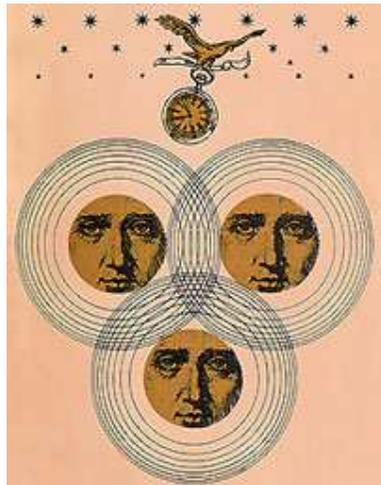


JOURNEY ACROSS THREE WORLDS

By

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PART ONE

**THE STRANGE STORY OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE, TOLD
ANEW ...**

No, this was a different
Mr. Golyadkin, absolutely
different, but at the same
time absolutely similar
to the former...
F. Dostoevsky, *The Double*

Nil admirari! Be astonished at nothing!
*A proposition borrowed from the philosophy of
Pythagoras*

WHO AM I?

I was returning home by way of Tverskoi Boulevard, walking up from the Nikitskie Vorota. It was somewhere around five o'clock in the afternoon, but the Saturday crowds usually teeming the streets at this hour by-passed the boulevard, and the side-alleys were as deserted and quiet as they are in the morning. The September sky, utterly cloudless of a sudden, gave no hint of the nearness of autumn. Not one yellow leaf rustled underfoot and, after last night's rain, even the faded late-summer grass between the trees seemed as

luxuriantly green as in May.

I strolled leisurely along an alley, hesitating at every bench with the vague idea of sitting down. Finally I did, stretching out my legs; and the very same second I felt as if everything around me was slipping off somewhere, fading out and spinning in circles. I don't usually have dizzy spells, but now I gripped the bench so as not to fall. Everything opposite me on the boulevard — trees and passers-by — vanished in a lilac-tinted mist. Exactly like in the mountains when clouds creep to your feet and everything around disintegrates and melts into the thick, wet, cottony flakes. But this was no rain: a pure dry mist swooped down, lapped all the green from the boulevard, and then vanished.

Literally vanished. In the blink of an eye, the trees and bushes were back again, like a repeated sequence in a colour cinerama film. The bench opposite, with its deep seat, was again in place and the girl in the blue coat — so almost listed missing — sat there with her book. Everything looked, ostensibly, as before; but only ostensibly — some inner voice instantly doubted it. I even looked around me to check my impressions and contentedly reflected: "Nonsense, it's all the way it was. Exactly...."

"No, not exactly," reflected that other inner voice.

Was it another voice? I was arguing with myself, but my conscious mind seemed to be split in half for the argument was more like a dialogue between two utterly unidentical and dissimilar egos. Any thought that arose was at once countered by another which intruded from somewhere or from somebody by suggestion, but was aggressive and masterful.

"The benches are the same."

"They are not. On Pushkin Boulevard they're green, not yellow."

"The alley walks are the same."

"These are narrower. And where's the granite kerb?"

"What kerb?"

"And there's no lawn."

"A lawn?"

"Beside the court. There used to be a tennis-court here."

"Whe-ere?"

By now I was looking around with a feeling of growing alarm. The double-ego feeling disappeared. I suddenly found myself in a new and strangely altered world. When you walk along a street where everything is dear to you and familiar to the eye, you do not notice the little things, the details. But let them suddenly disappear, and you stop, caught by a feeling of confusion and alarm. The surroundings were only similar to, but not exactly the same as those I knew — I, who had strolled along the boulevard walks a thousand times or more. Even the trees, apparently, were somewhat different; the bushes weren't the same; and for some reason I called the boulevard Pushkin instead of Tverskoi.

From habit I looked at my watch, and my arm froze in mid-air. Even my jacket was different from the one I'd put on that morning. As a matter of fact, it wasn't my jacket, nor was the watch mine, and a scar curved out from beneath the band, yet only about a minute ago no scar had been there at all.

But this was an old scar, healed long ago, the track of a bullet or shell splinter. I looked down at my feet — even the shoes weren't mine but a stranger's, with ridiculous buckles on the side.

"What if my appearance has changed, and my age is not the same? What if I'm not ... me, at all?" came the burning thought. I jumped to my feet and ran, rather than walked, along the alley toward the theatre.

The theatre stood in the same place, but it was a different one, with an altered entrance and other billings. I did not find one title I knew on the list of its repertoire. But in the dark glass doors, unlit from inside, a familiar face was reflected. It was my face. So far, it was the only thing in this world that was mine.

I was only now aware that my head ached. I rubbed my temples — it still ached. I remembered that somewhere near by, on the square I believed, there should be a chemist's shop. Perhaps it had been spared, if I were lucky. The square was already visible through the flashing interstices between the line of cars passing by, and I hurried ahead, continuing to glance behind me in confusion and alarm. I could not exactly recall the buildings that lined Pushkin Boulevard, though these did not appear to be different — except the lamps over the doorways weren't the same eye-smacking ones and, what's more, the street numbers were changed.

Where the green river of the boulevard flowed into the square, I was literally turned to stone: its mouth was empty. Pushkin was gone. For a moment, I thought my heart stopped beating. The naked stone bald-spot in place of the monument frightened me now, rather than alarmed. I closed my eyes, hoping the delusion would pass. At that moment, somebody passing by bumped into me, perhaps accidentally, but so hard that I was spun round on my heels. The delusion really did disappear. I saw the monument.

It stood far back in the square. Pushkin looked just as thoughtful and severe as ever, his winged cloak negligently thrown over his shoulders — an image dear to me from childhood. Even if it were in a different spot, it was Pushkin! I began to breathe more freely, though behind the monument I could see an utterly unknown building, quite modern, with the huge letters ROSSIYA across its facade. Hotel or cinema? Only yesterday, there had been a six-teen-storey building here, with the Cosmos restaurant on the ground floor, and flats above. Everything was similar, yet dissimilar, familiar down to the smallest detail, yet it was the details most of all that altered the familiar look. For instance, I found the chemist's shop in the same spot, the salesgirls stood behind the counters wearing the same white smocks, identical queues crowded round the cashier's booth, and in the optical section they were still selling eyeglasses with the same ugly, uncomfortable frames. But when I asked a girl for some pyrabutan for a headache, she gave me a puzzled grimace.

"Pardon?"

"Pyrabutan."

"Never heard of it."

"Well, for a headache."

"Pyramidonum?"

"No," I muttered vaguely. "Pyrabutan."

"There's no such thing."

My stupidly foolish look drew a pitying smile.

"Take these 3-in-one tablets." And she threw a small packet on the counter — a box I'd never seen before.

In my trouser pocket I found a handful of silver coins — the money could hardly be told from ours. Later, sitting on a bench by the Pushkin monument, I made a thorough search of all the pockets in the suit bestowed on me by a whim of fate. The contents would have stumped any detective. Besides some change I found a few one- and three-rouble notes that were quite different from ours, a crumpled tram ticket, an excellent fountain pen, and an almost new pocket-notebook with only a few pages torn out. There were no documents or identification cards to give me a hint as to what or who my double was.

I no longer felt any fear: there remained only a sharp, nervous curiosity. I tried not to dwell on how long my intrusion into this world would last, or how it would end — all kinds of conjectures, even the most terrifying, could be made on the subject. But what was I to do while I was on this free trip into the unknown? I wouldn't be let into a hotel. Where could I spend the night, if my sojourn was a long one? Perhaps at home, or with friends — after all, the owner of the suit must live somewhere, and he probably had friends. The cream of the joke would be if they turned out to be my friends. What if the whole thing were a dream? I slapped the bench as hard as I could — it hurt! So it wasn't a dream.

For a brief moment I thought I saw a face I knew. Sauntering past went a broad-shouldered, brawny fellow carrying a cine-camera. I recognized the tuft of hair falling over the forehead, the massive shoulders and iron neck. Could it be my neighbour, Zhenka Evstafyev, from flat 5? But why did he have a cine-camera? He had never snapped a picture with any kind of camera in his life.

I jumped up and ran after him.

"Excuse me," I stopped him, staring at the familiar face. "Aren't you Zhenka? ... Evgeny Grigoryevich?"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken."

I blinked my eyes in perplexity: the likeness was perfect. Even the timbre of the voice matched.

"Well, am I like him?" laughed the stranger.

"It's amazing."

"It happens," and he shrugged and went his way, leaving me in a turmoil of confusion.

It still seemed to me that all this was some kind of game, or a trick of fate. In a moment Zhenka would come back and we should have a good laugh over it. But he didn't.

Later, when I recalled this day, what came to mind first of all was the feeling of perplexity and confusion. And one thing more — the unbearable loneliness of being in a city where I'd known every stone from childhood, yet which had wholly changed during a few seconds of dizziness. I gazed at

the faces of the passers-by in the vain hope of seeing one I knew. What for? Probably he wouldn't have recognized me any more than Evstafyev had ... besides, what could I say to anyone who did?

And exactly that happened.

"Sergei! Sergei Nikolaevich!" A medium-tall, grey-haired man hailed me. He was wearing a suede zippered jacket. (I had never seen this man before.) "Come here a minute."

I got up. My name really was Sergei, and even Sergei Nikolaevich.

"Just listen to the latest." He took me confidentially by the arm and said softly: "Hang on to yourself. Sichuk stayed behind."

"What Sichuk?" I asked, surprised. "Mikhail?"

"Who else? We've only one Sichuk. All the worse for us."

I had known Mikhail Sichuk during the war at the front. Now he worked either as a photographer or as a news cameraman. We weren't friendly, and never got together.

"What do you mean — stayed behind?"

"What do I mean? He was touring Europe on the Ukraine. You get it, don't you...?"

I didn't get it at all. But, sensing the circumstances, I acted surprised.

"At the last foreign port he stayed behind, skipped — the scum! Either in Turkey or West Germany: don't know which way they were heading, to or from Odessa."

"The scoundrel," I said.

"There'll be trouble."

"For whom?"

"Well, those who vouched for him, and so on," laughed the man in the suede coat. "Fomich is fit to be tied; he made a beeline for head office. It has nothing to do with you, of course."

"I should hope not," I said.

The unknown released my arm and gave me a friendly jab on the back.

"You look a bit sour, Sergei. Or maybe I'm butting in?"

"In what way?"

"Are you in throes of composition ... or waiting for somebody? Why aren't you at the editorial office?"

I was not attached to any editorial office. I had to break off the conversation somehow — it was getting a bit too hot to handle.

"Business," I said vaguely.

