

THE DOOR

**A Tale of the Mountains of
Ararat**

Johann W. Oldcastle

THE DOOR

A TALE of the MOUNTAINS of ARARAT

Johann Waldemar Oldcastle

Dedicated to

**The children of Armenian
Christians persecuted today**

‘And Yahweh closed the door behind him’
«Եվ Եհովան փակեց դուռը նրա հետևից»

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johannoldcastle.weebly.com/the-door

ISBN: 9789403724454

Johann W Oldcastle

Cover design: Rolsen AS

First published in 2026 by Compass Books (Rolsen AS)

Illustrations © Isak Rolsen/Rolsen AS

Johann Oldcastle Books and Compass Books are trading
names of Rolsen AS

Published with Bookmundo

Chapter 1

Goodnight, mountains

24th-25th September 1923

“Ilya!”

Karev quickly hid the little wooden cross behind the ancient wooden chest that sat firmly against the wall. He looked up at the discreet hole in the roof that led to the attic.

“Ilya!” he called again, “It’s time for you to get the feed ready,” then to himself, “what on earth has become of the boy?”

Glancing furtively at the wooden chest again, he walked across the bare wooden floor to the door. The September sun was setting in the west, making the whole sky glow with the golden, red, orange hues. The giant lowering mass of Kazbek and the other giants of the Caucasus towered over the tiny stone house surrounded by its low, moss-

covered stone wall. Ilya looked down from his perch on the rickety slate roof where he sat, stroking a white cat that rubbed around his thin, sun-browned legs.

“Yes, Uncle Karev?” he called down quietly.

Karev looked up at him.

“You there already?” he asked, “Come on down, my boy, there’s the food to prepare,” he glanced around furtively and added in a lower voice, “for the cats.”

Ilya reluctantly slid down the roof and scrambled down the tree that grew out of the moss-covered wall that enclosed the house. Several chickens pecked at ancient grains inside this enclosure. Behind the house it surrounded a vegetable garden and the walnut trees.

“Ilya,” Karev said, putting a kind hand on the boy’s shoulder as he was about to run inside, “Next time, please come straight away.”

“Yes, Uncle Karev,” replied Ilya and hurried inside. The fire was roaring inside the Russian stove, the enormous stove that dominated most of the tiny room. Engineer’s drawings hung on the walls. A small kitten was rolling about on a pile of rugs in the corner.

“Oh Norik!” laughed Ilya, looking over his shoulder to make sure Karev wasn’t there, “Uncle Karev won’t be pleased if he finds out!”

The little kitten gave a tiny miaow. Ilya laughed and scooped him up carefully. His furry little white legs kicked indignantly. His big paws, big ears and large eyes made him look ridiculous. Laughing, Ilya scrambled on top of the chest, popped Norik through the hole into the attic and followed quickly himself, giving a jump so that he caught hold of the edge, then swinging himself up.

There was no ladder to the attic, but that made it all the better for Ilya. He chased

Norik across the attic. The smell of thyme was pungent. Colourful Armenian rugs decorated the whole attic, old mahogany chests, and above all – cats. It was like a different world. Behind a tall stack of walnuts, on several skins and rugs, were the cats. Norik had no difficulty in scrambling over the walnut barrier.

The smell of the walnuts here was absolutely overpowering. Everything smelt of it.

“You little rascal,” said Ilya affectionately, reaching behind them for the shelf where the bottles of goat’s milk and cheese were rowed.

“Look at that,” he said, impressed, after a moment, “I can reach the shelf without climbing onto the walnut barrier! Now I’m nine I’ll be able to come with Uncle Karev into the mountains much more often.”

He looked at Norik’s mother who seemed to look as if she agreed. Ilya poured the goat’s milk into little wooden bowls for the kittens.

For the cat food, he followed Karev's recipe that was written on a piece of paper and pinned to the wall. He knew it off by heart, but he still stumbled through the small Russian letters written in between the large useless Armenian ones. After feeding the mothers and their little ones, he took the food across to the men cats who had their own little area specifically for bachelors. They were boisterously affectionate, like oversized kittens, and jumped up all over Ilya demanding attention without hardly noticing the food.

