ‘move away you comrades.’”

“What a fool!”

“Ever since I heard that remark I began to have a presentiment that things would not be so rosy for us in the days to come.”

“I had that feeling since the day the monks

cursed the town that would be built here. Do you remember the day when they began to mark off the place for the factory? The monks said this was sacred ground and God would demolish anything built on it.”

“I just think of it now. They were up and down on their knees like madmen over and over again and scratching the earth with their finger nails.”

“And pronounced a curse on everything: the roads, buildings, trains and the whole town that would be built here.”

“What a terrible curse! It looked as if they were evoking an atomic bomb!”

“What idiots!”

The young women kept silent for a while.

“Why not go to Laç?” suggested the cross-eyed one.

“No use!” sighed the other. “No matter where we go, our doom is sealed.”

“That’s true. No one can find refuge anywhere without getting down to work. They have fired us from any workyard we have been to so far?”

“Now the last monasteries are being closed up too.” If night overtakes you have no place to find shelter.

“Now here, tomorrow there! I am fed up with this kind of nomad life. It would probably be better if we settled down somewhere.”

“To work, you mean?”

“Why not? We have only ourselves to blame for not having worked so far. We thought it below our dignity to mix mortar or work as bricklayers.

“Is it true that a town will be built here?”

“Most certainly it will.”

“It seems strange: there is nothing here but a plain, mud and some barracks, and all at once you say a town will spring up.”

“Do you think they will give us a chance to work as bricklayers now?”

“Why not? Manager Feizo has urged us to work a number of times.”

“A bricklayer’s job is not a bad one.”

Silence again. The wind temporarily changed direction, bringing the distant noise of the party quite distinctly.

“Who knows what the new town will look like?”

The other made no reply.

“It is quite a big party,” she said after a while. “The music never stops.”

The plump one heaved a sigh and they kept silent for a long while listening to the distant song and the beating of the drum.

“How is it so that no train has passed for so long?”

“I don’t believe there is any other train tonight,” replied the one in cream-coloured boots. “It is already past midnight.”

“How shall we spend the night? What if we went to the wedding? Maybe they will let us in.”

The two peasants snored lightly, inclining on the bench, while the other man smoked his cigarettes paying no attention to them.

“It has started to rain again,” said the fat one.

They listened to the patter of rain until the

plump one's head drooped and she was asleep. The other sat meditating.

Suddenly the other person jumped to his feet and left.

The siren of a locomotive sounded in the distance.

“Wake up!” said the one in cream-coloured boots. “Train is coming.”

A NIGHT PASSENGER

This was the freight train that passed through the unnamed station at two fifteen after midnight without stopping. The usual lantern emitted its feeble light in the little wooden cabin of the guards on duty towards the end of the long chain of dark wagons. The two guards in the black uniform of railway workers puffed at their cigarettes exchanging a word now and then while the third person, who had asked the guards to take him along at the adjacent station, sat wrapped up in his overcoat and gazed at the cold winter darkness.

“The soil is saturated. We need good weather now for the crops.”

“We need three or four weeks of good weather.”

“Even more. Heavy rain has fallen over in our region.”

“Did you see it in the papers? Had it not been for the terraces, half of the soil would have been washed away.”

The other pulled out his paper.

“Try a ‘Partizan’ cigarette. They are made in Shkodra.”

“This cursed cigarette lighter is out of gas again.”

The train ran at high speed through the darkness of the night. The siren wailed like a distant signal of alarm. This was the locomotive’s colloquy with night. At times the engine seemed afraid of night, at others, it felt elated that through its powerful headlights it

could find the familiar rails again stretching in two endless lines.

Some lights twinkled far to the right.

“I believe those two peasants must have arrived at their destination,” said one of the guards.

“Of course. It is three hours since they got off at the new station. From there to here it’s only a two and a half hour walk.”

“They looked very savage, particularly one of them.”

They continued to speak about the two peasants who had alighted from their train some three hours or more at the new station. They had asked to be taken to the adjacent station, the one without a name but as the train did not stop there they were told to get off at the new station and then walk to the station without a name, where they were in a hurry to join a wedding party.

“Two or three times they asked if a tall old man with his head wrapped in a shawl had ridden on our train,” said one of the guards.

“Those two peasants gave me the impression of being dubious guests at a wedding.”

“They didn’t even thank us for the trip.”

“Well, it takes all kinds of people to make the world.”

The cluster of lights shone more brightly as they approached.

“Apparently, the wedding is somewhere in the neighbourhood,” murmured the third person to himself when he heard the distant drum. From what he heard he gathered that this was a queer wedding, the bride without

the consent of her parents and the bridegroom's people having come from all parts of the Republic.

"Oh, these marriages!" the passenger muttered to himself. "Can't these people understand?" He crouched back in the corner giving two or three despairing nods of his head and biting his lips.

"Why do they do this?"

This question may have been murmured by the passenger or perhaps it was only in his thoughts. Apparently the question stood hanging between a murmur and a thought and the train made such a monotonous rumble on the rails as to hush every murmur and turn it into a thought and, on the other hand, it turned every thought into a murmur, through the clack-clack of the wheels.