"You're up to something, old fellow," he said with a wink. "Well, so long."

He vanished from my life as quickly as he had come into it. And like a man thrown for the first time into deep water begins to learn the motions of a swimmer, I also began to find my bearings in the unknown. Curiosity got the better of fear and alarm. What had I found out so far? That here my appearance was the same, and my name too. That Moscow was Moscow, only different in detail. That there existed an Odessa, Turkey and a Germany. That the S.S. Ukraine, as in our world, made runs around Europe. That I was connected with a certain editorial office, and that in this world

Mikhail Sichuk was also a rotten bit of scum.

So I was not much surprised when, going down the steps towards the Rossiya cinema — as I had already guessed, the building was a cinema — I ran into Lena. I was bound to meet somebody who knew me, both here and from whence I came.

Elegant as ever, Lena was walking along in her usual absent way, but she knew me at once and was even a bit embarrassed, or so I thought.

"Is that you? Where are you coming from?"

"Just off a camel. Well, how are things over there?"

"Where?" she asked, surprised.

"At the hospital, of course. Did you just get off?"

She was even more surprised.

"I don't understand, Sergei. What are you talking about? I've only been in Moscow three days."

I had seen her this morning in the office of the Head Doctor when I was telephoning the Brain Institute. Before that, we met every day or almost every day when I happened to be in the therapeutic department. So I was silent, painfully seeking a way out of what was a clearly critical situation. The road into the unknown certainly teemed with pit-falls.

"Sorry, Lena, I'm getting awfully absent-minded. And besides ... it's so unexpected, meeting you...."

"How are you getting along?" she asked, with what seemed to me a metallic note.

"So-so," I answered cheerfully. "I manage to get by."

She was silent a long time, taking a good look at me. Finally, she said dryly: "What an odd conversation. Very odd."

I realized she would leave me in a minute, and my only chance of finding a place to put down anchor here, for at least twenty-four hours, would disappear with her. My incursion into the unknown could scarcely last longer than that. I had to take a stab at it. And I did.

"Look, I've got to talk to you, Lena. I really have to. Something's happened, you see...."

"What, exactly?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I can't talk about it on the street." I hurriedly searched for words. "Where are you ... living now?"

She was slow in answering, apparently weighing something or other.

"At present I'm at Galya's."

"Where's that?"

"As if you didn't know."

I certainly did not know. I didn't even ask what Galya she meant. But I had to make her agree. It was my last chance!

"Please, Lena...."

"It's awkward, Sergei,"

"My God, what nonsense!" I cried, thinking of the Lena I knew.

But this was an utterly different Lena, who watched me guardedly, not at all like a friend.

"Well then ... come on," she said at last.

THE NEXT MOVE INTO THE UNKNOWN

We walked in silence, hardly exchanging a word. Apparently, she was nervous but tried not to show it; and withdrawn, perhaps even regretting her bargain. From time to time I caught her giving me a searching, suspicious glance. What was she suspicious or afraid of?

I immediately recognized the house in Staro-Pimenovsky Alley. My wife had lived here once, before we became acquainted. Incidentally, her name is Galya too.

To my disgust, my knees began trembling.

"What are you looking like that for?" she asked.

I continued to look silently around the room. Like everything else in this unknown world, it was both like and unlike. Or maybe I had simply forgotten.

"Whose room is it, Lena?"

"Galya's, of course. What strange questions you ask, Sergei. Haven't you been here before?"

I had difficulty swallowing. Now I would give her another strange question.

"But hasn't she ... moved?"

Lena gave me a somewhat frightened glance; she moved a bit away as if I had said some monstrous absurdity.

"Have you never met?"

"Why do you ask?" I countered, uncertainly. "Of course we have."

"When did you see her last?"

I burst out laughing and blurted out: "This morning. At breakfast."

But I immediately regretted saying it.

"Don't lie. What are you lying for? She's been at the institute from yesterday afternoon. Worked all night. And she's still not back."

"Can't a fellow joke?" I replied, foolishly, realizing I was getting in more and more of a muddle.

"Strange way of joking, I'd say."

"Maybe we're not talking about the same person?" I put in, trying to improve matters.

She wasn't even angry, she merely frowned like a doctor who sees, without quite understanding, the symptoms of a disease under observation.

"I'm talking about Galya Novoseltseva."

"Why 'Novoseltseva'?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

The cold eyes of a doctor now looked at me with professional interest.

"You've lost your memory, Sergei. They were already registered to marry when war broke out."

"Never mind," I muttered, wiping a perspiring brow. "I only wondered...."

"What I'm doing here with the woman who stole my chap, right?" she laughed, losing for a moment the curiosity of a professional doctor. "Even then, I didn't feel hurt, Sergei. Imagine the luck — my chap left me. But now ... why, it's even funny. It was so long ago.... And my next after that — you

know..." she sighed. "I'm not lucky in love, Sergei."

It is hard to map out every step you take in an unknown world. And I put my foot in it again, forgetting where I was and who I was.

"Who's in your way now, with Oleg?"

"Sergei!"

There was so much horror in that cry, I involuntarily shut my eyes.

"Something's wrong with your memory, Sergei. One doesn't forget things like that. Galya received the official death notice as far back as forty-four. You couldn't help but know that."

What did I know, and what didn't I? Dare I really tell her?

"You're either pretending," she said, "or you're sick. And I think you're sick."

"Then go ahead and ask me what day of the month it is, and the year, and so on."

"I still don't know what I should ask you."

"So tell me the diagnosis," I shot back, getting angry. "Gone crazy, that's all!"

"That's not the medical term for it. There are various kinds of psychic disorders.... What did you want to talk to me about?"

By now I had no desire to. If I told her the truth, she would send me off to the lunatic asylum at once. I had to wriggle out of this somehow.

"You see, the thing is..." I began a hurried improvisation. "A simply deplorable thing happened.... The most deplorable...."

"You've already said that. But what?"

"As a matter of fact, I've left home. Left my wife. I shan't go into the reason. But I need shelter. Just for the night. Nox lodgus, vulgaris, to put it coarsely...."

I fell silent. She said nothing either, only examined her fingertips.

"Haven't you any friends to go to?"

"To some I can't, and with others it's inconvenient. You know how it is, sometimes...." I tried not to look at her.

"What if you hadn't met me?"

"But I did."

She was still wavering. "It's awkward, Sergei."

"Why?"

"Can't you see that for yourself?"

"You know what?" I was getting angry again. "Call a psychiatrist. At any rate, I'll get put up for the night."

I looked into her eyes: the professional-doctor look had disappeared. Now there was only a frightened woman. The incomprehensible is always a bit terrifying.

"The room isn't mine," she spoke gently. "We'll wait for Galya."

"And what if she spends the night at the institute again?"

"I'll phone her. The telephone's in the hall. Take a seat while you're waiting."

She went out, leaving me alone in a room where everything seemed familiar, down to the least detail. I had left this room to go to the Registry

Office to be married. From this room? No, not this one. The whole thing was something like in similar triangles: certain lines coincide, others don't.

I picked up a pencil from the table and wrote in my notebook:

If anything happens to me, advise my wife, Galina Gromova, 43 Griboyedov Street. Also inform Professors Zargaryan and Nikodimov at the Brain Institute. Very important.

I underlined the words 'very important' three times, pressing so hard that the pencil broke.

So whatever else I intended to write remained unwritten.

After putting the notebook away in my pocket, I realized I had flubbed again. My Zargaryan and Nikodimov would never get this letter. And here, in this world, Galya Gromova bore a different surname.

A ring sounded from the front hall, and through the half-open door I heard the click of a lock. Then Lena cried: "At last. I was just ringing you up."

"What's the matter?" asked a voice — agonizingly familiar.

"Sergei Gromov's here."

"Well, that's fine. We'll have tea."

"But look, Galya ... he's sort of strange...." Lena lowered her voice to an inaudible whisper.

"What's wrong, is he crazy?" were the words that reached me.

"I don't know. He says he's left his wife."

"Lord, what nonsense. He's playing a joke on you, Lena, and you fall for it. I saw her only half an hour ago."

The door was flung open. I leaped to my feet, but couldn't move. My wife stood in the doorway.

The same face, the same age, even the hairdo was the same. Only the earrings were unfamiliar, and I'd never seen her wear that kind of suit before. I stood speechless, repressing my excitement by sheer force of will.

"What did you make up all this for?" asked Galya.

I was silent.

"I just saw Olga. She's gone home and expects you for supper. She said you were going to take her to see the Leningrad Ballet."

I was silent.

"What kind of joke is this? And to play it on Lena. What for?"

I could find no words to answer her. Everything was ruined. What explanation would satisfy them? The truth? Who, in my position, would dare to tell the truth?"

"Lena says you're sick," Galya continued, giving me a searching look. "Maybe you are really sick?"

"Maybe I am," I repeated.

I did not know my own voice: it seemed alien and far away.

"Well then," I added, "you must excuse me. I guess I'll just run along."

"Where?" asked Galya, with a start. "We won't let you go alone. I'll take you home." She looked out the window. "My cab's still there. Run after it, Lena. Maybe you'll manage to hold it."

Now we were alone.

"What does all this mean, Sergei? I don't understand it," said Galya.

"I don't either," I replied.

"But even so?"

"You're a physicist, I believe, aren't you, Galya?" I threw out at random.

She was sharply alert. "So what?"

"Can you picture the notion of a plurality of worlds? Worlds existing side by side? Being at the same moment both mysteriously remote and yet amazingly close?"

"Let's suppose that. Such hypotheses do exist."

"Then just suppose that one of these worlds right next door is similar to ours. That it also has a Moscow, only a wee bit different. Perhaps even the same streets, but with other ornamentation. Sometimes, the very same house but with a different street number. And that you are there, and I, and Lena — only our relationships differ...."

She still didn't get it. But I had got fed up with the spiritual masquerade long before. So I dared to open up.

"Let's suppose that in that other Moscow your name isn't Galya Novoseltseva, but Galya Gromova. That six years ago you and I left this room to be married at the Registry. And today a miracle happened: I broke through the membrane barrier ... and looked into your world. There you have a devil of a problem for our limited brains."

Now she looked at me with real fright. Probably she was thinking along the lines of Lena: a sudden madness, raving.

"All right, let's leave it lie," I said wryly. "Take me wherever you wish, I don't care. And don't be scared — I won't choke you or kiss you. There's Lena waving at us. Come on."

WHO IS JEKYLL AND WHO HYDE?

Even in this world, Galya must have possessed her usual control. A minute later she was quite calm and collected.

"I hope we won't start in on science fiction in front of the cabby?" she asked, on the way to the taxi.

