It was in '92, the famine year, between Sukhum and Ochemchiry, on the river Kodor, not far from the coast—hollow-sounding above the merry ripple of the glittering mountain stream I heard the rolling sea.

Autumn. Small, yellowed bay leaves were darting hither and thither in the white surf of the Kodor like nimble salmon trout. I was sitting on the high stony bank overlooking the river and thinking that the gulls and cormorants were also, probably, taking the leaves for fish and being fooled—and that was why
they were screaming so plaintively over there, on the right, beyond the trees, where the waves were lapping the shore.

The chestnut trees spreading above me were decorated with gold—at my feet lay numerous leaves that looked like hands severed from human wrists. The branches of the hornbeam on the opposite bank were already bare and hung in the air like a torn net. Inside the net, as if caught in it, hopped a yellow and red mountain woodpecker, tapping at the bark of the trunk with its black beak, driving out the insects—which were at once gobbled up by those guests from the north—the agile tomtits and grey nuthatches.

On my left, smoky clouds hung low over the mountain tops, threatening rain, and causing shadows to glide across the green slopes on which the boxwood trees grew, and where, in the hollows of the ancient beeches and lindens, one can find the “grog honey” which in the days of old nearly sealed the fate of the troops of Pompey the Great. It knocked a whole legion of the Roman iron sides off their feet with its inebriating sweetness. The wild bees make this honey from the pollen of bay and azalea blossoms, and “wayfarers” scoop it from the hollows and eat it, spreading it on their lavash—flat cakes made from wheat flour.

This is what I was doing, sitting on the stones under a chestnut tree, frightfully stung by an angry bee—I dipped my bread into my tea can, filled with honey, and ate, meanwhile admiring the idle play of the tired autumn sun.

The Caucasus in the autumn is like the interior of a magnificent cathedral which the great sages—being also great sinners—built to hide their shame for their past from prying eyes. They built a vast temple of gold, turquoise and emerald, and hung the mountain sides with the finest carpets embroidered in silk by the Turkmen in Samarkand and Shemaha; they plundered the whole world and brought all their loot here as a gift to the sun, as much as to say:

“Thine—from Thine—to Thee!”

... I saw a vision of long-bearded, hoary giants, large-eyed like merry children, descending from the mountains, beautifying the earth, scattering their multi-coloured treasures with a lavish hand, covering the mountain tops with thick layers of silver and the terraces with the living fabric of a vast variety of trees—and under their hands this patch of heaven-blessed earth was endowed with enchanting beauty.

It’s a fine job—being a man in this world! What wonderful things one sees! How the heart is stirred by pleasure almost akin to pain in one’s calm contemplation of beauty!

Yes, it’s true, sometimes you find it hard. Your breast is filled with burning hatred, and grief greedily sucks the blood from your heart—but this cannot last for ever. Even the sun often looks down on men in infinite sadness: it has laboured so hard for them, and what wretched manikins they have turned out to be!...

Of course, there’s a lot of good ones—but they need repair, or better still, to be made all over again.

... Above the bushes on my left I saw dark heads bobbing; barely perceptible above the murmur of the waves and the rippling sounds of the river I heard human voices—those were the “starving” on their way from Sukhum, where they had been building a road, to Ochemchiry, in the hope of getting another job.

I knew them—they were from Orel. I had worked with them in Sukhum and we had been paid off together the day before. I had left before them, at night, so as to reach the seashore in time to see the sun rise.

They were four muzhiks and a young peasant woman with high cheekbones; she was pregnant, her huge abdomen protruded
upward; she had bluish-grey eyes, seemingly bulging with fright. I could see her head above the bushes too, covered with a yellow kerchief, nodding like a sunflower in full bloom swaying in the wind. Her husband had died in Sukhum from overeating himself with fruit. I had lived in the same hutment with these people: from the good old Russian habit they had complained about their misfortunes so much, and so loudly, that their lamentations must have been heard a good five versts away.

They were dull people, crushed by sorrow, which had torn them from their native, worn-out, barren soil and had swept them like autumn leaves to this place, where the strange, luxuriant clime amazed and dazzled them, and where the hard conditions of labour had finally broken them. They gazed at everything about them, blinking their sad, faded eyes in perplexity, smiling pitifully to each other and saying in low voices:

"Ai-e-e ... what a soil!"
"The stuff just shoots up!"
"Ye-e-es ... but still ... it's very stony."
"It's not so good, you have to admit."

And then they recalled Kobily Lozhok, Sukhoi Gon, Mokrenki—their native villages, where every handful of earth contained the ashes of their forefathers; they remembered it, it was familiar and dear to them, they had watered it with the sweat of their brows.

There had been another woman with them—tall, upright, with a chest as flat as a board, a heavy jaw and dull, squinting eyes as black as coal.