"Why do you do these things?" repeated the passenger. "No matter what precautions you may take some evil will come of it. You are making merry and singing suspecting no evil, but evil always finds the way to take people by surprise. I used to think the same way as you. Everything would work for good provided she loved me. And when my people warned me to be on guard I did not listen to them. I thought nothing would happen if she was fond of me and I reciprocated. Even a week after our marriage, when my people warned me that I should be on my guard, because the people of her former fiancé were enraged, I still refused to listen. It was just a wedding like this, the same drum. Nothing could intimidate me then. The longer time passed

the more ridiculous the worries of my people seemed. They felt uneasy about me alone with her in a little house on the outskirts of the village. But things turned out differently and I repented my foolhardiness when it was too late. Everything had finished for all time. How strong had been their resentment against her! Whence does so much hatred spring and how can people mete out such a harsh punishment to a woman? She lay dead on the ground stabbed all over her body and the murderers stated at the court that she had rolled over because of pains but at the court they brought enough evidence to prove that they had rolled her over and stabbed her on all sides.

“You are singing because you have no idea of what may happen, just as I had no idea at my time. If I had any hope that I could convince you I would alight right away and betake myself to that wedding and say to you: ‘Why are you doing all these things. What is the use. You had better give this up before it is too late. Stop the music. Let the bride go to her father’s and get married as the custom prescribes, and the groom mind his own business. Why give rise to evil consequences? Can one oppose such a horrible custom? No! It is better to have a wedding less than a calamity more. Stop it, all, and do it quickly!’”

The passenger stressed these words so loudly that the two guards looked at each other.

The train was slowing down and the drum could he heard more clearly. The passenger strained his eyes towards the distant lights.

“Switch off the lights! Go back to where you came from!”

The guards again exchanged glances.

“This drum seems to beat right here in my heart. What are you waiting for? Go away!”

The train passed two green signal lights which stuck out of the ground like elbows. A heap of bricks. Beams. Another red signal light. A long wet platform.

Two young women and two peasants stood on the platform. They stared at the dark metal wagons that slid past and continued their way through darkness.

The train made no stop at the station. Again the green signal lights. Some bitumen barrels then the platform remaining behind with its white timetable which seemed to say to the wagons: “Don’t stop here. Keep going!”

The train picked up speed. At the head of the wet wagons, the locomotive, forcing its way through night, with the rain splashing on its steel sides, blew its whistle again.

LEGEND VINDICATES ITS RIGHTS

The writer S.K. rested his chin on the palm of his left hand and was watching the whole scene. It was a quarter past three. The merrymaking was at its highest. The orchestra played one dance time after another. They sprouted like flowers, shot forth their stems and petals and then, after raising their heads up to the sky, lowered them again, waning slowly to leave their places to other tunes. These were variegated as the flowers in a meadow. Some were tender, burnished and gay, others were more somber.

The writer watched how one dance grew only to give way in its turn to another.

It was in the interval between one dance and another that had grown on its ruins that the writer caught sight of the newspaperman again.

“What are you thinking of?” the newspaperman asked him, placing his hand on his shoulder.

“I am watching the dancing.”

“Do you know?” asked the newspaperman. “They say that the middleman and Katrina’s ex-fiancé have been seen strolling around here again.”

“I heard something about it.”

“What do you intend to do? Will you stay any longer here?”

“I will,” said the writer.

“I know what you are after,” said the newspaperman laughing. “You are waiting for

something to happen.”

“Nothing will happen.”

“You are waiting for a scramble to take place. You writers will go through all kinds of trouble for a little scramble.”

The writer smiled and nodded.

“I am going to bed,” said the newspaperman. “I advise you not to get mixed up in any skirmish. Good night!”

“Good night!”

He rested his chin again on his hand and watched the dancing. It occurred to him that these movements of feet and hands are the most ancient alphabet the people have created and interpreted.

This living circle has gathered into a white skein all the long threads of boredom and their sudden breaks, all the fathomless griefs and gleams of unrestrained gaiety. From what depths of a nation’s soul does all this turmoil spring and to what depths does it return.? You join the dance and your head turns: you whirl in this turmoil and feel as though floating in the agitated sea of the people’s soul; in the giant, unfathomed whirl, and you feel this turmoil sucking you up and turning you round and round while the white foam pours and splashes over the whole party.

“What is the use of the books I have read if I am not able to read these dances properly?” S.K. thought to himself

Some older workers were now dancing one of the war dances. It was the open wound of one of the fallen and the red kerchief one of the dancers was waving over his head looked

as though it had just been taken off the fallen man's forehead.

"I must write something about dances," thought the writer to himself. He stood up and began to walk past the people who were filling the various compartments of the barracks. Someone was interpreting something on the stage but it was too difficult for him to concentrate and listen.

Another dance came to its end. Ruins. Smoke. Dust. Ascent of powder. He walked through the ruins. His head felt heavy from all the liquor. Sunrays penetrating the haze of dust. He stumbled over boulders. Finally he burst out of this mishmash and found himself again in the midst of merrymaking.

Around the tables people were smoking and talking quietly. He caught sight of Dhori, his face glowing, relating something, quite absorbed in the memory of the event. The others were all eyes and ears as if urging him "Go on, brother, we believe you." At another table they were recalling the Bistrica tunnel flooded. The manager was debating with the Deputy-Minister. He shook his finger as if to mean "No! no! Comrade Deputy-Minister." By his side, Katrina watched the whole scene with her big, pensive eyes. Her face reflected a mixture of a smile and perplexity, the way people look at times when they have waken from a dream. At another table Xhavid and a group of his companions were busy working out something.

S.K. heard Soda Caustica's voice.

"That's enough! It's time to go to bed."