"So you consider it scientific?" I couldn't resist saying.

"Goodness knows!"

I could not read anything special on her face. Her behaviour was ordinary, that of a clever woman — Galya's way with people who were strangers and yet whom she found interesting. Attentive eyes, respectful attention to a companion, unconsciously coquettish, mocking.

"Why do you have Pushkin's monument in the middle of the square?" I asked, as we drove past.

"Where do you have it?"

"On the boulevard."

"You're lying about everything. Just as you lied about our going to the Registry. And why did you say six years ago?"

"Fate," I laughed.

"Where was I six years ago?" she wondered, thoughtfully. "In the spring I was in Odessa."

"So was I."

"Why do you lie? You never even came with us."

"In your world I didn't, but in ours — on the contrary."

"That's funny," she said, pronouncing every syllable. And added with a critical look at me: "But you don't give the impression of being a lunatic."

"Nice to hear it," I wanted to say, but I didn't. A dark squall hit me right in the face. Everything went black.

"What's wrong?" I heard Galya's frightened cry, and then her hurried, excited words: "Driver, driver, pull up somewhere by the pavement. He feels bad...."

I opened my eyes. The mist of bewitchment was still swirling round inside the car. And through this fog a woman's face was staring at me.

"Who is it?" I asked hoarsely.

"Do you feel bad, Sergei?"

"Galya?" I said, surprised. "How did you get here?"

She did not answer.

"Did something happen to me there ... on the boulevard?" I asked, looking around me.

"Yes, it did," said Galya. "We'll talk about it later. Can you go home, or do you need a doctor?"

I stretched, shook my head, and sat up straight. Clearly I could do without a doctor. While we rode, I told Galya about walking along Tverskoi Boulevard, about my dizzy spell, and how I tried to talk to myself in the midst of a lilac fog.

"And afterwards," Galya asked, with sudden interest — before that she had been listening now with distrust, now with indifference. "What happened afterwards?"

I shrugged in bewilderment.

"Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember."

I really didn't remember, and only on returning home did I find out from Galya what had happened at her place.

"It was delirium," I said.

With her love for expressing things precisely, Galya now corrected me: "For delirium, it's very consistent. Like playing a well-rehearsed role. People don't rave like that. Besides, delirium is a symptom of illness, yet you don't give me that impression."

"But the fainting spell on the boulevard?" broke in my wife, Olga. "And in the taxi?"

As a doctor she searched for a medical explanation. But Galya was as doubtful as before.

"Then what happened between the fainting spells?"

"Some kind of somnambulistic state."

"What do you think I am — a lunatic?" I told her, offended.

"If it was a dream, then it must have been a day-dream," put in Galya with

amusement, insistent on accuracy. "Besides, we saw the dream and not Sergei. Speaking of dreams, do you still have them?"

"What have dreams got to do with it?" I burst out. "I fainted, and I didn't see any dreams."

I realized only too well that Galya never played jokes on anyone. So her story about my wandering around like a sleepwalker — the only way my behaviour could be described — seriously alarmed me. Before, I had never fainted or walked along the edge of a roof in the moonlight, nor had loss of memory. However, I could find no explanation of the event that answered to common sense.

"Maybe it was the result of hypnosis?" I suggested.

"Then who hypnotized you?" Olga frowned. "And where? At the office? On the boulevard? Nonsense!"

"Right. Nonsense it is," I agreed.

"Are you, by any chance, writing a science-fiction story?" Galya asked suddenly. "Your very intelligible observation about the plurality of worlds even aroused my interest.... Can you imagine, Olga?" she laughed. "Two adjacent worlds in space, like similar triangles. Both there and here — Moscow; there and here, a Sergei Gromov. But you weren't there — instead, he was married to me."

"So the secret's out," joked Olga. "And the sleepwalker, of course, is a visitor from another world in Sergei's likeness."

"He explained it to me like this. Moscow, he said, was the same, only a little bit different. Pushkin's monument is on the square in our world, but on the boulevard in theirs. I almost burst out laughing."

Olga, apparently, was thinking hard. "And you know what might explain things?" she asked, suddenly animated, still seeking a rational explanation even as I was. "Look here, didn't Sergei know that the monument had once been moved? He did. So perhaps this information, stored away in his memory, became fixed in his delirium? Some stimulation triggered the signal — and there you are: the myth about an adjacent, similar world."

These arguments only annoyed me.

"It makes me sick listening to you. Some kind of new variant of Stevenson's tale. A regular Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Only which is Jekyll and which is Hyde?"

"It's perfectly clear who," parried Galya. "You wouldn't hurt yourself in choosing between them."

Olga did not understand, and asked: "Who are you talking about?"

"About international imperialist spies, Olga," I said jocularly. "Parachuted here from an unidentified plane."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Look, there is a certain English writer, Stevenson by name. Usually, you read his stuff when you're a teenager. However, even doctors do. For them, by the way, his story is almost like a course in psychiatry, for Jekyll and Hyde, in reality, are the same man. To be more exact, a quintessence of the good and evil inherent in one person. By drinking an elixir that he discovered — medically speaking, a particular combination of

sulphanilamide and antibiotics — the noble Dr. Jekyll turned himself into the scoundrel Hyde. Is that precise enough for you?" I asked Galya.

"Quite. Search your pockets, maybe Hyde left some clues behind during his temporary transmutation."

I dug into my pockets and threw on the table a packet of headache tablets.

"That must be one clue. I certainly never bought them."

"Perhaps you put them there?" Galya asked Olga.

"No. More than likely he bought them on the way home."

"I didn't buy anything," I put in angrily. "And, for the record, I didn't go into the chemist's."

"That means Hyde did. Is there anything else he left?"

I mechanically felt the inside pocket of my jacket.

"Wait. This notebook doesn't belong here." I pulled it out and opened it. "Something's written here. Where are my glasses?"

"Give it here." Galya grabbed the notebook and read aloud: 'If anything happens to me, advise my wife, Galina Gromova, 43 Griboyedov Street. Also inform Professors Zargaryan and Nikodimov at the Brain Institute. Very important.' "The 'very important' is even underlined," she laughed. "And Galina Gromova, that's me, of course. I already told you his delirium was consistent. Only why Griboyedov Street? There's Staro-Pimenovsky, and now it's Medvedev Street."

"But have we a Griboyedov Street?" asked Olga. "Somehow, I never heard of it."

"There is," I interrupted. "It used to be Maly Kharitonevsky. Only there's no building on it with that number. Apparently, Hyde had in mind some avenue, rather than street."

"But who's this Zargaryan?" Galya said, full of curiosity. "I know of a Nikodimov. He's a physicist, a rather famous one, by the way. Only he's not at the Brain Institute, but at the Institute of New Problems in Physics. But who this Zargaryan is, I really don't know."

"But Sergei didn't write this!" cried Olga suddenly. "It's not his handwriting ... though the 'v' has the same flourish and the down stroke in the 't' is the same. Look for yourself!"

I found my glasses and read the note.

"The handwriting's similar. I wrote that way as a student. Working on the paper spoiled my writing. I don't write like that now."

I rewrote the lines in the notebook. They differed greatly from the first.

"Right," drawled Galya. "No need for a handwriting expert. But perhaps the handwriting changes when you're in a somnambulistic state."

"I wouldn't know," said Olga. "Somnambulism's in the field of psychiatry. It's a sort of psychic upset that comes like lightning. I can't explain it any other way. And I don't like all this, not at all."

"Nor do I," Galya conceded.

She read and reread both memorandums in the notebook. Her face reflected not only concentrated thinking but repressed anxiety. Galya's clear, logical mind did not want to give in to the inexplicable.

"I simply can't explain it. Either scientifically or logically, from the

standpoint of common sense, so to say. A person of absolutely sound mind — and suddenly he turns sleepwalker. Of course, a fainting fit is understandable: a doctor could find an explanation. But this raving about a plurality of worlds — that's more like something out of a science-fiction story. And then his asking for a night's lodging, for a roof over his head, when the man has his own private flat."

"Apparently my Hyde was looking for shelter," I laughed. "He couldn't go to a hotel, d'you see."

"Here's what I don't like. The hypothesis about Hyde explains it all. But I prefer dealing with pure science, rather than science fiction. Though everything about it is fantastic. Now why, Sergei, did you ask to go to Lena's? You didn't know she lives with me."

"That's new to me, even now. I've not seen Lena for ten years. I can't even imagine what she looks like."

My adventure in Galya's story surprised me more than anything else. Lena and I never met, never corresponded. We'd probably even forgotten each other's existence.

"Is she an old flame?" asked Olga.

"All of us went to school together before the war," replied Galya. "We were all going to enter the medical faculty. But nothing came of it: Sergei and Oleg went to the front, and I got a yen for physics. Only Lena went in for medicine. By the way, she really was in love with you, Sergei."

"With Oleg," I said.

"All the girls ran after him," sighed Galya. "But I had the worst fate: I won and lost." She stood up. "Peace be to thy house, but it's high time I left. The council of detectives is closed and Sherlock Holmes proposes to make an excursion into the realm of physics."

"Psychology, you mean to say."

"No, I mean physics. I'm interested in Zargaryan and Nikodimov, and what they're doing in the Institute of New Problems in Physics."

"Whatever for?" asked Olga in surprise. "I should apply to a psychiatrist."

"And I would choose Zargaryan. Who is he? What is he engaged in? Is he connected with Nikodimov? And if he is, then in what field?" Galya turned to me: "Did you ever hear of either name?"

"Never."

"Maybe you read about them somewhere and have merely forgotten?"

"I've never seen the names anywhere, nor have I forgotten."

"And that's the most interesting point in all your somnambulistic story. Physics, my dear, physics. The Institute of New Problems in Physics. New, remember!" And Galya turned to Olga. "You know what? Call Zoya and find out about Zargaryan. She knows everybody."

We decided to call Zoya in the morning.

THE SHEET FROM THE NOTEBOOK

I fell asleep at once, and slept soundly right through till morning.

Dreams, I might say, are a peculiarity of mine that sets me apart from

other mortals. It wasn't by accident that Galya asked if I still had dreams. I have them. They repeat themselves, persistently, and are almost unchanged in content, oddly like fragments of travelogue films.

Naturally I also have ordinary dreams in which everything is confused and foggy, both as to proportion and distortion, like in a Fun House mirror. My recall of such dreams is so vacillating and short-lived that they are hard to recapture and describe. But the dreams I'm talking about I shall remember all my life, and I can describe them just as precisely as I can my flat.