"Ilya!" it was Karev again, this time sounding more urgent, "Does it take all evening to feed them?"

"Sorry!" Ilya yelled back, "Coming!"

He ran across to the hatch and sprang down, landing in a laughing heap on the rugs below.

"Did you see that, Uncle Karev?" he asked.

“Come here, little rascal,” said Karev, not seeming to notice, “There is someone approaching the house.”

Ilya hurried to the small window, set deeply in the stone wall. He looked furtively out. Approaching the house was a man with dark skin in wonderful clothing, colourful, bright and graceful. On his back he had a large pack. Karev descended out of the house to greet him.

“Welcome!” he cried, “Whoever you are and whatever you want!”

“I am a musician from Persia,” replied the man, “I would like to help during the walnut harvest in exchange for some small pay.”

“Of course you may,” replied Karev, “You must be tired and sore after a long journey. Let me help you with your pack.”

Ilya knew what was coming next.

“Ilya!”

“Yes?”

“Get bread and salt for this traveller and put some water in the kettle!”

Ilya hurried to bring out a fresh loaf from the basket where they were kept. The musician entered the house, Karev behind him, tucking the cross about his neck deeper in behind his shirt collar.

“Will you play some music for us?” asked Ilya.

“Please,” Karev reminded him, giving his hair a ruffle as he went to make tea for the stranger.

“Please,” Ilya said.

“Of course,” said the musician, settling himself comfortably on some rugs in the far corner of the room, and glancing curiously about. He looked at the windows.

“One, two, three,” he counted them under his breath. Then, “I have a new song which I

learnt when passing through Tsaritsyn on my way from Kazakhstan. Would you like to hear that, little master of the house?”

“Yes please!” cried Ilya.

With a faint smile, the Persian man dusted his dark hands and carefully opened his pack. From inside he drew out a leather case which he placed across his knees. With a dramatic and ceremonious sweep, he opened it and drew out his proudest possession, his setar. It was small, lightly coloured and old, but there was not a scratch on it.

“This little instrument has seen the world!” cried the musician, admiring it before he took it across his breast and winked to Ilya. Then he began to sing the Russian words – in a deep, rich, Persian voice.

“Far, far beyond the forests,
Far, far beyond the seas
Where wolves are gone forever
And gladness grows on trees

I never saw the country
Where war and strife are gone
But I can tell you something
I hope there will be one.
Soon I shall take my journey
Beyond the mountains high
I beg you, someone, tell me
Is this the end? Don't lie!"

"Sounds like a song from Tsaritsyn,"
muttered Karev, unimpressed, before he
remembered to applaud heartily. Ilya, who
didn't care for the words, was much more
impressed.

"Do you have any more?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course," the Persian man said, "More
than hairs on my head."

There was a little thud. All eyes turned
upwards towards the hatch in the low roof
that led to the attic. A little white bundle of
kitten hopped clumsily, landing on the pile
of rugs underneath.

“Oh Norik!” cried Ilya with an infectious laugh, “What have you done now!”

Karev tried to catch his eye with a warning look, but Ilya wasn't looking. He hurried over to pick the adventurous kitten up.

“That is a rare breed of cat,” the Persian said interestedly, standing up, “maybe it heard the music and came to see what was happening.”

“Do you like music, Norik?” asked Ilya.

Karev said nothing the whole time, only he looked as if he was thinking hard.

“Have you a whole litter?” asked the musician, “What kind of a breed is that? Look at the strange markings on his back. Where did you get them?”

“We have a litter,” Karev said guardedly, “The mother cat gave birth to them.”

The Persian howled with merry eastern laughter, and slapped Karev on the shoulder.

“Did you expect the father cat to give birth to them, my friend?”

Karev forced a laugh.

“Uncle Karev is an expert...” began Ilya but was cut off by Karev himself.

“I am no kind of expert as you can see,” he said with another forced laugh, “I am an engineer and work on the bridges and infrastructure around here in the mountains.”

