

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries  
**Woldemar Baron von Uxkull (1860-1952)**

**The Court Martial**

(from *Kaukasische Novellen*, 'Caucasian Novellas,' Berlin: Edwin Runge Verlag, 1912)

Tall and strong, in the picturesque costume of their home, and with self-consciously ingenuous expressions on their faces, Rashid and Selim strolled through the streets of the city.

They had come from the mountains.

A rocky valley, an eagle's nest on a mountain ledge, was their home; there they lived according to the customs of their fathers. There were no schools in that wilderness; three times a day the Mullah ascended the minaret and called the Faithful to prayer.

Breeding livestock and horses, and a little agriculture, were the main occupations of the inhabitants. But other things also happened, although they were not spoken of: the people had become very discreet and cautious ever since they realised how little understanding the Tsarist authorities had for "deeds of knightly heroism," which had been customary from time immemorial. People stuck together, and when Allah sent a "blessing" in the watches of the night, the whole village had a share of it. Now it was the horses or livestock of an enemy tribe; at times there were wares as well. Once, even an entire camel caravan heavily laden with carpets had been brought home to the village, and since then beautiful Persian carpets had decorated the simple houses of the village inhabitants.

Selim was going to get married in the next few days. He had come to the city to buy wedding jewellery for his bride-to-be, beautiful Aminett, and to acquire other items for this celebration. He had asked his relative and neighbour Rashid to come with him to be of help with the purchases.

When Selim and Rashid, straight after their arrival in the city, entered the shop of their acquaintance, the merchant Ali, they did not notice the alarm reflected on his features when he saw the long daggers, customary to that land, hanging from the guests' belts. But Ali controlled himself and said nothing, instead carrying on the conversation in the conventional manner; only when the coffee had been drunk and inquiries after the well-being of relatives on both sides had accompanied their cigarettes, did the merchant explain what difficult times they were at present. Without looking at the daggers which they both had on their belts, he informed them that several days before, an order from the authorities had been publicised by way of notices in the streets, through which the bearing of weapons was prohibited. Actually, a state of martial law held sway in the city and the court martials had already begun their business.

Selim and Rashid did not say a word; but when they had concluded their transaction and left the shop, they drew their cloaks, their *bishts*, tightly together so that nobody would see their daggers. They espied an empty courtyard, and looking cautiously around, they took their daggers from their belts and concealed them under their tunics, the *chokha*;<sup>1</sup> then they entered the street with easier consciences.

To the mountain-dweller, who has lived many months in wild

---

<sup>1</sup> Or *cherkeska*: a woollen coat with a high neck.

solitude, the city always offers something new: the surging of people in various costumes, the shops with all their seductive splendour, the cinematographs which have triumphantly marched into the Caucasus as well, all of this was stimulating for Selim and Rashid and new for them every time. They leisurely ambled through the crowd, exchanging remarks with one another every now and then. Suddenly they heard a piercing scream and immediately afterwards a Tatar ran past them before disappearing into a side-alley. Selim and Rashi stopped and looked in the direction whence the scream had rung out. They saw people rushing thither and an Armenian merchant lying on the ground breathing his last. There was a thin red trickling from the wound in the region of his heart. A *gorodovo*<sup>2</sup> who had rushed over on hearing the scream began to question the bystanders if they knew the murdered man, and if they had seen the man who had dealt the blow.

Selim and Rashi had a feeling that it would be wiser to take themselves off, so as not to be drawn into this affair as witnesses. As they were moving away with somewhat quickened steps, they heard someone calling behind them, and turning around, they saw the policeman running after them and breathlessly shouting to them to stop. Nobody had been able to tell him who had perpetrated the murder; then he had noticed the two Caucasians going away and run after them, impelled by the comprehensible desire to be able to bring any old guilty party before his superior.

\*

---

<sup>2</sup> Patrolman.

Astonished and with a sense of foreboding, Selim and Rashid came to a halt. The policeman declared them to be under arrest. Well might they ask in their defective Russian what crime they had committed; the gorodovoi, happy to have two guilty persons, curtly rejoined that they would find out very soon. Selim quietly asked Rashid if he should not do the policeman in and flee. But Rashid shook his head. "We have nothing to fear," he said, "and we cannot testify to anything, as we saw nothing but only heard the scream." When the policeman returned to the scene of the crime with the two sons of the mountain walking proudly before him, everyone turned their attention towards the arrested men; the crowd, undiscerningly as ever, took a hostile attitude towards the prisoners. The policeman began to question those present. Although nobody could attest to the crime having been committed by Selim and Rashid, yet several Armenians claimed to have seen the two tall Caucasians in the immediate proximity at the moment when their compatriot was murdered. This statement, and the circumstance that the policeman had noticed their going away with quickened steps, sufficed to uphold the arrest. One of those present said to a man who came up, pointing to Rashid and Selim: "The murderers have already been arrested." Then Rashid turned to the policeman and, suppressing his infuriation only with difficulty, asked if he really believed that they had murdered the Armenian. "The investigation will bring that to light," he said, "whoever has a good conscience doesn't need to run away." Selim and Rashid loudly protested their innocence and swore by Allah that they knew nothing about the crime. "We know, we know," said the gorodovoi, and giving a military salute, he reported to his