They are always in colour, and the colours are as true and harmonious as in nature. In one I see a spring-time meadow appearing out of the night mist, flowering as profusely as in real life. Arid I even remember the designs on a girl's cotton-print dress that flashes for a moment through the sunny dream. Nothing special happens in these dreams: they do not frighten or alarm me, but have something alluring about them, like getting a tiny peep into somebody else's life.

The one I see most frequently shows a corner in a strange city, the view of a street which I've never actually seen though I can remember all the details: the balconies, shop windows, the lindens along the pavement, the iron grilles. I can call them all to mind as clearly as if I had seen them but yesterday. I can even recall the passers-by, for they are always the same, even the black cat with white spots that runs across the road. It always crosses at one and the same corner, near one and the same house.

Sometimes I see myself in an arcade surrounded by shops off galleries like in Moscow's GUM department store. But the arcade has only one storey and branches off into numerous side alleys that run lengthwise and crosswise. For some reason I am always waiting by a stationery shop, or slowly strolling past a shop-window displaying draperies and miraculously lit by a sort of odd iridescent lighting. I have never seen this arcade in real life, yet I not only remember the windows but even the shape of the goods, the tall glass archways and the coloured mosaic on the pavement.

Sometimes the dream carries me into the interior of a town flat which I have never been in, or else into an idyllic village landscape. Often there is a road running between naked earthen slopes sparsely scattered here and there with patches of dusty grass. The road runs down to a blue strip of water, gay with golden water-lilies. Sometimes a woman in white walks ahead of me, sometimes an old man with a fishing-rod; but neither of them ever turns round and I never overtake them. I see only a strip of water, embroidered with duckweed and water-lilies; but for some reason I know it is a pond and that the road will now turn right along the bank, and that I ran here as a small boy — though neither the pond nor the road belongs to my real childhood.

It was these dreams that awoke Olga's doubts of my psychic balance and made her so insistent that I consult a psychiatrist. But I was more inclined to follow Galya's advice. The ill-starred sheet from the notebook with the names of Zargaryan and Nikodimov gave me no peace, because I was absolutely sure I had never, under any circumstances, heard of these particular names. As for subconsciously absorbing them from talk overheard

in the underground or on the street, naturally I didn't believe that. A normal memory preserves what is overheard in the conscious mind, not in the subconscious.

"All right, I'll call Zoya," Olga agreed.

Zoya worked in the Institute of Scientific Information and, according to her, knew all the 'big shots'. If Nikodimov and Zargaryan belonged to this highly-attested category, in one minute I should get an earful of a good dozen anecdotes about their way of life. However, I didn't need anecdotes, but precise information as to their particular fields and latest activities. I had to make sure that they wore my Nikodimov and Zargaryan.

I decided to ring up Klenov first of all. He is head of the science department at our editorial offices. I'd known Klenov from the time we were at the front together.

"I need some dope, old man. The exact whereabouts of two giants: Nikodimov and Zargaryan."

Laughter came from the receiver.

"Even yesterday I thought you were a bit off your rocker."

"When was that?" I asked, surprised.

"When I bumped into you in Pushkin square. About six o'clock. When I told you about Mikhail.."

I licked my overdry lips. So Klenov had seen Hyde and talked with him. And had noticed nothing. Very interesting.

"I don't remember," I said.

"Don't play games. About Mikhail stopping behind, don't you remember?"

"Where did he stop off?"

"In Istanbul. I already told you once. He asked for political shelter at the American Embassy. "

"He must be crazy!"

"He's got all his buttons, the snake. They should have kept an eye on him. They say 'the human heart is a mystery'. They should have guessed his little plan before it was too late. Now we're writing a collective letter not to let him come back when he comes crawling to us on his belly. What's up with you? You honestly don't remember?"

"Honestly. My mind is a complete blank about yesterday from around five in the afternoon to ten in the evening. First I fainted, and I don't remember a thing about what happened afterwards — what I did or what I said. I came to when I was being brought home. Must be a souvenir of that concussion I got near Dunafoldvar, remember?"

As if Klenov didn't remember the time we forced the Danube. Oleg was with us. And Mikhail Sichuk, incidentally, was there too. Only he was foresighted enough to get into the rear: headed the editorial office of a front-line newspaper. For about a minute we were both silent. What we went through at the Danube wasn't to be forgotten. Then Klenov spoke.

"You should get some advice from a professor. I can arrange a consultation, if you like. I know a few good specialists."

"No need of that," I sighed. "Better if you can tell me what Nikodimov and Zargaryan are doing in science."

"You hoping for a feature? You won't get anywhere. Nikodimov answers such attempts with the method of Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger. He dropped one reporter from Science and Life down the waste chute."

"Don't worry yourself about my nearest future. Just give me all you know. Who is this Nikodimov? And no jokes, if you don't mind. I need it bad."

"Look, he's a physicist, with a very wide range of interests. Puts out works on the physics of fields of attraction. Interested in electric magnetism in complex media. At one time, working with Zemlicka, he brought out the concept of a neutrino generator."

"With whom?"

"With Zemlicka. A Czech bio-physicist."

"And the general idea — can you tell me?"

"I'm an ignoramus here, of course, and I heard it from ignoramuses — but, in a general sense, it's something like a neutrino laser, which cuts a window into anti-worlds."

"Are you serious?"

"What do you think? That it looks a bit shady? That's how it was regarded, by the way."

"And Zargaryan?"

"What about Zargaryan?"

"Is he tied up with Nikodimov right now?"

"You already know that? Congratulations."

"Is he a physicist too?"

"No, a neurophysiologist or something like that. As a matter of fact, his field is telepathy."

"What, what?" I screamed.

"Te-le-pa-thy," repeated Klenov didactically. "There is such a science: mental telepathy."

"I doubt it. They gave that up in the Middle Ages. No such science."

"You're behind the times. It's al-read-y a science. Condensers of biological currents, and all that kind of thing. Satisfied?"

"Almost," I sighed.

"If you're going into the attack, I'll back you body and soul. We'll print anything you can get hold of. And I'd advise you to start off with Zargaryan. He's easier, more approachable. Just the fellow you want...."

I thanked him and hung up the receiver. The information wasn't beyond Zoya's level. An anti-world, telepathy.... Should phone Galya for more accurate information.

"Hello, this is me — the sleepwalker. Are you up already?"

"I get up at six in the morning," Galya cut me off. "I'm interested in one little detail of your Odyssey. Why did you tell Lena you'd left your wife?"

"I can't answer for Hyde's doings. I want to explain them. Listen hard, Galya. What's the essence of the idea of a neutrino generator, and how is it connected with the condensing of biological currents?"

"Nikodimov and Zargaryan?" laughed Galya.

"As you see, I found something out, at least."

"You found out rubbish, and you're talking rubbish. Nikodimov

renounced the idea of the neutrino generator long ago, that is, the way it was formulated by Zemlicka. Now he's working on the fixation of the power field set up by the activity of the brain ... something like a single complex of the electro-magnetic field that arises in the brain cells. You see, I also discovered something."

"Zargaryan is a physiologist. What's his tie-up with Nikodimov?"

"Their work is top secret. I don't know the inside story, nor if there's any future in what they're doing," admitted Galya. "But one way or another, it's connected with codifying the physiological neuronal state of the brain."

"What?" I asked blankly.

"The brain," Galya stressed, "the brain, my dear. Your Hyde connected these names with the Brain Institute, and not by chance. Though ... from what aspect to view all this.... Perhaps, it's even a problem of pure physics."

She was thinking hard: the membrane in the receiver carried her heavy breathing.

"The key is here, Sergei," she concluded. "The more I think about it, the surer I am. Find the scientists, and you'll find the key."

The scientific research over, there was still the ordinary search. We began it with Zoya.

She answered the call at once. Yes, she knew both Zargaryan and Nikodimov. The latter only by name: he was like a ground-hog who never came near receptions. But she was personally acquainted with Zargaryan. Had even danced with him at an evening social. He was very interested in dreams.

"He's interested in dreams," repeated Olga to me, putting her hand over the mouthpiece.

"What??" I cried, and reached for the telephone. "Zoya darling. It's me. Right you are, in person, your secret worshipper. What were you saying just now about dreams? Who's interested? It's very important."

"I told Zargaryan about a strange dream I had," responded Zoya, "and he was terribly interested, asked all about the details. And what details — frightful, but utterly. And he listened, and told me I should come to him every week and be sure to relate all my dreams. He needed it for his work. But you know yourself, I'm no fool. I know what kind of work he meant."

"Zoya," I groaned, "beg him to give me an appointment."

"Are you mad?" cried Zoya, terrified. "He can't stand reporters."

"But you won't tell him I'm from a paper. Simply say that a man who sees strange dreams wants to see him. And the strangest thing of all is that these dreams are repeated, as if tape-recorded. Repeated year after year. Zoya, try to tell him all that. If you fail, I'll try to contact him myself."

She rang back in ten minutes.

"Just imagine, it worked. He'll see you today after nine o'clock. Don't be late. He doesn't like it," she chattered on without a break, just as she usually did in her office at the institute. "He was interested right away, and immediately asked how clear the dreams were, what was the degree of recall, and so on. I said you would tell him about the clarity yourself. I also told him you worked with me. Don't give me away."

THE KEY

Zargaryan lived in the south-west of town in a new apartment building. He opened the door himself, silently listened to my explanation, and just as silently led the way into his office. Tall and lithe, black hair bristling in a crew-cut, he reminded me of the hero in an Italian neo-realistic novel. To look at, he wasn't more than thirty.

"Do you mind my asking what led you to me?" His eyes pierced right through me. "Yes, of course, I know it was strange dreams and so on ... but why did you particularly ask for a consultation with me?"

"When I tell you everything, the answer to that won't be necessary," I said.

"Do you know anything about me?"

"Until last night, I'd no idea you existed."

He thought a moment and asked: "Exactly what happened last night?"

"I'm sincerely glad that we begin our talk with that," I said decisively. "I did not come to you because I was worried by dreams, nor because you are a Martin Zadeka as, for instance, you are regarded by Zoya at the Institute of Information. By the way, I don't work there, I'm a journalist."

I immediately noticed a grimace of dissatisfaction on Agrarian's face, and continued.

"But I didn't come to you for an interview. I'm not interested in your work. To be more exact, I wasn't interested. And I repeat once more that until last night I had never even heard your name, but none the less I wrote it down in my small notebook while in a state of unconsciousness. "

"What do you mean by a state of unconsciousness?" interrupted Zargaryan.

"That's not exactly the right term. I was fully conscious, yet I remember nothing — what I did or what I said. I simply wasn't there, somebody else acted in my place. It was he who wrote this in my notebook."

I opened the notebook and passed it to Zargaryan. He read it and looked at me rather strangely, peering from frowning brows.