“Comrade workers!” exclaimed the Fellow of the Institute of Folklore drawing out his words with some difficulty. “I know one thousand six hundred and forty five formulas for a toast. I have put them all down in my records. I know all the formulas of toasts though I have never raised one myself so far.”

“That’s enough now!” whispered Soda Caustica.

“Not even at my own wedding have I partaken in this folkloristic drink called brandy. Believe me, comrade workers.”

“We believe you! We believe you!” said someone.

“Do you believe me? Then let us continue. On the day of wedding, the members of the Taungtha tribe...”

“Enough! It is time to sleep!” insisted Soda Caustica. “The people’s intellectuals should sleep at regular hours.”

He caught the folklorist by his arm and pulled him towards the door. Here, he was apparently reminded of the folklorist’s coat, satchel and hat. Leaving the folklorist supported by a chair he walked back. He had no trouble finding the coat and satchel but the hat was missing. At last he caught sight of the drunk coming out of the kitchen again with the folklorist’s brimmed hat on his dripping head.

Soda Caustica pulled the hat off the drunkard’s head with a quick movement of his hand.

“Call the collective together!” said the drunk without so much as looking at him.

Meanwhile the Fellow of the Institute of

Folklore had launched off into a description of the marriage customs of the Eskimo people. With scant ceremony, Soda Caustica caught his arm and pulled him to the door. Once outside the folklorist turned again to yell out:

“Hunks!”

“You are resorting to bandit terms!” said someone. Somehow the writer found himself dragged into a dance. Someone had caught his hands and he picked up the step with the rhythm. It was no longer as before when people sitting at the tables could watch how others danced. Now a group of people stood, often within the circle of dancers, and continued their conversation, laughing and smoking as if nothing were happening around them.

“Have you been to Spaç in Mirdita?” The speckle-faced warehouseman was speaking to three companions right under the writer’s nose. “You have no idea what is going on there!”

When dancing ceased the writer strolled around for a while. On the stage someone was reciting a comic monologue. Another pinned a big character poster on the red bulletin board. Those in the neighbourhood stretched their necks and burst into laughter as they read it.

Xhavid’s younger sister passed by red-eyed and upset.

“What’s the matter?” asked Soda Caustica who had just come back.

She wiped off her tears with the back of her hand.

“That drunk insulted me.”

Soda Caustica murmured angrily.

“I think someone will be getting a beating tonight.”

“Have you seen Comrade Feizo?” asked the carpenter who had been at the station, forcing his way through the crowd.

“What is it all about?” asked Dhori who happened to be near him.

“Those two young women have come. They are standing outside sheltering under the eaves.”

“What young women, men? I think you are off your tracks.”

“Those two who were at the station, the one in cream-coloured boots and the fat one.”

“Well, let them in. There is no need to ask Comrade Feizo. This is a wedding party.”

“You think so?”

The orchestra started playing and someone shouted:

“The women are in command.”

S.K. felt someone touching his elbow. He turned his head. It was Pranvera.

They joined the dancers who whirled around a narrow circle.

“Where have you been?” he asked her.

“Over there in the corner with my friends. I saw you a number of times.”

“Are you bored?”

“Not at all!”

Her hair had a pleasant perfume. It seemed to him that in this scent just as in the line of her lips and her slightly raised shoulders there was something of sincerity, of fidelity. Whereas in her eyes there was something slippery as if to say: “I can easily slip away” and this

caused some disquiet which was not unpleasant.

“How old are you?” he asked.

She smiled turning her head sideways.

“Why do you smile?”

“This is the second time you have asked that question.”

“Really?”

About her smile there was also a hint of something slippery, white and glistening like a snow drift.

“I feel a bit tipsy,” said S.K.

They danced for a while in silence.

“There goes Mira!” she said.

Soda Caustica and a short stout young woman were dancing near them. Rudi was telling her something as she danced past.

“That’s strange!” remarked the young woman.

Pranvera wanted to tell the writer something but she noticed that his mind was centred on something else, that he was following something with his eyes behind her shoulders.

“Something is happening,” he said in a low tone.

“What?” she asked in a low voice.

He looked at the scene and felt the waves of apprehension hovering over the merrymaking in an invisible and intangible way. The orchestra continued to play.

“What is going on?” asked Pranvera.

He did not answer.

“Has the bride’s father come back?” she asked.

“I don’t think so. He left like a legend in

night trains.”

“What a wonderful figure of speech!” she said in so low a whisper that he could not hear.

He heard the hoofbeats of the dangerous beast again on the outskirts of the wedding.

“A little while ago one of the old men sitting at the small table said that this new town demands a sacrifice.”

She listened attentively.

“It is the call of the legend,” he said. “From deep down below the legend vindicates its rights.”

Her look seemed to say “go on” but he spoke no other word.

“I did not catch the meaning of what you said about the legend,” she said at last.

He looked at her, paying no heed to what she was saying.

“The legend is hungry,” he said after a little while. “It spreads its wings far and wide over the foundations of worksites and demands its share.”

“Then?”

“It demands that life in this new town should begin with death.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a legend. It respects no projects, plans or technical laws. It respects only obscurity which has given birth to it.”