superior, who had rushed to the scene with several constables, the murder of an Armenian merchant moments before, and the arrest of two natives who had tried to leave hurriedly and had been seen by several witnesses near the scene of the crime at the moment of the murder. “To the police station with them,” the *okolotochnii*<sup>3</sup> commanded, “and see to it that they don’t escape from you on the way.” With revolvers in their hands, the policemen encircled Selim and Rashid and conducted them, under the threat of shooting them at once in case of an attempt to flee, to the police station.

In the police station, the two of them had to wait a long time before the mighty one, the *pristav*,<sup>4</sup> condescended to receive them, brusquely and uncivilly, in the full consciousness of that dignity of his which had granted him almost absolute power over the population. The *gorodovoi* stepped forward with a military salute and recounted the suspicious circumstances under which the two had been arrested. The *pristav* asked for the name, age, place of residence and denomination of the arrested men, inquired why they had come to the city, and demanded their passports. Rashid, who had somewhat more knowledge of people and experience of the world, drew his passport out of his *chokha* and dexterously inserted a ten-ruble note into it while Selim handed his passport over to the *pristav*. Dexterously though Rashid had slipped the money into the passport, yet the *pristav* had seen the movement, and connivingly screwing his right eye up a little, he asked Rashid, “Do you

---

<sup>3</sup> Police sergeant. Von Uxkull has “*okolodotschnik*.”

<sup>4</sup> Police chief.

admit that you are guilty of having murdered the Armenian?"

"But no," Rashid exclaimed indignantly, "Allah in Heaven is our witness that we did not do it."

"Why did you go away in such haste, before you were arrested?" asked the pristav.

"We did not want to be drawn into the matter, we were afraid that we would be called upon as witnesses."

"Do you have any weapons at all?" asked the pristav, who had looked at the passports and, unobserved and skilfully, made the ten-ruble note disappear up his sleeve. With this question, he wished to offer his current protégés the possibility of proving their innocence, for if they had no weapons whatsoever on their persons, they could not have committed the murder. Uncertain how they should answer, Selim and Rashid exchanged a swift, questioning look, which was caught not only by the pristav but also by his small, ugly clerk. The latter was an Armenian, with black hair, piercing dark eyes, and a large, bulbous hanging nose; he received only a small salary and was forced to procure supplementary income for himself. He could prove himself really helpful to people who had propitiated him, but it was his principle never to leave unpunished any negligence in this regard. He had seen something disappearing up the pristav's sleeve and now wanted to give an example of his power and his influence, for it vexed him that he was to receive nothing on this occasion. What most mattered to him was making a name for himself. People, and the gorodovois as well, should know that it was good to have him for a friend and it was dangerous to ignore him.

When Rashid and Selim somewhat uncertainly gave a negative answer to the pristav's question whether they had weapons, the clerk stood up and deferentially asked the pristav if it would not be advisable to subject the arrestees to a body search. "They may have weapons concealed on their persons."

This was inconvenient for the pristav, but the presence of the gorodovois meant that he could not well dismiss the clerk's suggestion. If they are innocent, it's lucky for them, he thought, but if they have weapons on them, that's not my fault, why are they lying? Besides, the ten rubles are mine one way or the other. "Search them," he commanded the gorodovois in attendance.

Again Rashid wondered if he should not knock the gorodovoi standing in front of him to the floor and take to his heels through the open door, but the thought of perhaps being held up by the public in the ante-room and only making himself more suspicious thereby, induced him to dismiss the thought, which had come to him in a flash, with equal rapidity.

The gorodovois had walked up to the two Caucasians and begun to feel and search both their bodies with not exactly gentle hands. With the very first grabs, made at breast-level, the concealed daggers were found. The gorodovois triumphantly showed them to the pristav and laid them down on the table before him.