"Why is it written twice?"

"I wrote it the second time, to compare the handwriting. As you see, the first was not written by me, that is, it's not my handwriting. And it's not the handwriting of a sleepwalker, or a lunatic, or of somebody with amnesia."

"Does your wife live on Griboyedov street?"

"My wife lives with me on Kutuzovsky Prospekt. And there is no house on Griboyedov street with that number. And the woman mentioned in the note is not my wife, but simply an acquaintance, a school friend. Besides, she doesn't live on Griboyedov."

Once more he read the note and pondered.

"And did you never hear of Professor Nikodimov either?"

"No more than I heard of you. Even now I only know that he's a physicist, something like a ground-hog who is never to be found at receptions. That detail, I'll have you note, is from the Institute of Information."

Zargaryan smiled, and I immediately noticed that he wasn't a severe man

at all, but a good-hearted and perhaps even a gay fellow.

"Along general lines the portrait bears a certain resemblance," he said. "Keep shooting."

And I talked. I can tell a good story, even with a dash of humour, but he listened without any outward show of interest. However, when I reached the place about the plurality of worlds, he raised his brows.

"Did you read that anywhere?" he asked quickly.

"I don't remember. In passing, somewhere."

"Go on, if you don't mind."

I concluded my story by reminding him of Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde.

"The queerest thing is that this mystical-phantom business explains everything, and I can find nothing else that makes sense."

"You think that's the queerest?" he asked vaguely, once again reading the lines in the notebook. "They refused to let us bring up this problem at the Brain Institute, but it was raised all the same."

I looked at him blankly.

"Have you been precise in everything you have told me?" he suddenly asked, with another piercing glance. "Two worlds like similar triangles, right? With a Moscow in both, differing only in ornamentation. And here and there you and your friends. Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"There you are married to a different woman, live on a different street, and in some way or other are connected with a Zargaryan and a Nikodimov, of whose existence here you were completely unaware. Right?"

I nodded.

He stood up and walked around the room, as if to hide his excitement. But I saw how wrought up he was.

"Now tell me about your dreams. I think there's a connection between all this."

I described my dreams. This time he stared with unconcealed interest.

"That means another life, eh? A certain street, a road down to a river, a shopping arcade. And all very clear-cut, like in a photograph?" He spoke slowly, weighing every word, as if thinking aloud. "And you remember everything afterwards. Clearly, including all details?"

"I even remember the mosaic on the pavement."

"And it is all uncannily familiar, even to trivial things? It seems you've been there a hundred times and probably lived there, but in real life there was nothing of the kind?"

"In real life, nothing of the kind," I repeated.

"What do the doctors say? You must have sought advice."

It seemed to me that he said this with a shade of cunning.

"What do the doctors say..." I spoke scornfully. "Stimulation ... inhibition. Any fool knows that. In the daytime the cortex is in a state of excitation, at night an inhibition process sets in. Irregular, with islands. These islands keep working, paste together dreams from day-time impressions, like in a cutting room." Zargaryan laughed.

"Or staging a series of attractions, like in the circus."

"But I don't believe it!" I grew angry. "The devil they are! There's no staging about it, everything is unchangeably fixed down to minute trifles, to the leaf on a certain tree, to the screw in a window-frame. And all this is repeated, like showings in a cinema. Once a week I'm sure to see something I dreamed before. Yet they still insist that you dream only of what you've seen or experienced during your waking hours. And nothing else!"

"Even Sechenov wrote about that. He even examined the blind, and it turned out that they dream only of what they saw when they had their sight."

"But I never saw them," I repeated stubbornly. "Not in real life, nor in the cinema or in paintings. Nowhere! Is that clear? I never saw them!"

"But what if you did?" laughed Zargaryan.

"Where?" I cried.

He did not answer. He silently took out a cigarette, lit it, and suddenly recollected me.

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't offer one to you. Do you smoke?"

"You haven't answered me," I said.

"I will answer you. We have ahead of us a long, interesting talk. You can't even imagine what a find this meeting is for Nikodimov and me. Scientists wait for years for such moments. But I'm lucky: I only waited four years. Can you give me another couple of hours?"

"Of course," I agreed, confused and still in the dark.

A sudden change came over Zargaryan. His excited, undisguised interest slightly embarrassed me. What was there special in what I had told him? Perhaps Galya was right, and the key to the puzzle of all that had happened was right here?

But Zargaryan was already telephoning somebody.

"Pavel Nikitich? It's me. Do you intend staying much longer at the institute? Wonderful. I'm going to bring a certain person over, right away. He's with me now. Who? You'd never guess. The one we've been dreaming about all these years. What he's told me confirms all our ideas. And I stress that. Everything! And even more. It's hard to take it all in — my head spins. No, I'm not drunk, but a drink is called for. Later on. We're on our way, so wait for us."

He hung up and turned to me.

"D'you realize what a refractor is for an astronomer? Or an electronic microscope for a virologist? And for me, that's the kind of valuable instrument you are. For Nikodimov and me. I'll give Zoya a royal present for this.... After all, it was she who gave you to me. Let's go."

I was as much in the dark as before.

"I hope you're not going to give me injections or cut me up? Will it hurt?" I asked, sounding like a patient on his way to see a surgeon.

Zargaryan burst into laughter, as pleased as punch.

"Why should it hurt, my dear man?" he said, adopting the accent of an oriental trader. "You'll sit in a chair, fall asleep for half an hour or so, look at dreams. Like in the cinema." Dropping the accent, he added: "Come, Sergei Nikolaevich, I'll drive you to the institute."

FAUST'S LABORATORY

The institute was off the highway in an oak grove which, in the dark of this starless night, looked to me like an enchanted wood out of a fairy tale. The gnome-like hushes, trees with clawing branches, black tree-stumps peering out of the grass like wild animals from across the roadside ditch — all seemed to be luring me into a romantic yet sinister gloom. But in place of the tumbledown hut perched on chicken-legs — the typical witch's abode in Russian fairy tales — there rose at the end of the alley a round ten-storey building with the occasional lighted window. Some of them blinked, flashing in spurts as if gigantic Jupiter lights in a film studio were being switched on and off.

"Valery Mlechin casting spells over wireless light-transmission," said Zargaryan, catching my glance. "You think that's us up there? No. Our labs are up under the very roof on the opposite side."

An express lift whisked us to the tenth floor, and we stepped out into a circular corridor with a moving passage that carried us with it. It moved softly, soundlessly, at about escalator-speed.

"It works automatically as soon as you step on it," explained Zargaryan, "and is stopped by putting your foot on one of these frosted, illuminated regulators."

Slightly convex milky-white transparent tiles were set every two metres, one after another, along the plastic ribbon of the corridor. We floated past white, sliding doors bearing large numbers. Opposite room 220, Zargaryan stepped on the regulator.

We stopped, and the door slid open instantly revealing the entrance to a large, brightly lit room. Zargaryan nudged me towards a chair.

"Amuse yourself for ten minutes while I talk with Nikodimov. First, it will save you from repeating your story; second, I can put it more professionally."

He approached the opposite wall: it slid open and immediately closed behind him. "Photoelectric cell," I thought to myself. The equipment in this institute answered the most up-to-date demands of scientific design for working comfort. A description of the corridor alone would have sent Klenov into ecstasy: it wasn't for nothing he had promised to back me 'soul and body'.

However, except for the sliding walls, the room where I waited held nothing very remarkable. A modern desk of clear plexiglas on nickel-plated steel legs; an open wall safe resembling an electric oven; concealed lighting, and a foam-rubber sofa-bed with cushions. Here you could spend the night in comfort if you were delayed. Along one wall I saw a monstrous pile of yellow, semi-transparent tape-ribbons along which thick, jagged lines ran: something like those on cardiograms. The coloured plastic floor, with its extravagant designs, made the room seem elegant, but the ascetic book-stands and the wall diagrams, also of plastic, returned it to the realm of the strictly serious. There was one diagram of the cortex of both cerebral hemispheres, marked with metal arrows crowned with coded inscriptions in

Greek and Latin letters. Another that hit the eye had only a mass of strange metallic lines flanked by a handwritten inscription: Biocurrents of Sleeping Brain. Sheets of paper were pinned up bearing the typed text: Length and Depth of Sleep — laboratory observations at Chicago University.

The books on the stands were in complete disorder, piled on top of one another, lying open on telescopic shelves. These, apparently, were in constant use. I picked one up: it was a work by Sorokhtin on the atony of the nerve centre. There were piles of books and brochures in foreign languages and, it seemed to me, they all dealt with some kind of irradiation following stimulation or inhibition. I found one book by Nikodimov, in an English edition, whose title was The Principles of Codifying Impulses Distributed Through the Cortex and Subcortex of the Brain. Whether I got it right or not, I don't know, but I immediately regretted that we journalists lacked the training necessary to at least come close to understanding the processes taking place on the peaks of modern science.

At this moment the wall slid open, and Zargaryan called me: "You can come in now."

The room I found myself in was the acme of laboratories, gleaming with stainless steel and nickel plating. But I had no chance to get a good look at it. Zargaryan was already introducing me to an elderly man with a chestnut-coloured beard touched with silver, and hair to match worn longer than was usual among scientists — more suitable for a professor of music. His aquiline nose related him to the hawk, but somehow he reminded me of the Faust I had seen during my youth in an opera staged by a company on tour from some remote country district.

"Nikodimov," he said, smiling as he caught my roving eye. "There's no use looking. You won't understand anything in any case, and explanations would be lengthy. Besides, there's nothing very remarkable here — anything of interest is in the floor beneath us: the condenser and operational controls. And here is a screen by which we fixate the fields, in various phases, of course. As you see, an elementary jumble of electric plugs, switches and levers. Like something out of Mayakovsky, right?"

I cast a sidelong glance at the chair behind the screen, over which hung a helmet resembling an astronaut's but with coloured wires attached to it.

"He's scared," said Nikodimov, winking at Zargaryan. "What's so terrifying about it? Surely a chair..."

"Wait," interrupted Zargaryan cheerfully. "Don't explain: let him guess for himself. See, old fellow, it's like a barber's chair, but no mirror. Or maybe a dentist's chair? But no drill. Where can you find such a chair? In the theatre, the cinema? No again. Perhaps in the pilot's cabin of an aeroplane? Then where's the joystick or wheel?"

"Looks more like an electric chair," I said.

"Naturally. An exact copy."

"And you'll put the helmet on me, too?"

"What do you think? Death in two minutes!" His eyes twinkled. "Clinical death. Then we resurrect you."

"Don't frighten him," laughed Nikodimov, and turned to me. "You're a

journalist?"