“Ah yes, I see the drawings pinned to the wall,” nodded the Persian, stroking the kitten that lay at ease in Ilya’s arms and looking curiously at the engineer’s drawings, “Since the civil war has ended, I don’t doubt you are much in demand repairing the damage. Will you sell me a kitten? I have already fallen in love with this one.”

“There are lots of mice around,” Karev said hopefully.

“Come, come,” coaxed the musician, “You have a whole litter. One less will not harm.”

“Not Norik,” said Ilya with an imploring look towards Karev.

“Not Norik,” agreed Karev firmly, “But there are a couple we don’t need.”

“I will give you anything you ask,” the musician added encouragingly, “I shall work in the walnut harvest for free. The cat is sure to be valuable somewhere.”

“In exchange for free labour over the harvest,” Karev agreed, taking the musician’s hand to shake it, “We shall give him Hayk. Is that alright with you, Ilya?”

Ilya nodded. He secretly wished they could keep them all, but he was used to the kittens disappearing one by one in baskets as Karev took them away.

The musician laughed again, his eastern laugh, and began to pluck randomly some long-forgotten melody on his setar strings.F

“I am tired,” he said, yawning loudly, “Is it right for me to sleep in the hay with the goats underneath your house?”

“You are welcome to sleep in here with us,” Karev offered.

“No, I sleep better with animals than humans,” the musician laughed, “permit me.”

So saying, as soon as he had eaten the quantities of bread, cheese and honey that they put out for him, he disappeared into the low stalls beneath the house, where the goats were kept during the winter.

Whistling the new tune that the musician had played, Ilya scrambled joyously up the little tree in the wall and onto the slate roof. Wood smoke rose gently from the slightly leaning chimney into the clear sky, a light

blue faded into half-light as the sun set in the west. The whole valley and the small village, each house crammed up against the next, were cast into shadow. Only the tallest mountains, crowned by the permanent snow of Kazbek, glowed almost red in a last farewell. Ilya heard Karev's contented sigh beneath him.

"The mountains are saying goodnight," he said.

Ilya looked back up at them critically.

"No," he said, "They're waiting."

"For what?" asked Karev.

Ilya didn't answer.

"You've got me," Karev said gently, "Anytime you want. I found you, hidden in a cave high up in the mountains. You were only a toddler. I can never replace a mother. Perhaps I can be a father, though."

Ilya said nothing. Still looking at the glowing warmth of the mountains, he could hear Karev cough as if to cover up his feelings.

“And they still call you. The mountain keeps every promise.”

“What does that mean?” asked Ilya. The glow was still there, but its strength was diminishing.

“Exactly what it says” replied Karev bluntly. For a long time, he stared at Kazbek distantly, as if remembering.

The glow faded entirely almost as quickly as it had come. With a sigh, Ilya slid down to the edge of the roof and stood up. Karev put out his arms and Ilya jumped straight down to where Karev caught him and lowered him to the ground.

“You are blessed, o Lord, for all your wonderful works!” Karev said quietly, lifting his eyes to the darkening sky, “You are

blessed, o Lord, for all your frightening acts!
You are blessed and praised forever!”

Together they re-entered the house, Karev crossing himself and closing the door behind them. Ilya undressed and scrambled in under the rough covers that lay on top of the enormous stove, still warm from the fire. He was asleep in moments.

The next thing he knew, he was being tickled in the face by something furry.

“Norik!” he cried, sleepily, trying to push the kitten away, “I can’t see!”

Norik didn’t seem to understand. Ilya freed his other and lifted the kitten up from his face. Karev, already awake and stirring the porridge on the stove underneath Ilya.

“Get up, little falcon,” Karev said affectionately, “He who sleeps through the harvest goes hungry in winter!”

“Does the walnut harvest begin today?” asked Ilya, rolling to the floor and pulling on his patched and worn clothes.

“Yes, indeed,” nodded Karev, “Run down to Yusuf the Turk’s house with a large bottle of goat’s milk before breakfast. Ask if his son can come and help with the harvesting.”

Ilya ran to fetch the bottle that stood near the door.