In the evening she, together with the woman in the yellow kerchief, would go a little distance behind the hutment, squat down on a heap of stones, and resting her chin in the palm of her hand and inclining her head to the side, would sing in a high-pitched angry voice:

*Beyond the village churchyard,*
*Among the bushes green,*
*On the yellow sand I'll spread*
*My shawl so white and clean*
*And there I'll wait ...*
*Until my darling comes ...*
*And when he comes ...*
*I'll greet him heartily ...*

Usually the one in the yellow kerchief would sit silently looking down at her abdomen; but sometimes she would suddenly join in, and in a deep, drawling, masculine voice would sing the words of the sad refrain:

*Oh my darling ....*
*My dear darling ....*
*I am not fated ....*
*To see thee more ....*

In the black, suffocating darkness of the southern night, these wailing voices had awakened in me the memory of the snowy wilderness of the north, of the shrieking blizzard, and the howling of the wolves ....

Later the cross-eyed woman was struck down by fever and she was carried to the town on a canvas stretcher—on the way she shivered and moaned, and the moaning sounded as if she was continuing her song about the churchyard and the sand.

...The head in the yellow kerchief dived below the bush and vanished.

I finished my breakfast, covered the honey in my tea can with leaves, tied up my knapsack and leisurely followed in the
track of the other people, tapping the firm ground with my cornel-wood walking stick.

And so, there I was on the narrow, grey strip of road. On my right heaved the deep blue sea. It looked as though thousands of invisible carpenters were planing it with their planes, and the white shavings rustled on the beach, blown there by the wind; which was moist, warm and fragrant, like the breath of a robust woman. A Turkish felucca, listing heavily to port, was gliding towards Sukhum, its sails puffed out like the fat cheeks of the pompous road engineer in Sukhum—a most important fellow. For some reason he always said “shoot oop” for “shut up,” and “mebbe” for “may be.”

“Shoot oop! Mebbe you think you can fight, but in two ticks I’ll have you hauled off to the police station!”

He used to take a delight in having people dragged off to the police station, and it is good to think that by now the worms in his grave must have eaten his body right down to the bones.

... How easy it was to walk! Like treading on air. Pleasant thoughts, brightly-clad reminiscences, sang in soft chorus in my memory. These voices in my soul were like the white-crested waves of the sea—on the surface; deep down, however, my soul was calm. The bright and joyous hopes of youth swam leisurely, like silvery fish in the depths of the sea.

The road led to the seashore, winding its way nearer and nearer to the sandy strip that was lapped by the waves—the bushes too seemed to be striving to get a glimpse of the sea and swayed over the ribbon of road as if nodding greetings to the blue expanse.

The wind was blowing from the mountains—threatening rain.

... A low moan in the bushes—a human moan, which always goes to the heart.

Pushing the bushes apart I saw the woman in the yellow kerchief sitting with her back against the trunk of a walnut tree; her head was dropped on one shoulder, her mouth was contorted, her eyes bulged with a look of insanity. She was supporting her huge abdomen with her hands and breathing with such unnatural effort that her abdomen positively leapt convulsively. The woman moaned faintly, exposing her yellow wolfish teeth.

“What’s the matter? Did somebody hit you?” I asked, bending over her. She rubbed one bare foot against the other in the grey dust like a fly cleaning itself and, rolling her heavy head, she gasped:

“Go away!... Ain’t you got no shame? ... Go away!...”

I realized what was the matter—I had seen something like this before—of course I was scared and skipped back into the road, but the woman uttered a loud prolonged shriek, her bulging eyes seemed to burst and tears rolled down her flushed and swollen cheeks.

This compelled me to go back to her. I threw my knapsack, kettle and tea can to the ground, lay the woman flat on her back and was about to bend her legs at the knees when she pushed me away, punched me in the face and chest and, turning over, she crept off on all fours deeper into the bushes, grunting and growling like a she-bear:

“Devil!... Beast!”

Her arms gave way and she dropped, striking her face on the ground. She shrieked again, convulsively stretching her legs.

In the heat of the excitement I suddenly remembered all I had known about this business. I turned the woman over on her back and bent up her legs—the chorion was already visible, “Lie still, it’s coming!” I said to her.
I ran to the beach, rolled up my sleeves, washed my hands and returned, ready to act as midwife.

The woman writhed like birch-bark in the flames. She tapped the ground around her with the palms of her hands, and tearing up handfuls of faded grass she wanted to stuff it into her mouth; and in doing so she dropped earth onto her frightful, inhumanly contorted face and into her wild, bloodshot eyes—and now the chorion burst and the child’s head appeared. I had to restrain the convulsive jerking of her legs, help the child emerge, and see that she did not stuff grass into her distorted mouth...