Selim and Rashid guiltily hung their heads, not saying a word; the stroke of ill-luck had fallen, the daggers been discovered. They felt an inescapable disaster coming ever nearer, becoming ever greater. They knew that carrying weapons was prohibited but hoped all the same that the

now well-disposed pristav would somehow help them out.

“You see, sir,” the clerk said with a scornful laugh, “it is just as I said.”

The pristav chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. He was not clear as to what he should do.

“You lied, you heels,” he barked at the two arrestees.

“Forgive us, sir, we only discovered in the city that carrying weapons is prohibited; that is why we concealed our daggers. But we did not kill the Armenian. Allah is our witness. We can swear so by the sacred beard of the prophet,” Rashid averred.

“Pray look at our daggers, sir,” said Selim, “they are completely clean, there is no blood on them.”

Reluctantly the pristav pulled one dagger after the other out of their sheaths; there were no bloodstains, the steel flashed like brightly polished silver.

Rashid and Selim’s innocence of the murder was proven; the pristav pushed the daggers back into their sheaths and decided to keep them for himself and release both the arrestees. Then the clerk stood up again and, humbly approaching the pristav, whispered into his ear: “Carrying weapons brings you before the Court Martial, sir.”

Rashid and Selim were far too naïve to understand the full significance of these two words, and had only an uncertain feeling that their situation was worsening. But the gorodovois knew that this signified grievous consequences for both the arrestees and looked almost with pity at the proud, handsomely grown sons of the mountain, and many of them



might have had the feeling: It's a shame that there's no helping them. The pristav then had his clerk draw up a report to the chairman of the Court Martial sitting in the city, in which he stated the circumstances under which Rashid and Selim had been arrested; he pointed out that they had carried daggers on their persons but there were no bloodstains on them. Then he beckoned an older gorodovoi over to him, gave him the report and the two daggers and said, "Take both these arrested men to the artillery barracks, hand them over to the Court Martial there, and deliver this communication and these daggers found on the prisoners to the chairman." As the gorodovoi turned to go, the clerk ordered, "Tie their hands behind their backs, so they do not escape from you on the way." The gorodovois fetched ropes out the pockets of their dark coats and bound the hands of Rashid and Selim, who grimly and silently submitted to this ignominy, behind their backs.

"Forward, march."

Surrounded by three policemen, they were both taken to the artillery barracks situated outside the city. In the street, many a heart contracted in pity at sight of them, but others gazed after them with indifference – "they may be robbers whom the police have caught."

Rashid and Selim were ashamed to be led through the streets with their hands bound behind their backs in broad daylight. But they could not do anything about it. The cup of ignominy had to be drained to the dregs. Walking beside one another, from time to time they exchanged disjointed words in their language – incomprehensible to the gorodovois. They were not forbidden this. The policemen had human hearts under their uniforms.

They knew that these two mountain-dwellers were going towards severe punishment – why shouldn't they talk with one another now?

When the artillery barracks, in the open country before the city, came into sight, the policeman walking beside Rashid drew nearer to him and quietly asked him if he could speak Tatar.

"Yes, certainly," replied Rashid in that language.

The two other gorodovois, with the amiability of good colleagues, pretended not to hear anything. If their comrade wanted to have some words with the prisoners, then he must have a good reason for doing so, and as they had heard his approach, he would have to "share" with them to avoid their reporting him.

"You know that we are taking you before the Court Martial," the gorodovoi continued.

"I know."

"That's no joke."

"But I am innocent of the merchant's murder."

"You were arrested while fleeing and had weapons on you, and concealed ones to boot – that's enough."

"We came to the city and knew nothing about the prohibition of carrying weapons."

"All the same, I wouldn't like to be in your shoes right now," said the gorodovoi, and some moments later he added, "If you want, I could send your friends news of your arrest – there's no time to lose!"

"How is that?"

"Some of the Court Martial's sentences are carried out before

sunset.”

Rashid felt as if an invisible hand had laid itself on his throat and were throttling him.

“I have no friends here – only the merchant Ali in the Alexandrovskaya knows us.”

“Well, he must know a good advocate?”

“Yes, I think he once said something like that. Please, go to him and tell him to send the advocate to us – my entire family would be eternally grateful to him and sell our last sheep, should it be necessary.”

“I *can* certainly go, but...” he hesitated.

“Oh, I see,” said Rashid, understanding the hint, “please reach into the left side of my chokha and take my pocket-book – there must still be 30 rubles inside.”

“Not here,” whispered the gorodovoi, “in the barracks, in the dark anteroom. I don’t know if I’m allowed to do this, but I feel sorry for you both, and I’ll tell the merchant what has befallen you.”