“Don’t loiter!” Karev called after him, but he was already out of earshot, running down the bumpy track the short distance to the village. The stone houses in the village were piled on top of each other as if at one time they had been sitting like ordinary houses with space in between, but some great monster had come and hugged them together so that they piled and climbed and stuck in all awkward angles on top of each other.

Ilya knew where Yusuf the Turk lived. It was in the middle of the village. His house

protruded at an awkward angle from another one, so that the front was on a tiny alleyway and the behind attached to another, but the back door was on the top story and led out onto the roof of the house behind. He had very Turkish tastes.

Ilya ran down through the village, where a few donkeys stood impatiently tied in the street and a few inhabitants nodded to him.

The door to Yusuf's house was wide open and in it knelt a small boy about Ilya's own age, busily hammering at something with half a stone.

"What are you doing?" asked Ilya.

"Making a pedal," replied the boy without looking up.

"A pedal?" asked Ilya.

"Don't be silly, a pedal," the boy said, still not looking up.

“Can I get by?” asked Ilya, “I’ve got milk for your father.”

The boy looked up, looked first puzzled, then laughed.

“I thought you were my mother,” he said.

“Your mother?” asked Ilya, shocked. The boy moved to one side to let him by. Just then, Yusuf himself came out to meet them.

“Peace be upon your house!” Ilya said amiably, holding out the jug.

“And upon yours,” Yusuf smiled, accepting the milk gratefully.

“Uncle Karev wants to know if your son can help with the nut harvest today.”

“Of course, go along, Mahmud,” Yusuf addressed the boy who had been hammering.

“Harvest?” asked Mahmud, “What about my pedal?”

“You’ll never manage to make a bike,” his father said, “hurry along. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of fun with Ilya here.”

Mahmud wiped his mouth with an oily hand and pocketed the strange metal thing that he called a pedal.

“We’ve got to hurry,” Ilya explained, “I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

So they set off quickly through the winding alleys.

By the time they arrived at the little stone house just above the village, the musician was up and poking around inside the house. Karev was milking the goats outside. The musician looked almost as if he was looking for something. Here and there he would stop, take some snuff, and scratch his head, often looking up at the hatch to the attic.

“What’s he looking for?” Mahmud whispered, “Is he trying to work out how the house has been built?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya replied, just as quietly.

At that moment the musician suddenly laughed quietly.

“O baraye in kar bah man pol khobi khahod dad,” he said in some foreign language. Then he added, in Russian, “I can hear you two listening to me.”

Ilya and Mahmud both froze.

Chapter 2

The Coveted Basket

25th September 1923

The musician looked around slowly. Ilya backed slowly towards the door so that he was slightly behind Mahmud. There was a slightly pleased grin on the Persian's face.

"This is a very comfortable house," he said, "A nice place for a cat breeder to live. Goat's milk every day for the kittens. Plenty of rats and mice for the cats themselves."

"Yes," Mahmud nodded, as if he hadn't noticed, "Who are you?"

"A musician from Persia," the man replied, "Come to help with the walnut harvest."

There was a clanking noise and an old woman bustled through the door with a giant pile of baskets, Karev following quickly.

“Babushka, let me take that,” he said respectfully.

“Take it?” said the babushka, “Am I that old? Not too old to come and help at an old friend’s harvest. All these baskets are for you all.”

She tossed one to Ilya, one to Mahmud and one to the Persian.

“How are you, my heart?” she asked Ilya kindly.

“Fine thank you, babushka,” Ilya replied.

“You take your harvest seriously,” the Persian remarked, “Are you Karev’s grandmother?”

“Nothing of the sort,” the babushka replied, “Come along, young man. Karev will tell you what to do.”

They all rushed outside. A white cat looked down from the roof as the troupe scrambled up the steep slope behind the house to the

enormous, ancient walnut trees that stood in less-than-neat rows on the rocky hillside.

There were probably only five of them, but they were so enormous that they looked like several versions of Balachko from the legend sitting side by side and joining hands.

Karev looked at the trees proudly.

“My grandfather’s father planted this one when he was a boy,” he said, motioning to the largest. Brandishing an enormous, long stick, he gave a second one to the musician.