I nodded.

"Then I beg you ... no write-ups. Everything you'll find out here is not ripe for printing yet. Besides, the experiment might prove a failure. You might see nothing and we'll have to write it off as a loss. Well ... but when it is ready, the story will certainly be yours. I promise you that."

Poor Klenov. His hopes for an article vanished like a dream.

"Do your experiments have a direct relation to my story?" I dared to ask.

"Geometrically direct," interrupted Zargaryan. "That's only Pavel Nikodimov's cautiousness, but I tell you straight: there's no possibility of failure. The proofs are too clear."

"Ye-es," drawled Nikodimov, thoughtfully. "Pretty good proofs. So Stevenson's story happened to you? Is that how you explain it? Jekyll and Hyde?"

"Of course not. I don't believe in reincarnation, or transformed bodies."

"But even so?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for an explanation. From you."

"Wise of you."

"So there is an explanation?"

"That's right."

I jumped to my feet.

"Sit down," said Zargaryan. "No, go and sit in the chair you're so scared of. Believe me, it's much more comfortable than Voltaire's."

To put it mildly, I was rather hesitant. That devilish chair positively terrified me.

"All explanations only after the experiment," continued Zargaryan. "Sit here. Come, where's your nerve gone? We won't pull any teeth."

I sank deep into the chair, as if in a feather bed. A feeling of special lightness came over me, almost like weightlessness.

"Put out your feet," said Zargaryan. Apparently he was the one directing the experiment.

The soles of my feet rested on rubber clamps. On my head I felt the soundlessly lowered helmet. It gripped my forehead lightly, and was unexpectedly comfortable, like a soft, felt hat.

"Is it too loose?"

"Yes, a bit."

"Make yourself comfortable. We shall now regulate it."

The helmet became tighter. But I felt no pressure: its supple lining seemed to fuse with my skin. I had the feeling that an evening breeze had stolen through the window and was pleasantly cooling my forehead and ruffling my hair. Yet I knew the window was closed and my head was enveloped in the helmet.

Suddenly the light went out. I was surrounded by a warm, impenetrable darkness.

"What's up?" I asked.

"It's all right. We are isolating you from light."

How were they isolating me? With a wall, a cowling, a hood of some

kind? I touched my eyelids: the helmet did not cover my eyes. Stretching out my hand, I could feel nothing.

"Drop your arm. Sit still. You will sleep now."

I settled more easily in the chair, relaxed my muscles. And truly, I felt sleep coming over me, an imminent Nirvana drowning all my thoughts, recollections, intruding words. For some reason, I remembered a four-line stanza:

*But sleep is only a shadow-creation,
An unstable dissimulation,
Illusion of live animation —
Yet not a bad prevarication.*

What kind of illusory dreams would sleep bring me this time, good ones or evil? The thought flashed and died away. There was a slight ringing in my ears, as if a mosquito were buzzing on a very high note somewhere close by.

Now voices, very clear, reached my ears, though I could not place their whereabouts.

"Is anything coming through?"

"There's some interference."

"And now?"

"The same."

"Try the second scale."

"Got it."

"And brightness?"

"Excellent."

"I'll turn it on full power."

The voices disappeared. I fell into a soundless, untroubled state of non-existence, pregnant with unusual expectancy.

THE DREAM WITH A MIRACLE

I half opened my eyes and blinked. Everything swirled round in a rosy mist. The lights of the chandelier on the ceiling were arched out in a shining parabola. I was surrounded by a circle of women all in matching black dresses, all with matching washed-out faces. They cried out to me in Olga's voice.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?"

I forced open my eyelids as wide as I could. The mist melted away. The chandelier was at first tripled, then doubled, and finally became its normal self. The women shrank into a single figure with Olga's voice and smile.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"At the reception."

"What reception?"

"Can you have forgotten? At the Hungarian Embassy's reception. At the Metropole Hotel."

"What are we doing here?"

"Good lord, the tickets were sent to us this morning! I just managed to get my dress from the dressmaker. You seem to have forgotten everything! "

I was certain no tickets had been sent to us that morning. Perhaps they'd come the evening before, on my return from Nikodimov? Did this mean I'd lost my memory again?

"But what happened to me?"

"The reception room was terribly stuffy and you suggested we go out for some fresh air. When we got to the foyer here, you suddenly felt bad."

"Strange."

"Nothing strange about it. It was impossible to breathe in there, and your heart isn't too good. Would you like something to drink?"

"I really don't know."

Olga seemed almost like a stranger to me in the new dress she had mentioned. It was the first time I'd heard about it. When did she go to the dressmaker's if I'd been home all day?

"Wait a minute, I'll go and bring you some Narzan mineral water."

She disappeared into the reception room, and I continued to look vaguely about at the familiar foyer of the restaurant. I recognized it, but that didn't ease my position. I couldn't at all understand when the Hungarians had sent the tickets, and why they'd sent them. I had no title of honour, I wasn't an academician or a master of sport. Yet Olga accepted it as a matter of course, as something quite usual in our way of life.

I was still standing there motionless when Olga returned with the Narzan. I got the impression that she wanted to return to the reception.

"Have you met anyone you know?"

"All the chiefs are there," said Olga, brightening. "Fedor Ivanovich and Raisa, even the deputy minister."

I was not acquainted with either a Fedor Ivanovich or a Raisa, let alone a deputy minister. But I didn't want to risk admitting it, and merely asked: "Why the deputy minister?"

"It was he who fixed it so we could all come. After all, our clinic is attached to the ministry. He gave the tickets to Fedor, who passed some on to Raisa. Probably there were a few extra tickets."

Olga did not work at a ministerial clinic, but at a very ordinary district polyclinic. I knew that for a fact. Once she had actually been invited to work at the clinic for the Ministry of Communications, but she had refused.

"You go on back," I said. "I'll take a little stroll for a breath of fresh air."

I went outside, stood at the entrance and lit a cigarette. The yellow light from the street lamps was swimming in the wet asphalt pavement. Two-decker buses, as red as those in London, splashed by me. I had never seen such buses before. Between the upper and lower deck windows ran an advertising strip with the painted sign:

SEE THE NEW FRENCH FILM CHILD OF MONTPARNASSE.

I'd never heard of it. What was wrong with my memory? It was full of gaps. In the distance, to the left of the Bolshoi Theatre, a gigantic neon oblong burned against the sky.

Flickering letters raced round it: 'Earthquake in Delhi.... Soviet doctors

flew to India.' The latest news in lights. I couldn't recall when it was put up.

"Getting some air?"

I heard a well-known voice, turned, and saw Klenov. He had just come out of the restaurant.

"I'm leaving," he said. "There's lots of liquor, but I don't drink. Ulcers. I've paid my respects, and now for home."

"Between ourselves, how come you're paying respects?"

"Well, d'you see, Kemenes invited us. He's press-attaché now."

Tibor Kemenes, a Russian-speaking Hungarian student, had been our guide in Budapest. I was just out of hospital, and we had wandered for hours around the city, so new to us. But when had Kemenes become press-attaché at their embassy in Moscow? And how was it I only found out now?

"Yes, people go up the ladder. But you and I got stuck somehow, old fellow. We are the ones who keep the wheels turning."

"Speaking of turning the wheels, there won't be any article, incidentally," I told him.

"What article?" asked Klenov in surprise.

"About Zargaryan and Nikodimov."

He laughed so hard, passers-by turned back to stare.

"You certainly picked an eccentric for a subject. That Nikodimov keeps a panther on a chain at his cottage instead of a dog. And in Moscow he drops reporters down the waste chute."

"You already told me that."

"When?"

"This morning."

Klenov gripped my shoulders and looked me in the eye.

"What have you been drinking, Tokay or palinka?"

"I've not taken a drop."

"That's easy to see. Why, Saturday night I went to my cottage at Zhavoronki, and only returned today at five in the afternoon. You must have been talking with me in your dreams."

Klenov waved good-bye and went off, but I stood there, deeply shaken by his last words: 'talking with me in your dreams'. No, it was now I was talking with him in a dream. In a dream too real to be true.

Immediately I recalled the conversation in Faust's laboratory, the chair with the various lead-in wires. And Zargaryan's warning from the darkness: 'Sit still. You will sleep now.' Some kind of electronic sleep with artificially aroused dreams. It all seemed as if I were awake, only this real life for some reason was turned upside down. Then why should I be surprised? It was as plain as day.

I went back inside. A turbid haze of smoke hung over the tables, like steam, mixing with the electric light. People were dancing. I searched in vain for Olga, then entered the adjoining room. The long tables, littered with half-demolished food and drink, were witnesses that the guests had recently been feasting here. They had been served European buffet style, and ate standing holding their plates, or sat on the window-sills covered with folds of the draperies. Now only the latecomers remained, searching the tables for

drinks and snacks still untouched. Somebody, who was playing a lone hand at the end of a large table, turned and called out to me.

"Over here, Sergei. Tuck in. Palinka, just like in Budapest."

It was Mikhail Sichuk who, according to another version I knew, had already managed to skip the country. Perhaps in this dream he'd managed to return. Through a hole in space or on a flying-carpet. I didn't bother my head over it, nor did I react to the miracle. I simply poured myself a glass of palinka from Mikhail's bottle, and drank. I was beginning to like dreams that contained even real sensations of taste.

"To our friends and comrades," toasted Mikhail, also drinking.

"How did you get here?" I asked, diplomatically.

"The same as you. As a hero of the liberation of Hungary."

"Oh, you're a hero?"

"We're all heroes." Mikhail drained his glass and grunted. "It's heroism to have survived such a war!"

I grew angry. "Only to be a traitor, afterwards?"

Mikhail put his glass down and pricked up his ears.

"What are you getting at?"

I realized, of course, that I wasn't being logical, that it was senseless to accuse under the circumstances, but I got carried away.

"You went off on the Ukraine in real style. On a Soviet excursion-voucher, you scum!"

"How did you guess?" asked Mikhail in a whisper.

"That you skipped?"

"That I wanted to travel, and went to a lot of trouble to get a voucher...."

"If they'd known, you wouldn't have got it."

"But they didn't give it to me."

As chairman of the trade-union committee, I myself had arranged for Mikhail's voucher. But in this dream everything was topsy-turvy. Perhaps I had gone in his place? I had also wanted to go, but there hadn't been an extra voucher. But what if there had been? My dream tossed me around like a chip of wood in the ocean.

"Sit down, Sergei. Are you avoiding me?"

Somebody caught my arm as I was threading my way between the tables in the banquet room. I looked into his face and was frozen dumb. And I was really scared.