When they had reached the barracks and were taken through a dusky corridor into a guard-room, the gorodovoi walked up to Rashid and drew a little book out of his chokha which he slipped into his pocket. Then he left it to his two comrades to hand the prisoners over to the Court Martial and hurried to merchant Ali, whom he informed of the arrest of his two acquaintances and the circumstances under which this happened. Ali listened to the news with the calmness of the Oriental; but when the gorodovoi had departed, he hurriedly made his way to a lawyer he knew, a Mohammedan, to ask him to help his two friends. The lawyer, still a young

man, promised to do his utmost, but he said straight away that he had little hope if the case had been placed in the hands of the Court Martial. Before an ordinary court, it was a different matter, but the Court Martial did not like to allow defence lawyers. He did not, it was true, know Selim and Rashid, but he felt sympathy for their fate, for he expected them to be given a long prison sentence. He got ready immediately, and taking a droshky, he drove out to the barracks, where Rashid and Selim had been made to wait in a guard-room for some time. The gorodovois had been chatting and smoking with the soldiers. On the walls hung some old, grey soldier's cloaks. Stuffiness filled the space. Rashid and Selim stood there with darkly knitted brows, with the feeling of ill-fortune past and ill-fortune yet to come.

After some time, several soldiers appeared with drawn sabres and beckoned the two to come with them.

The gorodovois followed also.

A long, dusky corridor, a flight of dirty backstairs, another corridor – then a door was opened and the arrestees found themselves in a large room that was brightly lit by three tall windows. Light-grey walls painted with distemper. A life-sized portrait of the Tsar with a friendly smile on his benevolent features. In the middle of the room, three officers sat at a long table draped with green cloth. The oldest of them a colonel; the two others lieutenants. The colonel was a man of middle height with sparse dark hair, a pointed nose and glasses. To his right sat a tall and lanky, quite short-sighted blond lieutenant, who was cutting his well-manicured, rosy fingernails with a small ivory pocket-knife. The third officer, a young dark-haired man, had pushed his chair back somewhat, tired from a night of

drinking. He had his hands in his trouser-pockets and yawned, stretching himself, without holding his hand before his mouth.

A gorodovoi stepped forward with a military salute and handed the communication and the weapons found on the arrestees over to the chairman. The chairman read out the report, threw a glance at the daggers, which were of no especial value, and told the policeman that would do, they could leave now. Then he looked at the arrestees. His eyes were cold and stern.

“Do you understand Russian?” he asked them.

“A little,” replied Rashid, who had a fairly good command of the language, whereas Selim could barely speak it.

“Well, a little will be enough for us,” said the colonel with a peculiar smile. “I shall not keep you long, gentlemen,” he said, turning to his two comrades, “the case is clear-cut.” Then he asked the arrestees their name, age, place of residence, creed, and wrote down all the answers, for he had been ordered by his superiors to render an account for every case.

“Do you admit to having murdered the Armenian?”

“But no”, replied Rashid, “never – Allah is our witness.”

Selim looked silently and tensely with his big black eyes from one speaker to the other.

“But you ran away,” said the Colonel, “or do you deny that also?”

“How should we deny that, Sir – but we walked, we did not run.”

“And why?”

“We did not want to be summoned before the court as witnesses.”

“Do you confess to having had these weapons on you?”

“Yes! But we did not know that it was prohibited.”

“That will do. Take the prisoners into the next room,” the Colonel ordered the soldiers who stood with drawn sabres beside the arrestees. The prisoners were taken away.

“Gentlemen,” the Colonel said to the two officers, who had up to that point continued with their occupations of yawning every so often and cleaning and paring their nails, “gentlemen, the case is clear-cut – the arrested men hurried away after the murder and had weapons on their persons – moreover, hidden ones – both of which facts prove their guilt.”

“But there is no blood on the dagger,” the blond lieutenant said carelessly, “at least, so the pristav writes”. He snapped his pocket-knife shut, reached for a dagger and drew it from its sheath. The steel flashed brightly. “You see, Colonel.”

“No matter, one must make an example – these natives shall learn to obey our commands,” said the Colonel. His voice sounded piercingly sharp. “Yes, if you regard the matter from a political standpoint, then it’s certainly different,” said the blond, giving in.

“The army has a mission to procure respect for the Russian name in the border regions,” rasped the Colonel.

“Oh, politics,” yawned the dark-haired lieutenant, “if you mix them into this, then of course we have nothing more to say.”

“The general has ordered us to proceed with severity, gentlemen.”

“Yes, but only against those who are truly guilty, Colonel,” the blond dared to say.