“Take this and shake the lower branches as hard as you can. Babushka and the boys will gather the nuts into baskets. Later we will have to climb the trees.”

“Can’t I please climb too?” asked Ilya, looking longingly up into the giant branches.

Karev looked at the boy and then at the trees.

“Very well,” he said, “If you gather enough walnuts now, but no further than the second branch.”

“Come on, Mahmud,” cried Ilya, “Let’s gather as many as we can!”

They waited impatiently as the men began to shake the branches with the sticks. Rains of walnuts poured out of the branches and landed, bouncing, on the ground. The musician began to whistle a melody merrily, some unheard folk tune from a distant land. It had a strong beat, and it helped Mahmud and Ilya especially as they scurried hither and thither picking up the walnuts and throwing them into baskets as quickly as they could manage.

“My hands are becoming stained,” Mahmud complained after a while, “Look at that.”

“It looks like oil to me,” babushka said.

“Oil washes off. It’s something much worse.”

“Walnut harvest only comes once a year,”
babushka replied, “Make the most of it.”

Mahmud said nothing more on the matter.
Soon the Persian man burst out with the
words in Armenian.

“Wake, wake, you people! Up with the
dawn!

Shadows of velvet no longer are drawn!
Gather your harvest, shout with the valleys
Leave you your firesides, gather the corn!”

Karev, shaking busily, looked shocked
almost as if he had been bitten. He looked at
the musician, without ceasing to shake the
branches. Then he joined in himself in a
deep harmony.

“Wake, wake, you people! Out to the fields!
Clouds see you smiling, bad weather yields
Gather your harvest, sing with the
mountains
Gather the increase, enough for your
meals!”

“Armenian, are you?” asked the Persian perceptively, not stopping shaking after the end of the verse.

Karev, who had been so taken up with the familiar song, suddenly became cold again.

“It’s an Armenian song,” he said, cagily.

“What do the words mean?” asked Mahmud, who had stopped for a rest. Ilya was still hurrying to and fro as fast as he could, picking up every walnut in sight. The juice ran all over his arms and hands.

“Don’t stain your clothes,” babushka warned him, “It’ll never come off. They’re bad enough already.”

The walnuts came down in rains, much faster than the boys and the babushka could pick them up. The high branches, their green leaves already turning golden-brown at the tips, were still laden with nuts. The whole ground was covered in them. As soon as all the baskets were full, down they went

with them to the house and emptied them on the floor, ready to be husked and put out to dry the next day. The clear, cool autumn air was full of the strong aroma of walnuts.

“Go away!” called Ilya as he left the house after emptying the last basket. The goats were busy butting at the door. Carefully he locked it.

“You don’t want to eat it all before the winter,” he warned them, “Then there will be nothing left and you will all starve.”

He set off running as fast as he could up the rocky path to where the others were still gathering.

“Tea!” babushka called, climbing up behind him with some old wooden cups full of the hot drink, “Those who work well drink well.”

Mahmud sat down next to Ilya, fingering one of the long poles between his stained fingers.

“I’m sure we could do this better,” he said, “If we tied two poles securely together, we could reach higher up without climbing.”

“But I like climbing,” protested Ilya, “That’s the best bit.”

“Karev might appreciate it, though,” Mahmud said, loudly.

“He might,” Karev agreed with a smile.

“Oh Mahmud,” exclaimed babushka suddenly after handing him his tea, “look at the dreadful state of your clothes. Your mother will be furious. Walnut stains never come out.”

Mahmud looked at his shirt for the first time.

“They’re always stained,” he said, “She won’t notice. I keep my best ones for going to the mosque in.”

“Everyone back to work,” Karev said after a short pause, “All the nuts need to be in

before tomorrow. If there is any rain it will spoil them.”

“Can I climb now?” asked Ilya.

“Alright, Ilyusha *jan*” consented Karev with a sigh, “Only be careful.”

Ilya ran as fast as the wind to the nearest tree, quickly found the best way up and was away in an instant. Mahmud watched for a couple of seconds before turning at once to the poles again.

“Come along, Mahmud,” babushka said, busily collecting, “Don’t dawdle.”