"Sit down, won't you? Let's drink Tokay. After all, it's the best in Europe."

My legs gave way and I fell, rather than sat, in a chair by the table. Sad eyes that I knew so well stared at me. The last time I'd seen them — not both, but one — was in '44 on the Danube highway. Oleg lay on his back, his face covered with blood trickling down from where his right eye had been a moment earlier. Fright and grief had frozen in the other.

Now they both looked at me. A curved, reddish scar stretched from the right eye up across the temple.

"What are you staring like that for, Sergei? Do I look so much older?"

"I was remembering forty-four. When you ... you...."

"When I what?"

"When you were killed, Oleg." He smiled. "Bullet was a bit off. Only the scar's left. Had it hit a fraction more to the right — curtains. Neither my eyes nor I would be here." He sighed. "Funny. I wasn't afraid then, but I am now."

"Of what?"

"The operation. A splinter was left somewhere in my chest, memorial of one other wound. So far I've lived with that splinter all right, but now they say I mustn't any longer. Have to have an operation."

His familiar eyes with the long, almost feminine lashes were smiling. The forehead angled back into the receding hairline at the temples, so that it looked higher than before. Deep lines nestled close to the corners of his lips. And yet there was something about this dear and familiar face that struck me as strange. The imprint of time, perhaps. So Oleg would have looked, if he had lived. But in this artificial world of dreams he was alive. If Faust had created this model, then he was a god, and I was already beginning to doubt which of the two worlds was real. A treacherous thought struck me: what if something broke down in Faust's laboratory and I was stuck here for good! Should I be sorry? I didn't know.

I pinched my arm hard.

"What for?" Oleg looked his surprise.

"For a minute I thought this was a dream."

Oleg laughed, and suddenly faded away into a lilac mist. That familiar mist. It lapped up everything, and went black. Zargaryan's voice asked me out of the dark: "Are you alive?"

"Of course, I am."

"Raise your arm. Can you move it freely?"

I moved my arm in the dark.

"Roll up your sleeve and loosen your collar."

He pressed something cold to my chest, then to my wrist.

"Don't be frightened. It's only a stethoscope. We'll check your heart. Don't talk."

How could he see in the dark through which not one speck of light penetrated? But he saw.

"All right," he pronounced in a satisfied voice. "Only the pulse is a bit fast."

"Maybe we'll break off the test?" The voice of an invisible Nikodimov came from somewhere.

"Whatever for? Sergei Nikolaevich has the nerves of an athlete. Now we'll show him another dream."

"So it was a dream?" I asked, feeling relief.

"Who knows?" Zargaryan slyly called out of the dark. "And if not?"

I didn't have time to answer. The darkness swallowed me up like the sea.

A DREAM CULMINATING IN HYSTERICIS

Out of the darkness burst a stream of light, flooding a white operating theatre. On the table lay a prostrate body covered to the waist with a white sheet. The dissected chest exposed to view the scarlet, bleeding inner tissues

and the pearly whiteness of ribs. The patient's eyes were closed, his face bloodless and still. There was something familiar about the face: it seemed I'd seen only recently those deep lines at the lips and the curving, rosy scar on the right temple.

My hands were holding a probe buried in the open chest. I was in an operating gown and white linen cap, my nose and mouth covered with a surgical mask. The people opposite me were dressed as I was. I knew none of them, but seemed to recognize the eyes of a woman standing at the patient's head. Her eyes were riveted to my hands, and were so full of alarming tension that it seemed as if a taut string were stretched between us. It rang thinly the deeper the probe went into the opening.

Suddenly I remembered all that had occurred up to this moment. The squeal of brakes from the car stopping at the entrance, the granite steps wet with rain, the well-known vista of a street I had often dreamed about, and then the respectful smile of the cloakroom attendant catching my coat on the fly as I went by, the slow rise of the lift and the shining whiteness of the operating theatre where I put on my gown and scrubbed hands and arms a dreadfully long time. I remembered perfectly that it was I — yes, I — who began the operation, opening the chest with a scalpel along the line of the scar while my hands with professional, habitual skill cut, split and probed. All this flashed into my conscious mind with the speed of sound, and disappeared. I had forgotten everything. The habitual skill of my hands turned into a frightened tremble and with sudden terror I realized that I didn't know what to do next, or how to do it. Any further delay would mean murder.

Without realizing what I did or why, I withdrew the probe from the wound and dropped it. It gave out a hollow tinkle. In the eyes above the muslin masks, I read one and the same question: "What's happened?"

"I can't," I almost groaned. "I'm ill."

Walking on strangely cottony legs, I went to the door. Half turning round, I saw somebody's back bent over the patient in my place, and a quiet bass voice gave a command to the head nurse: "Probe!"

"Run!" my thoughts raced. So that nobody would see, so that I would see nobody. No longer to read what I had managed to read in all those wide-open, surprised and accusing eyes. I could not feel my legs under me. I ran like a storm through the scrubbing surgery and into the hallway between two right-angled corridors, flinging myself down on white, shining enamelled seat.

"Just now, with these very hands, I killed Oleg," I told myself. I gripped my temples with icy hands, groaned and perhaps even cried aloud.

"What's wrong ... Sergei Nikolaevich?" I heard a frightened voice.

The man who addressed me wore an operating gown like myself, but without the cap, revealing a bald, naked skull and he asked uneasily: "What's wrong? How did the operation go?"

"I don't know," I said.

"How's that?"

"I threw it up ... left...." I scarcely opened my mouth. "I came over ill."

"Who's operating then? Asafyev?"

"No idea."

"That's not possible!"

"I know nothing. I don't even know who you are! Who are you, what's your name, where am I, for heaven's sake?" I screamed.

He shuffled from foot to foot, staring at me with amazed eyes, empty of comprehension. Then he ran to the door through which I had just stormed.

I looked after him and stood up. I tore off my gown, ripping the ties, wiped my hands and threw the gown on the floor. The cap followed. In the depths of the corridor stretching before me I saw a flash of white — a doctor or nurse-in high heels that tapped on the parquet. She disappeared in one of the rooms. I mechanically headed in her direction, passing identically white doors. They led into consulting rooms of doctors, whose names were printed on cards framed in white plastic. 'Dr. Gromov, S. N.' I read. My office. Well then, in you go!

Klenov sat by a wide Italian window behind my desk, reading a newspaper.

"So soon?" he asked with restraint, but a restraint that rang with alarm and fear.

I was silent.

"He's alive?"

"Why are you here?" I countered.

"You told me to wait here, yourself!" burst out Klenov. "What's happened to Oleg?"

"I don't know."

He leaped up. "Why not?"

"I felt bad ... almost lost consciousness."

"During the operation?"

"That's right."

"Who is operating then?"

"Don't know." I tried not to look at him.

"But why are you here now? Why aren't you in the operating room at least?" screamed Klenov.

"Because I'm not a surgeon, Klenov."

"You're mad."

He didn't push me aside, he charged me with his shoulder like a hockey-player and ran into the corridor. And I sat inately on a chair in the middle of the room, couldn't even drag myself as far as my desk. "I'm not a surgeon," I had told Klenov. Then how could I have started the operation and conducted it to the critical moment without arousing anybody's doubts? So that was possible in dreams. Then where did the fear come from, this near terror of what had occurred? You see, Oleg, the operation, Klenov and I myself were only shades in a world of dreams, and I knew it. "And if not?" Zargaryan had asked. And if we're not!

Then the desk telephone rang, but I turned away. It went on ringing. Finally I grew tired of it.

"Sergei, is that, you?" came a voice. "How was it?"

"Who's speaking?" I barked.

"Don't yell. As if you didn't know me."

"I don't. Who is this?"

"But it's me, Galya! Who else?"

Galya is excited, and quite rightly so, I thought. But why is she phoning? If anyone should be waiting here, she should be. Instead of Klenov.

"Why are you silent?" she asked, surprised. "Was it a failure?"

"Look...." I faltered. "I can't tell you anything definite. I felt bad during the operation. An assistant is finishing...."

"Asafyev?"

Again that Asafyev, I thought. How do I know whether it's him or not? And does it matter, since this is only a dream?

"Probably," I said aloud. "I couldn't tell. They're all in masks."

"But you don't trust Asafyev. Even this morning you said he's a surgeon for convalescents."

"When did I say that?"

"When we were having breakfast. Before the car came for you."

I knew perfectly well that I hadn't had breakfast with Galya. I had been at home. I had no car. But why argue, if it was all a dream?

"And what happened to you?" she continued. "What do you mean ... you felt bad?"

"Weakness. Dizziness. Loss of memory."

"And now?"

"What about now? Are you asking about Oleg?"

"No, about you!"

I even marvelled. Where did Galya get such callousness from? Oleg lying on the operating table, and she asks what's wrong with me!

"Complete atrophy of the memory," I said angrily. "I've forgotten everything. Where I was this morning and where I am now, who you are, who I am, and why I'm a surgeon if one look at a scalpel makes my flesh creep."

Silence from the receiver.

"Are you listening?"

"I'll come to the hospital at once," said Galya, and hung up.

Let her come. Did it matter when, where or why? Dreams are always illogical, yet for some reason I was able to think logically even in dreams. The resolve to run away, ripening from the moment I left the operating room, was finally taken. "I'll leave a note of some kind for decency's sake, and go away," I thought.

On the top sheet of the pad lying on the desk above some papers I read the heading: 'Professor Sergei Nikolaevich Groinov, D. Sc. (Med.)'. This brought to mind my sheet from the notebook on which my hypothetical Mr. Hyde had scribbled the mysterious, cluo-like inscription. It had turned out to be the key to the puzzle. True, I hadn't yet solved the puzzle itself, but the key was in the lock. 'And if not?' Zargaryan had answered in reply to my query whether it was a dream. What if I were just as much of an unseen aggressor to Prof. Sergei Gromov as my Hyde of yesterday had been to me?

Shouldn't I follow his example and leave a similar kind of clue or explanatory note?

I was already writing on the professor's pad:

You and I are doubles, though we live in different worlds, and perhaps even in different times. Unluckily, our 'meeting' happened during an operation. I couldn't finish it: in my world I have a different profession. Find the scientists in Moscow: Nikodimov and Zargaryan. They, probably, can explain to you what happened at the hospital.

Without reading over what I had written, I went to the door, caught by a single impulse — to go anywhere at all, so long as it was out of this Hoffman-like devilry. Too late: the devilry was already at the door.

Before I could open it, Lena entered. She was still wearing the cap and gown she had worn in the operating room, but no mask. I retreated a step and asked in the trembling tone others had applied to me: "Well, how was it?"