We swore at each other a bit—she through her clenched teeth, and I in a low voice; she from pain and, perhaps, from shame, I from embarrassment and heart-rending pity for her... “Oh Lord! Oh Lord!” she cried hoarsely. Her livid lips were bitten through, there was foam at the corners of her mouth, and from her eyes, which seemed suddenly to have faded in the sun, flowed those abundant tears of a mother’s unbearable pain. Her whole body was taut, as if it were being torn in two. “Go... away... you... devil!”

She kept pushing me away with her feeble, seemingly dislocated arms. I said to her appealingly:

“Don’t be a fool! Try, try hard. It’ll be over soon.”

My heart was torn with pity for her, it seemed to me that her tears had splashed into my eyes. I felt as if my heart would burst. I wanted to shout, and I did shout:

“Come on! Hurry up!”

And lo—a tiny human being lay in my arms—as red as a beetroot. Tears streamed from my eyes, but through the tears I saw that this tiny red creature was already discontented with the world, kicking, struggling and yelling, although it was still tied to its mother. It had blue eyes, its funny little nose looked squashed on its red, crumpled face, and its lips were moving as it bawled:

“Ya-a-ah... Ya-a-a-ah.”

Its body was so slimy that I was afraid it would slip out of my arms. I was on my knees looking into its face and laughing—laughing with joy at the sight of him... and I forgot what had to be done next...

“Cut the cord...” the mother whispered. Her eyes were closed. Her face was haggard and grey, like that of a corpse, her livid lips barely moved as she said:

“Cut it... with your knife...”

But somebody in the hut had stolen my knife—so I bit the navel cord through with my teeth. The child yelled in a real, Orel bass voice. The mother smiled. I saw her eyes miraculously revive, and a blue flame burned in their bottomless depths. Her dark hand groped in her skirt, searching for her pocket, and her bloodstained, bitten lips moved.

“I’ve... no... strength... Bit of tape... in my pocket... tie up... navel,” she said.

I found the piece of tape and tied up the child’s navel. The mother smiled still more happily; that smile was so bright that it almost dazzled me.


But this red manikin didn’t need gentle-handling. He waved his fists and yelled as if challenging me to fight:

“Ya-a-a-ah... ya-a-a-ah.”

“That’s it! That’s it, little brother! Assert yourself. The neighbours will pull your head off if you don’t,” I warned him.

He emitted a particularly savage yell at the first impact of the surf which splashed us both, but when I began to slap his
chest and back he screwed up his eyes, and he struggled and shrieked as wave after wave washed his body.

"Go on, yell! Yell at the top of your lungs! Show 'em you come from Orel!" I shouted encouragingly.

When I brought him back to his mother she was lying on the ground with her eyes closed again, biting her lips from the fits of after-pain; but amidst her groaning and moaning I heard her whisper:

"Give ... give him ... to me."

"He can wait!"

"No! Give ... him ... to ... me!"

She unbuttoned her blouse with trembling uncertain hands. I helped her to uncover her breast, which nature had made fit to feed twenty children, and put the struggling Orelian to her warm body. The Orelian understood at once what was coming and stopped yelling.

"Holy Virgin, Mother of God," the mother muttered with a sigh, rolling her dishevelled head from side to side on the knapsack.

Suddenly she uttered a low shriek, fell silent again, and then opened her inexpressively beautiful eyes—the sacred eyes of a mother who has just given birth to a child. They were blue, and they gazed into the blue sky. A grateful, joyful smile gleamed and melted in them. Raising her weary arm the mother slowly crossed herself and her child....

"Bless you, Holy Virgin, Mother of God.... Oh ... bless you...."

The light in her eyes died out again. Her face again assumed that haggard hue. She remained silent for a long time, scarcely breathing. But suddenly she said in a firm, matter-of-fact tone:

"Laddie, untie my bag."

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I untied the bag. She looked hard at me, smiled faintly, and I thought I saw a blush, ever so faint, pass over her hollow cheeks and perspiring brow.

"Go off a little way," she said.

"Take care, don't disturb yourself too much," I warned her.

"All right.... All right.... Go away!"

I retired into the bushes nearby. I felt very tired, and it seemed as though beautiful birds were singing softly in my heart—and together with the unceasing murmur of the sea this singing sounded so good that I thought I could listen to it for a whole year....

Somewhere, not far away, a brook was bubbling—it sounded like the voice of a girl telling her friend about her lover....

A head rose above the bushes, covered with a yellow kerchief already tied in the regular way.

"Hey! What's this? You've got up rather soon, haven't you?" I cried in amazement.

The woman sat down on the ground, holding on to the branches for support; she looked as if all the strength had been drained from her. There was not a hint of colour in her ashen-grey face, except for her eyes, which looked like large, blue pools. She smiled a tender smile and whispered:

"Look—he's asleep."