“Well, there really is no doubt of their guilt, the proofs lie before us

on the table.”

“Of course,” said the dark-haired lieutenant. His thoughts were elsewhere; he wanted to see the matter quickly settled.

“But they are actually guilty only of having weapons,” the blond said stubbornly.

“We are assembled for a Court Martial and are not in a district court. We have only to ask if the accused are guilty or not.”

“They are guilty – yes,” said the blond.

“Of course, guilty!” added the dark-haired lieutenant, rocking on his chair.

“I demand the death penalty,” the Colonel declared, “we must make an example – teach the natives to respect the government.”

“Of course, I agree,” yawned the dark-haired officer.

His blond comrade wanted to say something; he had a vague feeling that it was his duty to oppose this sentence, but he could not find the words in which to dress his dissent. In any case, the Colonel, who was for settling such matters quickly, had already seized a bell on the table and ordered the soldier who entered to bring the prisoners in to hear their judgement. The door opened, and under military escort, Rashid and Selim walked into the courtroom.

The Colonel stood up, a paper in his hand, and without looking at the prisoners he said: “You are found guilty of carrying weapons on your persons contrary to the order of the Governor, and of having hurriedly moved away after the Armenian merchant was found murdered. The Court Martial has condemned you to death by firing squad. The sentence is to be

carried out by sunrise.”

Rashid knew enough Russian to understand what was said; looking steadily at Selim, he told him, in few words, the content of the sentence. Rashid wanted to speak, he actually wanted to protest against this sentence, to call upon Allah as witness to his innocence, but his pride did not allow him to humble himself before the hated infidels; he also recognised that it would be in vain. Bolt upright in spite of his hands being tied behind his back, with flaming eyes, he stood there not saying a word.

“What are you waiting for?” the Colonel shouted at the soldiers. “Take the prisoners to the detention-room. And you, Lieutenant,” turning to the dark-haired officer sitting on his right, “will be in charge of carrying out the sentence.” “Very good, Colonel,” the lieutenant said sullenly. He stood up and lit a cigarette.

“And now, gentlemen,” said the Colonel, “it is time for us to go into the casino and eat lunch. Today we have Roast Caucasian mutton, which tastes excellent when basted with wine from Kakheti.”<sup>5</sup> The gentlemen stood up, stretched themselves, and left the courtroom with the Colonel at their head. They betook themselves to the casino.

While the officers were eating lunch, the lawyer came driving up there in a droshky. He sent his visiting card in through a young man and was conducted to a room which, decorated with the Tsar’s portrait, was used to hold the officers’ festivities.

Some time later the Colonel appeared, a little constrained; he thought this was proper towards a gentleman in civilian clothes. After the

---

<sup>5</sup> A historical province of Georgia.



lawyer had introduced himself and the gentlemen exchanged greetings, the Colonel requested his visitor to take a seat. The latter asked at first if he had the honour of speaking with the chairman of the Court Martial that was currently in session. When the Colonel had answered in the affirmative, the lawyer revealed that he had received the news from Ali, a merchant who was known to him, that two friends of the latter had been arrested. He had come to offer the arrested men his services.

“You have come too late,” the Colonel dryly remarked, “the two natives who were arrested today have already been condemned to death, and the sentence is to be carried out by sunset today.”

The lawyer felt something inside him give a jerk; he had not expected the affair to be settled so quickly. But he controlled himself and asked the Colonel if it was possible for him to take a look at the records.

“We do not actually keep records, I made only some cursory notes, on the basis of which I then drew up my report to the general.”

“I see. On what grounds did you sentence them to death?”

“For carrying weapons, which, as you doubtless know, is prohibited. In addition, an Armenian merchant was murdered and they hurried away from the scene of the crime.”

“Have they confessed to the murder?”

“Not to that. But you know what these people are like. It is their principle always to lie. Here in the Caucasus they are all robbers or murderers, more or less. And we wanted to make an example and so we condemned them. We must teach these foreign tribes respect.”

“That is certainly most correct, Colonel,” the lawyer courteously

replied, "and I do not want to say a word against the measures which you deem to be necessary for political reasons; that would be going too far. I would only like to ask you if you have proof that the two arrestees committed the murder?"

"We do not have that," the Colonel said candidly, "we actually have proof that they did not commit the murder. Both of the daggers taken from them have no bloodstains."

The lawyer leapt up from his chair. "And you sentenced them to death, although you have the proof that they cannot be the murderers?"