“I wasn’t dawdling,” Mahmud said, turning to help again, “I was inventing a way to do it more quickly.”

“Yes,” babushka said, “Hurry along.”

Up in the trees, the squirrels were after the nuts, too. Ilya began by trying to scare them off as he worked, but as he saw what an

abundance there was, he thought perhaps they were allowed a bit. Not too much.

He shook the branches. That was the best bit. To see all the walnuts rain down on the heads of the grown-ups below. Karev was in another tree across from him, but gradually Ilya overtook and got higher and higher until he had far outclimbed him. The whole afternoon went in this way.

Right at the top of one of the trees, he scrambled so high that the top of his head poked out through the topmost browning leaves. Here he could see for miles, up to the enormous form of Kazbek, permanently iced over, and down to the city of Vladikavkaz, far below the steep valleys, from which the dark plain stretched off into the distance. But it was to the mountains Ilya's eyes turned.

“Lunch time!” it was babushka's voice that got him into action again, “What has become of Ilya?”

Ilya could hear church bells ringing on the distance. A little guilty, the boy scrambled down the tree and hurried down after the others to the house. The goats were still butting at the door. There was no hiding the smell of walnuts from them.

“Ah, there you are,” Karev said, “Time for lunch!”

They ate bread and pure mountain honey with apples, cheese and grapes, all gathered on the doorstep. Karev showed Ilya and Mahmud how to crack walnuts to eat with their bread. They washed it all down with tea babushka had made in the samovar.

The goats’ bells tinkled noisily as they attempted to steal the workers’ food.

“Ilya and Mahmud shall take some walnuts into the town,” Karev said, “We shall continue harvesting until it gets dark, but we will need to be up at dawn tomorrow to finish the job.”

“Take walnuts down to the town?” asked the musician, surprised.

“Taking payment,” muttered Karev, as if he didn’t like lying.

“Aha,” nodded the musician with just a trace of sarcasm, “True enough.”

After babushka and the Persian had set off for the walnut trees, Karev quickly took the boys aside into the house, emptied a walnut basket and popped a kitten inside. He handed the basket to Ilya and another full of walnuts to Mahmud.

“Take these down to 43 Zangiyeva,” he said, “Don’t tell anyone where you are going and if anyone asks what is in the baskets, say walnuts. Best you take a lift in a cart. You’ll want to be back before dark.”

“Why have we always got to hide the cats?” asked Ilya looking up questioningly into Karev’s urgent face.

“Some things need protecting,” he said briefly.

With that he hurried off back up to the walnut trees. Ilya made sure the goats couldn't get in, and the two boys walked off down into the village. It was bustling with life, men and women and children were running here and there with baskets full of walnuts, goats bleated, bells tinkled and people shouted. They were nearly swamped by the noise and the hurrying.

“Why have we got to be so secretive?” asked Mahmud quietly.

“It's more fun,” Ilya shrugged, “I always like a spy game. Sometimes I've spied on your house, just for fun, you know. I expect Uncle Karev likes it, too.”

Mahmud shrugged.

“My hands look like an old walnut,” he said, then suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Look! A bicycle!” he yelled.

Ilya stopped to look, too. He had only once seen a bicycle before, and that was in Vladikavkaz, not here in Nizhniy Kani. Standing next to it was a soldier, very important looking in his green uniform, neatly pressed, with a red star on his hat. He turned from watching the hurrying people to raise his eyebrows at their interest.

“Sir, can we please have a lift down to Vladikavkaz, if you’re going that way?” asked Mahmud.

The soldier laughed unpleasantly.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked, “I am Pyotr Petrovich, district commander. Two couldn’t fit on anyway.”

“Yes, comrade, they could,” argued Mahmud, “One on the seat behind you and one on the handlebars.”

The soldier shook his head.

“How much would you pay?”

“All I’ve got,” cried Mahmud, “I’ve got a one-rouble piece and sixteen bicycle brake wires.”

He pulled them all out of his pockets to show the general. Pyotr was clearly tempted. He knew the value of brake wire, and he needed new ones.