As he spoke he realized that he was steadily plunging into the past. His head felt heavy. He did not want to lose her grasp but this was impossible. He was sinking. Her hands, one on his shoulder and the other round his neck, tried to hold him on the surface. In his mind’s

eye all at once he saw hundreds upon hundreds of foundations dug and thousands of gloomy masons hewing stones under the scorching rays of the sun and their faces glum. In the meantime the walls often crumbled down and buildings and bridges collapsed, because in order to stand they required sacrifices. And then he saw thousands of young wives taking the road uphill or along river banks where walls to surround castles and bridges to span rivers were being built; and all those young wives were carrying in their hands the dinners for their husbands who were building these walls and these bridges. Which one of them is Rozafat who will be buried alive in the foundations of the Shkodra castle? The foundations of castles and bridges stretch far and wide through the edifices of centuries. Today, in our time, they extend far and wide in the buildings of the worksites. They lie sheathed in scaffolding, blocks of concrete, under cranes, motor pumps and deep down there the legend is breathing its last. It demands nourishment. It is famished. After hundreds of years, its call is almost inaudible, yet everyone of us occasionally hears its echo as we hear the rain while we sleep. Why does one lose one's balance when walking over the narrow board across an open foundation? Because of the call of the legend. "Come down!" it cries. Its voice is faint, even inaudible. Nevertheless, you feel its pull, and at the danger you hurry to regain your balance and not tumble into the pit below.

"People have crowded at the entrance," said Pranvera softly as if awakening him from

sleep.

Their dance took them in the direction of the door where the people had gathered. Some were outside under the eaves.

“A mason said that he had seen one of them beyond those cypress trees.” explained someone.

“Devil take him. But, in any case, we had better inform the police.”

“There is no police station here.”

“There is no need for a policeman,” roared Soda Caustica. “My word of honour, if any ill-intentioned man approaches the barracks, he will not come out unscathed.”

“Comrade Feizo said that we should be on guard.”

“That’s right! Anything may happen.”

“I dare them to come!” threatened Soda Caustica. “I will show the wretches what the fist of a mechanic of the seventh category can do.”

“They have certainly been drenched through and through out in the rain for so long.”

Pranvera listened attentively.

“They hover over the wedding,” she said as if to herself. “Strange!”

“This is the way the myth of evil spirits has been formed,” said the writer.

All at once he noticed that her face had become pale, nearly transparent.

“What is the matter with you?”

“Nothing!”

“Are you frightened?”

He placed his right hand on her shoulders

and slowly touched her hair. Pranvera leant her head on his shoulder.

Inside the merrymaking continued.

KATRINA — III

I had no doubt it was he. Right at the beginning, when they said that someone was loitering around the railway station, I had a feeling that he would come. He was sure to come. I was certain of this, I expected it. It could not happen otherwise. For years in succession he haunted me. He penetrated unexpectedly into my innermost thoughts, into my dreams disturbing my sleep and freezing my heart. He haunted me everywhere, in the dark corner of my room, in my father's wrinkles, at the crossroads where the main highway started that led to distant, unknown places. Beyond the mountains they said there were beautiful plains, valleys, rivers which flow smoothly and over them, on marvellous bridges, passed cars, horses, people. Further away there were picturesque towns, trains that left smoke and whistling sounds in their wake. And still further there was the deep blue sea. All these were in my reader, but I was certain that I would never be able to go beyond that crossroad for behind any embankment there might appear, at any moment, the short barrel of his rifle. The rifle would say to me "go back" and I would obey.

I was certain he would come here. It couldn't be otherwise. For years at a stretch he has followed me but tonight will be the last time. They say that he has come accompanied by my former fiancé or by someone else of his family, because he has always played the part of a dog showing the way to its master. He in

the lead, the fiancé in the rear.

I expected him. Even when, to everybody's surprise, my father came to the wedding, I looked for him, expecting that he would follow father. He himself was not with my father but his shadow was. They say they have lost contact with each other, that they have mixed up stations and are looking for each other; they say that father left to look for him and return together with him and... I am not afraid. Even if I believed that it was so, I would still not be afraid. Fear has left me once and for all. Besides, no one knows better than I why they cannot find each other. I am sure father runs away from him, but no one could guess as much because no one has heard the pow-wow of rifles over in our old house.

Now he is wandering round about. They try to keep this from me lest I feel concerned, but I feel it more clearly than anyone else. I feel when he approaches and when he departs. This is the way the slither of a snake is felt in the field. The corn stalks turn one way or another blown by the wind and the snake slides along among them. And tonight at this wedding party people turn one way or another in order to get an idea from which direction he is coming.

This sound of a snake's scales has been following me for years. Every time I was in high spirits I suddenly heard it and my joy vanished. Whenever I happened to admire the reflection of moonlight on the snow I felt tranquil and elated but all at once the sound of the snake sliding on the snow turned this elation

into dejection and my heart became as small as the pigeonhole on the bay window of our house. When I read a book this sound became more disturbing. It was in the leaves, at the tranquility of mid-day and cold perspiration covered my whole body.

I have heard this rustling noise for the last eight years. But tonight it is more threatening than ever. The snake intends to strike but it is too late. I am no longer afraid of its bite.

For eight years I have been living under the menace of this man. It was like an unsolvable riddle, like a burden that weighed heavy on my breast day in day out, like a nightmare.

It began that day in autumn when, returning from school, I learned that guests had come to our house from far away. I was ten years old. I went upstairs and saw a row of rifles hanging on the wall. Inside, men were engaged in conversation. Mother and one of our cousins were taking them brandy and tittbits.

“Mother, who are these guests?” I asked.

“It’s for you that they have come, my darling daughter,” she said and cast a piteous glance at me.