"Oh," said the Colonel, standing up, "if they do not have this murder, they will have some other one on their consciences. Besides, we did not condemn them for the murder, but for carrying weapons. We wanted to make an example, I repeat, one must instil respect in the natives."

"Do you not believe", asked the lawyer, his voice quivering a little, "that the punishment is out of all proportion to the violation of the law?"

"I have already told you," the Colonel said very stiffly, straightening up somewhat, "that we wished to make an example. Do you require anything else?"

"Have mercy, Colonel," the lawyer said in a strained voice. "Tell me, can anything be done to save these two unfortunates?"

"I don't know what," said the Colonel, shrugging his shoulders. "The Court Martial allows no appeal."

"But one can ask for a delay, and a pardon, can one not?"

"Yes, if you succeed in interesting the Governor in this matter. If he quashes the sentence or orders a new investigation, then things will be

different. But otherwise – by sunset!”

“I shall see what can be done,” said the lawyer, and he left the casino after a hasty farewell.

He leapt into his droshky and, looking at his watch, ordered the cabman to drive to the Governor’s mansion. It was already half-past three. Would he be able to speak with the Governor?

He was agitated; although he had never seen the two arrestees, their tragic fate had deeply moved him. He had not yet had his feelings dulled by many years of rubbing against authorities and civil servants. “Sentenced to death for carrying weapons” – that seemed to him too hard and unjust. He really wanted to save the condemned men. When he finally came driving up before the portals of the mansion and hurried in, the tall, dignified porter walked up to him and asked with a certain disdain – he only had respect for a uniform – whom he wished to see.

“I must see the Governor,” the lawyer replied hurriedly and nervously.

“The Governor receives only until one o’clock,” the porter said coldly and matter-of-factly.

“But it is a very important matter, I must see the Governor, I must be announced to him.”

“His Excellency receives only until one o’clock,” the giant in livery repeated.

“But it concerns the lives of two people,” the lawyer snapped at him. “You must announce me.”

“I may not,” said the giant. “It is His Excellency’s pleasure to rest at

this time.”

Then the lawyer employed the wonder-working, benefit-bringing, all-solving method. He walked up to the giant and slipped something into his hand. “What should I do, tell me?”

“I may not announce you,” the long livery said in a now friendly tone, “but speak with the officer on duty; if you wish to see the Governor this day, it can happen only through his mediation.”

“Where can I speak with him?”

“Please, proceed this way into the reception-room,” said the porter, opening a door before the lawyer. “I shall announce you to him.”

The reception room was banal and dreary: a divan covered with imitation leather and corresponding chairs against the walls under the portraits of past tsars. The lawyer paced up and down the room in agitation. The task of doing something for the arrestees had been allotted to him very suddenly; he had interrupted his work in his office only with reluctance, but the discussion with the Colonel had shown him that two innocent men were going to suffer here for reasons of higher politics. His sense of justice revolted against this; he had made the cause of the condemned men his own and wanted to do everything in his power to save them or to at least lighten their lot.

The door opened, and the “Officer for Special Commissions” walked in. A handsome young man, with carefully styled hair and moustache, in a well-fitting back tail-coat with golden buttons. At balls which the Governor gave, he had to play the major-domo to some degree, and had thereby acquired certain courteous manners and movements which he did not cast

off even in his ordinary duties.

Very politely, yet with a certain reserve, he asked the lawyer how he could be of service to him.

Somewhat hastily and nervously, the latter told him what it was about and asked the officer to procure him an audience with the Governor; two human lives were at stake.

“Only two natives,” the officer let out with disdain.

“Their life is just as valuable to them as life is to someone who had the good fortune to be born in Moscow and to enjoy all civil rights.”

“I cannot enter into any discussions with you here,” the officer said with a haughty expression.

The lawyer gave way; the fate of the condemned men was close to his heart. “I have absolutely no wish to say anything that could displease you, I appeal in this matter only to your kind heart and beg you for your intercession.” “I can do very little,” the official said, flattered, “It is His Excellency’s pleasure to rest, and afterwards he will drink tea in Her Excellency’s drawing-room, and in the evening we have company. But come before dinner, between five and six, then I shall try to announce you to the Governor, he might receive you.”

The sun goes down around seven o’clock, thought the lawyer, so the Governor could have time to phone the barracks to postpone the execution until the matter has been investigated anew. He saw that there was nothing to be done at the moment, and thanking the official for having given him a hearing, he took his leave with the promise to return at five o’clock. Then he sat down in the droshky and, moved by a sense of

unease, ordered the cabman to drive to the barracks.