“Where did you get those from?” he muttered rather jealously, “Very well, both of you get on, and hold on tight. We’re going to go fast.”

Mahmud scrambled onto the handlebars. Ilya climbed on behind the seat on the bicycle rack behind. He kept both baskets on his knees.

“Away to go,” snapped Pyotr, “And if one of you falls off, I’m not going to turn around to fetch you again or patch up grazes.”

They set off at an unbelievable pace. The air whistled through their hair as they leant around the corners of the twisty, packed mud road, bumping over the uneven sections, descending and descending into the valley. Only once did Pyotr bother using the brakes; that was when they nearly crashed into a donkey and cart. Then he put the brakes on so hard that they nearly all flew off the flimsy bike. Both boys laughed so hard all the way that they had difficulty holding on at all.

Pyotr braked to a sudden stop on the bustling and teaming Prospekt Kosta. As they climbed off, he looked suddenly regretful, as if he had had a better idea too late.

“Thank you, comrade!” said Mahmud, handing over the promised rouble and brake wires, “I shall be forever grateful!”

Pyotr counted the rouble and wires several times over, meticulously.

“What’s in those baskets, anyway?” he asked, suddenly malicious.

Chapter 3

Thieves and Liars

25th – 26th September 1923

Ilya looked sheepishly down at the baskets.

“These baskets?” he asked slowly, “Oh, just walnuts.”

“Walnuts?” asked the soldier, “Taking walnuts into town on harvest day? Strikes me as being a bit odd.”

“We were taking payment to somebody,” Ilya explained, “That’s what he said.”

“Who?” asked Pyotr, “Payment? Where?”

“Walnuts are valuable,” Ilya said brusquely.

People surged by, knocking them occasionally. It would have been easy for them to slip away into the crowd, but he knew that would have looked even more

suspicious. The soldier looked down and fingered the brake wire and the rouble for a few moments as if trying to work something out.

“What, still here?” he asked, looking up, “I’m not going to take you back all the way up again, you know. Off to go, young comrades.”

Ilya and Mahmud hurried off with relief.

“That was quite a bicycle,” Mahmud said excitedly, “It’s the first time I’ve ever actually been on one. But now I’ll have to find more brake wires for my bike.”

“Your bike?” asked Ilya, looking around and trying to orientate himself, “I thought you said that was the first one you’d been on.”

“It is,” Mahmud said, “But I’m making one for myself.”

“Making one?” asked Ilya, “But surely that’s too difficult.”

“No,” Mahmud said, “Not a bit of it. I’ll manage it someday.”

The sun was nearly setting after they delivered the kitten in its basket to the family at the address Karev had told them. They were joyously received and given a hearty meal before they left and found an old Ossetian man with an arm missing, who had a donkey and cart and was bound for Verkhniy Kani. He would of course pass through Nizhniy Kani on the way. The sky was streaked with fire, and the evening air was cool as they trundled slowly along up the river gorge among the slowly colouring trees that gave the valley even more of a fiery aspect.

Mahmud sat up next to the Ossetian farmer who guided his mule along. Ilya sat behind on top of some baskets and felt his head nodding occasionally so that he could hardly keep awake. The man noticed this despite his deep conversation about mechanics with Ilya.

“Sleepy, young friend?” he asked kindly.

“No, not at all,” Ilya said quickly, sitting up and forcing his eyes open. The man laughed and urged his mule faster.

“We’ll get you home to your parents and bed soon,” he said, “More harvesting tomorrow!”

“How did you fix the axles on?” Mahmud asked, and the rest was lost on Ilya.

Parents? Who had they been after all? Maybe his father had even been a climber. Ilya looked in the direction of Kazbek, but it was blocked by the sides of the ravine. But there was no use thinking about it. Back at the village he said goodbye to Mahmud who went down to his house and crossed the village. The people were no longer crying and shouting, they were sitting around the doorways, drinking tea and eating walnuts, talking in animated voices in Ossetian. The sound of the goat’s bells quietly tinkling drifted out through the darkening evening as Ilya scrambled up the steep track out of

the village towards Karev's house. As he did, the church bells struck nine in the evening. Coldly, uncompromisingly, the deep tones floated through the air.