“And why, mother?”

“It is your betrothal, darling. You should be happy.”

Half stunned, I felt in a hazy way that something gloomy and long was starting for me out of the encirclement from which I would never be able to escape. I said nothing but tears, many tears rolled down my cheeks. The walls, windows, the rifles, mother and every-

thing became dim and spectral for I saw than through the prism of my tears, and it looked as if, at any moment, everything would come crashing down.

“Is that why that man with a lump on his neck has been coming here two or three times?”

“Yes, darling, that is why he has come here two or three times. He has come here today also.”

“I guessed as much from the rifle. Isn’t that short one his?”

“Yes, my darling. He is the go-between.”

More tears rolled down my cheeks while mother stroked my hair and kissed my brow.

Conversation was high and one could hear the clinking of glasses in the other room. At every clink I felt something in me break into pieces.

It was a sultry afternoon. A warm and stifling wind blew outside. I sat motionless at the window and stared at the rifles on the wall. I had often heard rifles talk as they hung there muzzle downward on the walls. They spoke of the bullets they had spewed out of their black barrels, of the “ah” of the dying man who had dropped down in the water of the village spring. I had been used to the conversation of rifles but this time it was more sullen and forbidding.

“Uh, we are stale” said one of the rifles, the longer one.

“A rifle that does not kill readily becomes stale.” This from the carbine belonging to the man with the lump.

“Are you eager to kill?”

“By Jove, yes!” said the carbine.

“Whom will you kill?” asked the long rifle.
Silence.

“Whom do you intend to kill?” repeated the long rifle.

“Katrina” replied the carbine.

“And why?”

“If she does something to put us to shame.”

“If she does something shameful, that job devolves on me,” said father’s rifle.

The rifles were silent for a while. It was the turn of the throttles, muzzle and trigger to pick up a conversation. They spoke of many minor events while the rifles kept silent

“Uh, we are getting stale,” repeated the long barreled rifle.

“We are hemming womanish. We are not spewing smoke.”

“Are you eager to spew smoke?”

“Why not? That’s what we are made for, to kill. We are not ploughs to be drawn by oxen, we are rifles.”

“Enough of such nonsense!” said the automatic rifle. “When the time comes to spew smoke against the enemy, all of us will be there.”

“Old customs are being broken. The Canon is being trampled underfoot while we hang quiet.”

“Now we have matters to settle with the enemy,” said the long weapon.

“The one who breaks a custom is an enemy.”

“On the contrary.”

“You are shameless,” said the carbine.

“What is that you say, you son of a bitch?” said the automatic.

A bitter quarrel began and I noticed how they strove to turn their muzzles against each other but this was altogether impossible for they lacked the hands of men to wield them.

“Enough!” shouted the elder of them in a coarse voice. “Are you not ashamed? You act like women quarreling at the village well.”

For some time the rifles murmured; then silence.

I had been dozing for more than one hour when I heard the footsteps of the departing guests. They took their rifles from the wall, flung them on their shoulders, saluted my father and left. The only rifle that still hung on the wall was father’s.

“Katrina!” father called me to him. “Come here! You are now betrothed. Beginning with tomorrow you will no longer go to school!”

I burst into tears. Father became angry. He snatched my reader out of my hand and flung it into the fire. Its leaves curled and rustled as they began to burn. The pictures of cities and towns, the trains, plains, highways and the blue sea were all turned to ashes.

So that day ended. He paid frequent visits. His carbine and father’s rifle whispered to each other on the wall. Their conversations were curt and repetitious. At times, they became glum and threatening, opposing each other and squabbling in subdued tones, until they calmed down again and spoke as before. That was when this horrible man with a lump

on his neck entered my life. He has stuck to me. He follows me everywhere. He is trying to make me return, to deprive me of all that I have gained these recent months. He wants to deprive me of the beautiful highways, cities, the sea, the trains and my companion. In compensation for all these he wants to give me a half-lit nook and the solitude of subjugation to a forty year-old man I have never seen. He wants to deprive me of my bobbed hair, clean underwear, wall bulletins, books and songs, and in their place to give me a black kettle, a lash rope to haul firewood, filth and beatings.

He wants to snatch away socialism from me. But this will never come about. I will never let go of what I have already gained. He roams about in the plain. Through the drum-beat, songs and merrymaking I hear the hiss of the serpent. It looks for a crack through which it can strife. He approaches then sneaks away again. But his blind groping makes no impression on me. His sway over me has come to an end for ever. I feel how he is steadily moving away from me. He runs and keeps running. He will soon become a distant evil just like all other evils of the past I used to be frightened by his shadow, by the lump on his neck, by his carbine. But now that I have come to see things, now that I have come to know socialism, now that I have realized that I am not alone, he looks ridiculous to me. How can he match forces with these workers, with my comrades and Xhavid's, with those who have set up a whole world with their own hands? What is he in comparison with the

majestic factory chimneys, with the long asphalted streets and highways, with worksites, terraces, concerts, rallies, locomotives that run at high gear? He is nothing; a worm which gnaws at something over yonder and nobody heeds him. Keep on roaming, this is your last night on the prowl. Prowl around in rain and pools of mud. You look to me now like a half-drowned dog. But no matter how piteous you may look, I will never feel any compassion for you, for you are a thing of the clammy darkness. You have brought to grief so many sisters and brothers of mine. You penetrated like a pest into their lives leaving great sorrow and misfortune behind. You must be trampled underfoot like a worm wherever you may appear. Linger on in the mudholes of this plain, o despicable go-between!