He felt no hunger; his agitation at the fate of the two condemned men had made him forget his midday meal. He wanted to see them both: he knew fine well that these sons of the mountain needed no words of comfort, but he wanted to make their acquaintance and give them an assurance that they had a friend who would look after them and do everything in his power to save them.

In the barracks guardroom he asked after the condemned men. A corporal with massive, immovable features answered with much pride that nobody was allowed to speak with the prisoners without permission from the authorities. A civilian was an inferior member of humanity in his eyes, whom it was in keeping with the dignity of a corporal to meet with disdain. But a small silver coin, laid in the right place at the right moment, had the effect that the corporal made himself ready to fetch permission for the lawyer to see the prisoners from the officer to whom they were entrusted.

“Wait here,” he said graciously and disappeared. The soldiers in the guardroom, lolling about and chatting, took no further notice of the civilian, who paced up and down filled with inner unrest. The corporal very soon came back and said self-importantly, “You are allowed to visit the prisoners but only in my presence and after I have satisfied myself that you have no weapons on you which you could slip to the arrestees.”

“Please, search me,” said the lawyer, raising his arms a little.

The corporal walked over to him and ran his fingers, not exactly the cleanest, through every pocket. When he had the lawyer’s pocketbook in the breast-pocket between his fat fingers, the latter thought the moment

had come to say a final farewell to it and its contents, but this fear proved unnecessary. The possessor of the fat, unwashed fingers was still in the benevolent mood engendered by the silver coin and did not know how much was in the book in question. "Come," he said, beckoning to the lawyer. He walked after the corporal down a long, dusky corridor, then a door was opened before him and he found himself in a narrow room which received only a poor light through a barred window at the far end. On a bench against the wall he saw two figures sitting, bent slightly forward. To make the corporal more amenable, he offered him a papyros,<sup>6</sup> which the latter took from the cigarette case after touching almost all the other ones. Then the lawyer walked over to the two prisoners. "I am Lawyer D.," he said in a low voice in Tatar, "friend of the merchant Ali. He has asked me to help you."

"Praised be Allah who sent you," said Rashid, and his large dark eyes lit up. "We are innocent and have fallen into the hands of these infidels. We did not murder the Armenian merchant, we can swear it by the beard of the Prophet."

"I know, I know. I have spoken with the officer who chaired the court... I know that you did not kill the Armenian, and the officer knows it also... they did not condemn you for that, but because you were carrying weapons."

"In our mountains, no man walks without weapons. We did not know it was prohibited and only learned this in the city."

"Well, ignorance of the laws does not protect from punishment, but I

---

<sup>6</sup> A little tobacco rolled up in thin paper to smoke as a cigar.

have come to tell you that I have tried to speak to the Governor to ask him to investigate your case once again. I have not been able to see him yet, but one of his officers told me I was to go back between five and six, then I would be able to talk with him.”

“Allah bless you for standing up for two unfortunate men,” said Rashid, “and reward you for it on the Day of Judgement.”

“What a man can do, I shall do for you” ... the lawyer laid his hand on Rashid’s shoulder ... and noticed that the prisoners’ arms were still tied behind their backs.

“What, you still have your hands bound?”

“As you can see,” replied Rashid, “the cords are cutting in, they pulled them so tight.”

The lawyer stood up and walked over to the corporal. “Is it regulatory for the prisoners’ hands to be tied?”

“I cannot know that,” the corporal mechanically replied.

“But they cannot run away, here in prison ... could their hands not be untied?”

“I cannot know that.”

The lawyer regretted not having a pocket-knife about him, or he would himself have cut through the cords, for he felt it to be a needless cruelty to leave the prisoners sitting with their hands tied behind their backs all day long.

“Like this, you cannot eat at all; have you not been given anything?”

“Not a piece of bread, not a drop of water,” said Rashid.

“How is that?” the lawyer asked the corporal. “Are prisoners here



not given anything to eat?”

“I cannot know that”.

“But one cannot leave them without food.”

“The authorities have given no order,” the corporal said with indifference.

The lawyer looked at his watch; it was already half-past four.

“I must go to the Governor now ... I shall do everything I can.”

We lay our lives in your hands and will bear witness before Allah on the Day of Judgement that you have taken the part of the innocent and the unfortunate.”

“May He help me to save you,” said the lawyer, and he left the detention-room. He got into his droshky and ordered the cabman to drive to the Governor’s mansion. His heart was seething; the unjust sentence and the treatment of the two prisoners enraged him ... he burnt with desire to help them, they had given him the impression that they were thoroughly good and ingenuous, albeit a little limited. In the mountains and ravines, on night-time rides, in battles and the ruses of war, he thought, they would hold their own ... but when they had to deal with law, decrees, officials, then these sons of the mountain were as helpless as fish in a net.