Karev was standing in the doorway watching the sunset and waiting for him as the boy entered through the gap in the mossy stone wall. A cat watched him from on top of it.

"Ilya!" he called, "How did it go? Did you get it delivered?"

"Yes, Uncle Karev," replied Ilya, handing him the basket with the walnuts in it. He yawned loudly. The whole room smelt pungently of freshly picked walnuts.

"Straight to bed," Karev said, "You must be fresh for the morning!"

Ilya did not argue. He left his clothes in an untidy heap by the wall and scrambled up onto the large stove and under the worn covers.

“Will you play me your duduk tonight?” asked Ilya.

“With that musician in the barn underneath?” asked Karev with an almost mischievous smile.

“He’s not half as good as you,” replied Ilya distantly.

“We’ll see,” replied Karev, digging in the old chest that stood by the wall. He crossed himself and drew the old wooden instrument out, worn but well-kept. He fingered it for a few moments, shaking his head, before he put the reed to his lips, took a long breath, closed his eyes, and played. The long, quavering, almost melancholy tone calmly echoed out over the darkening room. Ilya yawned again, waiting for the last note, which quivered slightly as Karev finished and stood, almost transfixed, staring at the instrument and then at Ilya.

“*Astvats bahe*,” he murmured under his breath, shaking his head again.

“What were the words?” asked Ilya, distantly.

“Which words?” asked Karev, equally distantly, still staring.

“The words for the song,” Ilya replied.

“Oh, the song,” Karev said hesitantly, “I haven’t sung them for years.”

“Do sing them.”

Karev was silent for a while before he made his decision.

“They are good ones,” he said, and his deep bass began.

Sleep, my little falcon
May your sleep be pure!
Sleep, my little falcon,
May your rest endure!
If I leave tomorrow
Wait until the dawn
When the mountains, rising
Hail my glad return...”

But Ilya did not hear the rest. He was already asleep. Karev finished the lines before he noticed that the boy was in the land of dreams. He slowly fell on his knees to the floor and raised his hands into the air.

“My God,” he said, shaking his head still, “My God! Why did it have to be like this? Why are you still so far from helping us?”

He froze in that position. For underneath the floor, he heard the Persian moving about. Unless it was the goats. Karev quietly got up and went to climb under his own blankets, head up against the chest so that he could feel any movements if a robber or spy happened by.

Ilya woke up feeling very refreshed, almost as if he had been dead for a few hours. He sprang out of under the covers. Karev was as usual stirring the porridge, in a larger pot than usual, just next to him on the stove.

“Run and milk the goats, Ilya,” Karev said, ruffling the boy’s hair as he pulled on his

tattered and patched garments, “We must start early to get the last of the walnuts in!”

Ilya was out of the door in a flash. Kazbek was still looking down at the village from its towering heights. An eagle was soaring high overhead, emitting ear piercing screams, that from so far down were faint and eerie. The goats butted Ilya and nibbled his hands, stained from the walnuts, their bells donging excitedly.

“Get off!” he cried affectionately, “I’m not a walnut!”

He tied the first of the two nanny goats to the stake they used, so that the impatient creature could not kick the bucket over or run away, as they were always disposed to do. The other one bleated in distress to see its friend so treated, and hopped around excitedly, the bells ringing ridiculously as it did. Ilya whistled Karev’s old lullaby as he milked the goat, hardly thinking about it. It was very Russian-sounding and not at all

Karev, but he had played it so many times to the boy at night that it didn't strike him as being odd. Someone else clearly thought it was, because a foreign voice interrupted him as he ended the stanza.

"Salam, little master of the house!"

It was the Persian musician.

"Bairæ," Ilya did not like to be outdone and used the common Ossetian greeting all the villagers used.

"You are an odd one!" laughed the musician, "You whistle a very strange song. I have never heard it before, but the style is very Russian. And then you greet me in Ossetian."

"Is it that odd?" asked Ilya, looking up as he finished milking the goat.

"Yes," the Persian said, poking further, "Tell me, what are the words of the song? Did you invent it yourself?"