Yes, he was sleeping all right, but no different from any other kid as far as I could see; if there was any difference it was only in the surroundings. He was lying on a heap of bright autumn leaves, under a bush, of the kind that don't grow in the Orel Gubernia.

"You ought to lie down for a bit, mother," I said.

"No-o-o," she answered, shaking her head weakly. "I've got to collect my things and go on to that place ... what do they call it?"
“Ochemchiry?”

“Yes, that’s right! I suppose my folks are a good few versts from here now.”

“But will you be able to walk?”

“What about the Virgin Mary? Won’t she help me?”

Well, since she was going with the Virgin Mary—I had nothing more to say!

She gazed down at the tiny, puckered, discontented face, warm rays of kindly light radiating from her eyes. She licked her lips and slowly stroked her breast.

I lit a fire and heaped some stones near it on which to place the kettle.

“I’ll give you some tea in a minute, mother,” I said.

“Oh! That will be fine.... My breasts feel dried up,” she answered.

“Have your folks deserted you?”

“No! Why should they? I dropped behind. They had had a drink or two.... And a good thing, too. I don’t know what I’d have done if they were around....”

She glanced at me, covered her face with her arm, spat out with blood and then smiled shamefacedly.

“Is he your first?” I asked.

“Yes, my first.... Who are you?”

“It looks like I’m a man....”

“You’re a man all right! Are you married?”

“I haven’t had the honour.”

“You are fibbing, aren’t you?”

“No, why should I?”

She cast her eyes down in reflection. Then she asked:

“How is it you know about this women’s business?”

Now I did tell a fib. I said:

“I learned about it. I’m a student. Do you know what that is?”

“Oh! That will be fine.... My breasts feel dried up,” she answered.

“Have your folks deserted you?”

“No! Why should they? I dropped behind. They had had a drink or two.... And a good thing, too. I don’t know what I’d have done if they were around....”

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“How is it you know about this women’s business?”

Now I did tell a fib. I said:
"What's the matter?" I enquired.
The woman stopped short as if she were scared, her face became ashen grey, and she tried to conceal something under her body. I guessed what it was.
"Give it to me, I'll bury it," I said.
"Oh, my dear! What are you talking about? It's got to be taken to a bathhouse and buried under the floor...."
"Do you think they'll build a bathhouse here soon?"
"You are joking, but I am afraid! Suppose a wild beast eats it.... Still, it's got to be buried...."
And with that she turned her face away and, handing me a moist, heavy bundle, she said shamefacedly, in a soft imploring voice:
"You'll do it thoroughly, won't you? Bury it as deep as you can, for the sake of Christ ... and my little one. You will, won't you?"

When I returned I saw her walking from the seashore with faltering steps and outstretched arm. Her skirt was wet to the waist. Her face had a touch of colour in it and seemed to be shining with an inner light. I helped her to the fire, thinking to myself in amazement:
"She has the strength of an ox!"

Later, as we were drinking tea with honey, she asked me quietly:
"Have you stopped your book learning?"
"Yes."
"Why? Did you take to drink?"
"Yes, mother. I went to the dogs!"
"That was a nice thing to do! I remember you, though. I noticed you in Sukhumin when you had a row with the boss over the food. I said to myself then: He must be a drunkard. He's not afraid of anything...."

Licking the honey from her swollen lips she kept turning her blue eyes to the bush where the latest Orelian was sleeping peacefully.
"How's he going to live?" she said with a sigh, looking into my face. "You helped me. For that I thank you.... But whether it will be good for him I don't know."

When she had finished her meal she crossed herself, and while I was collecting my things she sat drowsily swaying her body and gazing at the ground with eyes that seemed to have faded again, evidently engrossed in thought. A little later she got up.
"Are you really going?" I asked.
"Yes."
"Take care of yourself, mother."
"What about the Virgin Mary?... Pick him up and give him to me!"
"I'll carry him."

We argued about it for a bit and then she yielded, and we set out, walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder.
"I hope I won't stumble," she said, laughing guiltily and placing her arm on my shoulder.

The new inhabitant of the land of Russia, the man of unknown destiny, was lying in my arms, snoring heavily. The sea, all covered with white lace trimmings, splashed and surged on the shore. The bushes whispered to each other. The sun shone as it passed the meridian.

We walked on slowly. Now and again the mother halted, heaved a deep sigh, and throwing her head back she looked around, at the sea, at the woods, at the mountains, and then into the face of her son—and her eyes, thoroughly washed with the tears of suffering, were again wonderfully clear, again they shone with the blue light of inexhaustible love.
Once she halted and said:

"Lord! Dear, good God! How good it is. How good! Oh, if I could go on like this, like this, all the time, to the very end of the world, and he, my little one, would grow, would keep on growing in freedom, near his mother's breast, my darling little boy...."

...The sea murmured and murmured....