\*

When he arrived before the Governor’s house in his small droshky, he saw a saloon car stop in front of the door and ladies in elegant, light-coloured evening attire get out of it. He did not wait until his carriage could drive forward but jumped down and hurried after the women into the hall. The tall porter punctiliously received the Governor’s guests and took the

ladies' evening-cloaks, while having neither a word nor a look for the lawyer, who was like a cat on hot bricks. Time after time the door opened and new guests walked in ... including some officers in epaulettes who gallantly raised to their lips the hands clothed in long white gloves which were held out to them by the ladies with amiable smiles. The lawyer could not take in this picture of social life ... another picture was in his mind ... he saw a long, narrow room in which two innocent men, unjustly condemned to death, languished with their hands tied behind their backs; and they had placed all their hope in him. That room had been dim when he was inside it, and now the shadows were probably growing longer, and longer, and then – the word flashed through him: “Sunset!”

He looked hastily and nervously at his watch ... still 20 or 30 minutes ... then it would be too late ... he weaved his way through the trains of the ladies, who were in part making themselves ready to ascend the carpeted stairs on the arms of the cavaliers, in part putting some aspect of their toilet in order before the tall pier mirrors, and reached the porter, who did not want to take any notice whatsoever of so insignificant a person as this suppliant. The lawyer gave him his card and said peremptorily, “Take my card to the officer on duty at once, he told me to come here at this time.”

“That is impossible. I cannot leave here now.”

The lawyer's patience snapped. “You will take this card in this very instant or I shall accuse you before the Governor. It concerns the lives of two innocent men, for whose deaths you will be jointly responsible if you do not deliver this card immediately.”

That worked.

The porter took the card, ascended the steps, and handed it to a servant with the instruction to take it to the official on duty. Again, the lawyer had to pace up and down for a while, nervous and agitated.

It was not long before the official he knew appeared, elegant and amiable.

“I regret,” he said as he approached, “that it has been impossible for me to apprise His Excellency of your wish.”

“But it concerns the lives of two innocent men, who have been condemned to death through an – let us say – inadvertence of the Court Martial,” the lawyer almost shouted in his agitation.

“Please do not shout like that,” the official said with icy coolness. “I am not deaf.”

“Forgive me, but the fate of the two upsets me.”

“Are they relations of yours?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Well, why are you getting so worked up? It is no disaster if there are two robbers less in the Caucasus.”

So as not to do any harm to the men entrusted to his care, the lawyer resisted the temptation to knock the elegant official to the floor with a powerful clip round the head. He restrained himself and asked, “Please announce me to the Governor.”

“That is impossible.”

“It concerns the lives of two innocent men!”

“I cannot ... it is not possible now ... I may not appear before His

Excellency with such a matter now ... You see that there are guests here.”

For a moment, the two men stood facing one another. In the lawyer’s eyes blazed hatred and outrage. Then the official regretfully threw out his hands with a slight bow, and the lawyer was alone with the porter, who had listened to the negotiations with condescending interest.

With heavy tread, the lawyer stamped out and got into his carriage. He was so disappointed and incensed that he could not compose his thoughts.

“Where to, sir?” the cabman asked.

“Back to the barracks,” said the lawyer, and he himself was astonished at this order ... for what am I to do there, he wondered, I cannot after all save them. Shall I tell them that my efforts have come to nothing? I don’t have the heart to.

Then the thought came to him that he could perhaps persuade the Colonel to postpone the implementation of the death sentence until he had succeeded in talking with the Governor.

“Drive on, cabman, use your whip ... you will receive a good tip.”

The cabman drove his little horse on ... Again and again the lawyer had to look at the sun, which was sinking on the horizon like a large red ball.

He approached the barracks.

Then ... an infantry salvo rattled out ... a second one straight afterwards. The lawyer’s heart was ready to stop ... then he covered his face with his hands and burst out into sobs ...

“Turn back ... turn back, we are too late.”

“It seems that they’ve shot someone there,” said the cabman.

The lawyer was not ashamed of his pain and his tears. He could see the two of them in his mind’s eye as they sat on the bench in the detention room with bound hands, and the grateful look in Rashid’s eyes when he informed him of his efforts to save them ... then it occurred to him that the relatives of the two men knew nothing about their arrest and so would not come to fetch the bodies for burial. An honourable burial should be theirs at any rate.

“Driver, turn back,” he ordered once again, “drive back to the barracks.”

He wanted to ask that the two bodies be handed over.