THE DRUMSKIN

Had it not been Soda Caustica talking to him, S.K. would have been unable to hear a thing. The orchestra was playing at full blast and people at many tables were singing.

“Yesterday we did some installation work under a hailstorm,” said Soda Caustica. “You can’t imagine what a wonderful sight. I was working almost at the top of an antenna. You must come out one day and clamber up there. You get dizzy. Don’t be afraid, I will be there with you. Up there you feel quite different. The wind blows in your ear in a strange manner. You feel as if it runs right through your ribs and lungs. You are absorbed by space. At any moment you expect to turn blue and crystal-clear as the sky. You hold on to the steel framework of the antenna. You tighten bolts and you are subject to a flight of fancy: What wonderful metal this is! This steel understands foreign languages, it receives and transmits music, it collects and broadcasts news to the four horizons of our terrestrial ball. It is the living mouthpiece of the Republic emerging right from its soul. It speaks and its words fly away to Alaska or to San Francisco or whatever devil it may be called. You tighten nuts and bolts, gripping this steel and think that, anyway, there is no better vocation than that of a mechanic. Don’t you think so?”

The writer smiled and nodded confirmation.

“You must be sure to come there,” continued Soda Caustica. “We will get up there

together and you will see how wonderful it is. Yesterday there was a hailstorm. The hail atones bounced on the metal, on my slicker, on my headgear and I whistled away to my heart's content. I whistled because I was fond of this thing, of the world, of hail stones, of the plains below which suddenly turned white. I felt buoyant because this antenna would soon broadcast news for all the world to hear. Perhaps my name will be mentioned in this news some time or other. Don't think that I am after personal glorification. Not at all. That's one thing I care little about. Of what significance can my name be compared with the spate of words it will transmit. Just as insignificant as a wren flying in the spacious sky. Am I making it clear? Nevertheless, it wouldn't be a bad idea for the name of a member of mechanics of the seventh category, Soda Caustica, to be flying, at least for once, on the ether too. Let all my friends and enemies throughout the world hear it. Because this antenna we are installing will transmit its broadcasts everywhere, as far away as Honolulu or San Francisco or whatever name it is called. Now, tell me, will you be coming our way some day?"

"I certainly shall," assured the writer.

Soda Caustica raised his glass:

"Good luck!"

"Good luck! To the big antenna!"

"Thank you!"

The writer pulled out his cigarette package and they both lit up.

Someone on the stage shouted: "Devoll! Devoll!"

“What a wedding party!” said Soda Caustica. The roistering revelry was spreading its amorphous being into everything; into people bumping onto one another, into breaking glasses, rolling on the floor, blowing on the bassoons and beating on the drumskin.

“I have never seen such a noisy affair in my life,” said the writer.

“Shall we join the dance?” asked Soda Caustica. “I like this one though it is not danced in our part of the country.”

“I’m for it!” replied the writer.

They joined the dance each with his arm on the other’s shoulder as the others did. This was an old man’s rondeau accompanied by rhythmic words which were repeated over and over. The lines of the song seemed like heavy steel sheets staked together and which couldn’t easily part from one another. The leader stamped the floor at fixed intervals as if crushing some evil genius and then raised his head, smiled and waved his white kerchief as if imparting the good news to those in the distance that the evil spirit had been crushed under his heel. But while he was still waving his kerchief the evil spirit again raised its head to strike like a serpent, therefore he stamped it down again angrily flexing his knee and bringing all his weight on it, raising his head and waving his kerchief in triumph. And these motions were repeated time and again ad infinitum.

During the dance, the writer S.K. caught sight of Katrina talking to a group of girls from Tirana. Near them, Dhori was relating

something to Mira which made her laugh. The newspaperman appeared again among the crowd.

“Here you are again!” said S.K. after the dance was over.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Have you seen Comrade Feizo?” Rudi was asking right and left.

“What’s up?”

“This comrade has found some dubious looking slips of paper,” said Rudi, ushering in a stocky-built mechanic. The latter was holding some papers in his hand.

“Look at them!” he said.

The writer took one of the slips of paper and read: “At 11:57 pm I play the role of Johnson. At 00:44 am I play the role of the man who causes distress. At 00:59, after having been made up I play the role of a Greek agent.”

Soda Caustica burst into laughter.

“They are the notes taken down by my friend,” he said.

“They looked suspicious to us,” said the mechanic.

“Take my word for it,” said Soda Caustica. Rudi and the short mechanic departed.

“How are things going?” asked the newspaperman.

“Marvellously!” answered the writer.

“Any squabbles?”

“No!”

“A party without a squabble, a rare thing.”

“This is a workers’ party.”

People were dancing round about them.

“Do you know what I am thinking of?”

added the writer. "I am imagining a long, long row of carriages painted blue carrying thousands of teenagers from all over Albania who have broken their underage betrothals. Imagine what an outburst of joy and what waving of handkerchiefs there would be through the windows of the carriages!"

"This could be done," said the newspaperman. "It would be a wonderful excursion. If not in a train painted blue they could ride in a caravan of 'Albturist' busses."

"The merrymaking is at its height," said the writer. "It's a pity the man from Labëria can't be here."

Now they were all joining in a long and endless dance. Some of them in the lead of the main circle broke away, raised handkerchiefs and, waving them over their heads, formed a new circle. The dance spread its branches like the runners of a strawberry plant, starting a new unit wherever it touched the earth.

The writer S.K. walked out through the backdoor and lit a cigarette. He smiled to himself.

Day was dawning. Outside it was still dark but along the skyline the darkness was retreating. Now and then it looked as if a timid white line, as if the light of two distant headlights of a car, slipped over it.

He stared at the plain and thought that probably in that direction there would be a straight street lined by twin rows of neon lamps. This might be called "Katrina Street." "And why not?" he thought to himself. "Katrina is the town's first bride."

He pictured to himself the neon lights lining the street like white cacti on cold aluminium poles. At this hour of the day they would blink their sleepy eyes before vanishing and, probably, he himself would alight from the train and walking along, exhausted from a long trip on duty, he would stop before an apartment, walk upstairs and ring a bell.

He smiled again to himself and nodded.

When he stepped inside again, the barracks were resounding with merriment.

Perspiration dripped from the members of the orchestra. The drummer had left his seat and joined the crowd, his two sticks beating the drumskin like mad. His moist hair hung over his forehead. The people around were dancing, bumping into one another and shouting "Hopa!" as he watched them with his burning red eyes urging them on, while the bassoonists with half-closed eyes blew at their instruments while they turned their heads right and left as if to spread their notes all over the room.

The writer S.K. met Pranvera in the midst of that turmoil.

"Good heavens! Isn't this terrific?" said the young woman resting her head momentarily on his shoulder.

He made no reply but fixed his bewildered eyes on what was going on. She stood by him as he groped in vain in his pocket for his cigarettes.

"They are going crazy," said the young woman. "Look at those two there! See how they jump!"

"I see them," answered the writer.

"I have never seen such revelry before."

"Rarely does one see such a celebration," said S.K. casting a searching glance as usual over the beech of the moving crowd. "Here hundreds of joys clash and mingle together."

The dancing circle grew wider and wider, engulfing everything and everybody.

"Don't leave me alone," pleaded Vera. "I am afraid of remaining all by myself."

"What is it you are saying? There is so much noise that I can't catch your words."

"I am afraid of being by myself," she shouted in his ear.

He pressed her hand and she looked up at him. Her eyes were moist like a bedewed window pane.

"One can always enjoy the sight of such eyes," he thought. "For a moment you think you have received every thing from that glance but after a while you realize that you have got too little, that there is much more to get. They resemble pools fed from never ending springs. You draw out a pailful and then another and you think you have dried it up. But half a day later you pass by and notice that it is filled with clear shimmering water again."

"Hope!" shouted the drummer as he bent his knees and lowered his body to beat the drumskin as violently as he could, while the bassoonists and violinists flung their notes like a net to gather in the whole surroundings.

"Do you hear?" he asked all of a sudden.

"What?" she asked catching her breath.

"It is whirling around," he added as if half

asleep. It is felt everywhere.

The young woman pressed his hand trying to understand what was going on.

The barracks resounded with song and cheer except for a few persons who seemed to be alarmed, who withdrew to one side and stepped out of doors.

“It is very near,” he remarked, “nearer than ever.” She pressed his hand tighter.

“What can happen?” she asked in a trembling voice, but the clamour prevented him from hearing her as he gazed at the merry-making and the anxiety which appeared to be spreading among the faces.

The rumble of the drum sounded to him like gunfire and his head turned spontaneously to where the revelry was at its height. Now and then it seemed that the drumbeat scared the unknown threat and drove it away to some corner, at other times, that it lured it out in the open again. The bass notes of the bassoon bored at the atmosphere like a pneumatic drill, only to give way in their turn to the Boom! Boom! of the drum.

“Do you see that goatskin stretched on that round wooden frame?” the writer asked Pranvera, moving his lips close to her ear and pointing to the drum.

The young woman strained to hear his words.

“On that little disc reverberate all the sounds heard in life. Do you hear them?”

“Yes, I hear them,” she said.

“All,” he repeated, “from the rhythm of rocking cradles to the roar of battle.”

She stared.

“This is not a wedding party,” he said.

“This is a triumph”

Suddenly he thought he heard a pistol shot.

“How wonderful,” she said, her voice lost in the turmoil.

No one else had heard the shot. The revelry had become a most amusing ballyhoo.

NIGHTHAWKS — II

Finally they came face to face. They stood there silent for a while. They exchanged some harsh words, their voices hoarse from the wet and cold. One of them pointed to the barracks while the other groped in his sash.

The third man, the youngest left them and walked away leaving behind him all the songs, the celebration and the sound of a drumbeat which grew fainter and fainter. Harsh words muttered half-aloud gave vent to his anger. He stumbled into a pool cursed again and moved further away. Again a pool.

He was about to jump it but came to a sudden halt as the clap of a pistol shot came from the distance. He listened for a while and then, spitting towards the barracks, he hurried away. In his flight he marked the contours of the factory silhouetted in the darkness of night like something emerging from the plain, something planted deep in the ground. He came to a halt, strained his eyes in the direction of the half completed factory and advanced towards it. Crossing a heap of boards (a nail tore something off his clothes and he cursed again), he ran between concrete columns to pick up from the ground an iron bar with which he began to attack the nearest metal scaffolding only half visible in that dim light.

Over yonder he heard the voice of the nightwatchman. He struck again before recrossing the heap of boards, running across the open plain still gripping his iron bar.

“Say who you are or I will blow your

brains out!" shouted the nightwatchman. But by this time he was well away and running at full speed.

Alternately walking and running, breathing hard, from his exertions he heard far behind him the sounds of merrymaking rising wave after wave like the billows of the sea.

He stumbled on the rails and nearly fell but managed to keep his balance, leaping over the tracks like a cat.

Suddenly, he changed his mind and began to retrace his steps. He groped with his feet for the rails and when he had located them in the darkness, with a glance round about the dark plain he bent over them striking hard with the iron bar in his hand. The concussion ran back up his arms and through his body. The rails were hitting back. Then he stuck the bar under the rails and heaved with all his force but the rails could not be moved. He stuck his bar in between them, putting in all his weight until his bones cracked under the tension. The rails had not moved at all. Then cursing all the time, he began to burrow under a rail.

AT DAYBREAK

It was an hour after daybreak. Grey immobile clouds in the sky admired the world below.

On the station platform stood a cluster of wedding guests waiting for the train and those seeing them off. People came and went before the station building. They talked, smoked, stared at the landscape. Some of them gathered around a group of mechanics replacing a rail that had been warped.

During the night somebody had tampered with the line. When the first batch of wedding guests had arrived at the station, one of the mechanics who came to see them off was surprised to notice that a rail had been tampered with. A crowd gathered and all could see the place where someone had burrowed under a rail. It looked as if some strange beast had burrowed and scratched with its paws under it. Other mechanics came along to verify the story that the railway line had really been damaged. Immediately, they decided to fill the hole and replace the damaged rail from a heap of unused rails nearby. Rudi and two others ran to get tools. Xhavid, Rudi and four or five others set to work on the job.

Almost two hours had gone by and the train was about to arrive. People looked anxiously at their watches, then to where the rail was being replaced, peering in the direction from which the train would be approaching and making all kinds of suppositions. They were all here. The Deputy-Minister and the

District Party Committee Secretary walked to and fro talking. Some of the womenfolk were dozing on the wood benches. Katrina, Xhavid's younger sister, Pranvera and a large group of girls were talking and laughing as Rudi bustled from one place to another. Dhori and Mira had withdrawn to a corner. He said something and she gazed far in the distance rapt in thought. The Chinese had also come out and the newspaperman was trying to explain to them something that was very complicated. The Fellow of the Institute of Folklore, tall and very pale, walked to and fro his brimmed hat stuck tight to his head. The watchman had apparently come straight from his post of duty because he had his rifle on his shoulder. He looked at the mechanics toiling and sweating, and now and then at his watch.

Katrina and Pranvera watched a small group of mechanics who had been tarrying for nearly two hours at a spot, bending to the ground examining something. Feizo, the manager, the writer S.K., Soda Caustica and some others were there too.

"Very strange," said the manager for the fourth time.

In several places on the wet ground there were two or three spots of blood. Further away there was a boulder covered with blood.

"It must be this way," said the writer. "He must have attacked the old man with this boulder and the old man must have retaliated by firing at him. I heard a pistol shot myself."

"Why should we not suppose the other way around?" asked the manager.

“Because if the go-between had fired he would have shot the old man dead,” argued the writer. “Whereas, the old man, having been dazed by the blow apparently failed to shoot his opponent dead.”

“And then?”

“Then they must have run away like two wounded beasts.”

The writer pointed to the hills on the horizon. The others turned their head in that direction. The fog hung over the earth’s surface like the folds of a curtain, heavy and damp.

“Probably over there in some ravine they may have come to gripe again,” suggested the writer.

Soda Caustica picked up the sharp-edged boulder.

“Poor old man!”

“Come on,” said the manager. “I think the train is approaching.”

“Don’t let Katrina know anything about this.”

“Anyway, we must inform the police.”

“Certainly!”

The long whistle of the locomotive was heard from a distance. Everyone present turned to look. There was a sudden outburst of commotion as hands and kerchiefs waved, signalling the danger to the incoming train. (It was probably due to this that the engine drivers thought the crowd of wedding guests were drunk, though really, they were only trying to signal the locomotive driver that the line had been disrupted).

The train halted at the station and some

of the crew jumped down to find out what was going on. They were surrounded by many of the guests but none could explain clearly what had taken place. While the chief engineer was talking in sarcastic terms to the worksite manager and with a few others, his assistant hurried to telephone his superiors. (It seems this was the first man to state that the railway line had been damaged by drunken wedding guests).

In the meantime, the passengers on the train craned out of the windows trying to find out what had happened. Those standing on the platform shrugged their shoulders. Words and presumptions of all lands were whispered from carriage to carriage. Perhaps somebody had been killed. Or an earthquake or a flood may have struck during the night. Everybody asked but none seemed to be able to give any explanation.

Now and then the locomotive puffed out a grey cloud of steam, resembling a little sky spot which rises at once in order to join the real sky.

Meanwhile, the mechanics had repaired the damage. Now people were embracing, taking leave of one another and getting aboard the train. "Come on!" "Come on!" The locomotive blew the whistle. The train started to move. The nighthawk had delayed it six minutes.

Hands and kerchiefs waved from the windows. Those who had remained waved not only to the wedding guests but also to the passengers and train crew with whom they had

been squabbling a little while before. From one of the wagons came the song:

“O Mechanics, Roving Birds of the Five-Year Plans!”

On the platform the waving hands subsided.

The train rolled along taking with it the grey steam puffs, the clack-clack of rails and the song.



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