She had scarcely aged at all since the last time I saw her after the war: that must have been ten years ago. But I was more tightly connected with the Lena of this dream, for our professions joined us.

"We removed the splinter," she said, barely moving her lips.

"And Oleg?"

"He'll live." After a moment's silence, she added: "You counted on something different?"

"Lena!"

"Why did you do it?"

"Because a terrible thing happened. Loss of memory. I suddenly forgot all I knew, everything I had learned. And even professional skills that were part of me. I couldn't, I didn't have the right to continue the operation."

"You're lying!" Her lips were clamped together so tightly they were white.

"I'm not."

"You're lying. Are you improvising this on the spot or did you think it up earlier? Do you think anybody will believe your story? I shall demand a special commission of experts."

"Go ahead," I answered with a sigh.

"I've already talked with Klenov. We'll write a letter to the papers."

"You won't. I'm not lying to anybody."

"To anybody? But I know why you did it. From jealousy."

I even laughed.

"Jealous of whom?"

"And he even laughs, the scum!" she screamed.

Before I could catch her arm, she hit me in the face so hard that I almost lost balance.

"You scum!" she repeated, choking with tears, and close to hysterics. "Murderer! ... If it wasn't for Volodya Asafyev, Oleg would now be dead on the operating table. Lying there dead, dead!"

A sudden darkness cut short her screams.

A DREAM FULL OF ANGER

I seemed to be blind and deaf, and my body was pressed to the parquet floor as if paralysed. I could not even stir, and felt nothing except the coolness of the waxed floor against my temple. How many hours, or minutes, perhaps seconds, this feeling lasted I don't know. I had lost all sense of time.

Suddenly the blackness before my eyes faded like Indian ink does on Whatman paper when you use it to spread a dull grey wash over an outlined space. The space here was outlined by the walls of a narrow corridor lit by a few dim electric bulbs and terminating in a steep stairway leading up to a rectangle of daylight. I was standing now, pressing my face against the waxed wall-panels, holding on to the handrail that ran the whole length of the corridor.

As before, Lena was looking at me, but her expression had changed into deep sympathy.

"Are you sea-sick?" she asked. "Nauseous?"

I certainly felt a bit under the weather, especially when the floor, swaying like a swing, suddenly slipped from under my feet and my stomach twisted in spasms.

"It's the pitching of the ship," she explained. "We're turning into the harbour."

"Whereabouts are we?" I said, failing to grasp what she meant.

"We've already reached Istanbul, Professor. Come and take a look."

"Where?"

I still could not catch on to what was happening.

A new devilish metamorphosis. Out of one dream into another. A Technicolor scene from a fairy tale.

"Come up on deck. You'll feel better where there's a breeze," and she pulled me after her. "Incidentally, let's see what Istanbul looks like. Though one can hardly make anything out — it's raining."

The rain did not actually fall, but hung around us like a lustreless, hazy netting. Through this net, the shoreline panorama seemed made of shapeless, abstract patches with the outlines here and there of murkily gleaming minarets and cupolas, some blue and others green. Clouds teemed above it all, bunting and overtaking each other.

"We'll need our raincoats," frowned Lena, with a hand above her eyes to ward off the fine wet spray. "Can't go ashore like this. What cabin are you in, seven? Wait for me by the ship's ladder or on shore. All right?"

Now I knew the number of my cabin. Well then, let's go for a mackintosh. A trip through foreign seas and countries is always interesting. Even in the rain, even in a dream.

Entering my cabin, I found Mikhail Sichuk busy by his bunk. He was hurriedly pocketing some papers and packets, and did not seem at all pleased with my appearance.

"Is it raining?" he asked.

"It is," I answered mechanically, trying to puzzle out why my dreams persistently confronted me with the very same personages. "What are you stuffing in your pockets?"

This seemed to embarrass Mikhail.

"Oh, that ... just souvenirs to exchange. So it's raining..." he mumbled, avoiding my eyes.

"That's bad. We'll all be bunched in a group, holding on to each other. Otherwise we'll get lost...."

Then I remembered what Mikhail had done in real life. In this very same Istanbul. In reality, and not in a dream.

"What's the name of our ship?" I asked.

"What? You've forgotten?" grinned Mikhail.

"Sclerosis. Can't remember, somehow."

"The Ukraine. What of it?" He looked at me with suspicion.

Everything fell into place. This dream, in time, was a month ago. All the better. I could change the course of events.

"Nothing special," and I even yawned to put him off the track. "It's raining. Suppose we don't go."

"Not go where?"

"Ashore. They'll make us walk half the day in the rain: mosques, museums.... Wishing we were home. Let's settle down in the bar over a glass of beer."

"Isn't that the limit!" laughed Mikhail. "The last foreign port and we go to the bar."

"Why the last? We still have Varna and Constanta to see. Very beautiful cities, by the way."

"Socialist," drawled Mikhail scornfully.

"And you, of course, must have capitalist towns? "

"I paid good money out. I want my money's worth."

"Thirty pieces of silver," I said. "Judas money."

Incidentally in that other dream in the Metropole, I'd already put this to Mikhail. And all for nothing. The shot had misfired. He never got his excursion-voucher, and so never took the trip. But now I'd caught him in time.

"Look, I know what you're planning," I went on. "Two words to a policeman at the first bus stop, and off in a taxi to the American Embassy. Quiet, don't deny it! And at the embassy you'll beg for political shelter."

For a moment Mikhail was turned into a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife immortalized in the Bible. But only for a moment. Realizing that somebody had looked into his soul, into its secret depths, a quiet terror came and went in his eyes. He was a damned good actor.

"Rubbish," he said, with a show of good-heartedness, and reached out to take his raincoat off the hanger.

"I am not joking, Sichuk," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I know the dirty thing you intended to do, and I'm going to stop

it."

"That's interesting, but how?" he burst out.

"It's all very simple. Till we leave port, you don't go out of this cabin."

"Might as well warn you, I'm not a good subject for hypnosis. So get out of my way," he declared insolently, and began putting his coat on.

I sat on the edge of the bunk nearest the door. Then I wrapped my handkerchief round my left hand. I'm left-handed, and punch with my left. There's no curve to the punch, and it has all the power of my arm and shoulder muscles behind it, and the whole weight of my body. I learned this from Sazhin, the USSR boxing champion in the light-heavyweight class. That was in the late forties. I was younger then and glad of his help. I would go to him at the training gym after work, right from the editorial office. There, in a sheltered corner, I would correct his notes — he was going to turn journalist. Then I would ask him to show me a few tricks.

And he did. "You'll never make a boxer, of course," he told me. "Too old, and no talent.... But if you ever get in a fight, you'll be able to take care of yourself. Only see you don't break your knuckles. Wrap your hand up."

Mikhail at once noticed my manipulation and became curious.

"What's that for?"

"So I don't skin my knuckles."

"What? You're joking?"

"I've already told once I'm not joking."

"One yell from me...."

"You won't yell," I interrupted him. "Or it'll be the worse for you. I'll tell everything you plan doing and ... curtains, as they say."

"Who's going to believe it?"

"They'll believe it. Once they're tipped off, they'll start thinking out the how's and wherefore's. You won't be let ashore."

"But I can accuse you of the same thing."

"Then they won't let either of us go. And when we get home, it'll all be straightened out."

Dressed in his hat and coat, Mikhail sat opposite me on his bunk.

"You're crazy. What gave you the idea I was going to skip?"

"I saw it in a dream."

"I'm asking you straight."

"What difference does it make? The important thing is, I'm not mistaken. I can read it in your eyes."

"I'm a Soviet citizen, Sergei."

"You're not. You're the scum of the earth. I found that out even at the front. Knew you were a coward, a bad lot. Only I never managed to expose you in time."

Red spots came up on Mikhail's cheeks. His fingers played nervously with his coat buttons, doing them up and undoing them. He must have finally realized that his well-worked-out plan could fail.

"I won't yell, of course. I don't want a row." His voice took on a tearful note. "But, honestly, this is all nonsense. Sheer nonsense."

"What's in your pockets?"

"I told you. All kinds of stuff: pins, badges, photos."

"Show me."

"Why should I?"

"Then don't. Lie down on your bunk, and stay there."

He got up and walked to the door. I put my back against it.

"Let me out," he said through his teeth, grabbing my shoulders.

He was stronger than I, but out of cowardice didn't realize it. However, without any manifest hesitation, he came straight for me.

"Let me out," he repeated, pulling me toward him.

I gave him the knee, and he flew back. Then, crouching, he tore at me trying to smash his head under my chin.

But it didn't connect, and I let fly at his face with a straight left, landing right on his mouth. He swayed and crashed to the floor between his bunk and the wash-basin. A red trickle ran from his cut lip. He touched it with his fingers, saw blood, and screamed: "He-elp...." And broke off.

"Go ahead, yell," I told him. "Yell louder. You don't scare me."

His eyes narrowed, radiating spite alone.

"All the same, I'll skip," he hissed. "Next time."

"You be man enough to announce that at home. Officially, so that all can hear. Say it plainly, that you don't like our system, our society. Beg for a visa from some embassy or other. You think you'll be held? Oh no. We'll be glad to chuck you out. We don't need human scum like you."

"So why don't you let me go now?"

"Because you're crawling out quietly. By a fraud. Because you're letting everybody down who trusted you."

Mikhail jumped up and rushed me again, his mouth stretched in an ugly grin. He wasn't thinking now of getting out of the cabin at any cost; he was gripped by blind anger and lost his head.

I knocked him off his feet again. Sazhin's lessons came in handy after all. This time he fell on his bunk, but so hard that his head hit the wall. It looked to me as if he had lost consciousness. But he stirred and groaned. I folded a towel, wet it under the tap, and laid it on his face.

There was a knock at the door. I slid a glance at Mikhail. He did not even turn round. I released the catch on the door. In came a perfect stranger wearing a wet raincoat; apparently it was raining harder.

"You coming, Sergei Nikolaevich?"

"No," I answered. "I'm not. My friend isn't feeling well. Sea-sick, I guess. I'll stay with him."

Mikhail still did not move, nor even raise his head. I waited till the footsteps died away down the corridor.

"I'm going to the bar," I warned Mikhail. "But, if you'll excuse me, I'm locking the door."

I locked the door, but did not get to the bar. Again the sudden darkness, that I was so used to, returned me to the familiar chair with the helmet and pick-ups.

The first thing I heard was the tail end of a conversation which clearly was not meant for my ears.

"A traveller in time — that's stale. I should call it a 'walk in the fifth dimension'."

"Maybe in the seventh?"

"We'll formulate it. How is he?"

"Unconscious, so far."

"Consciousness has already returned."

"And the encephalogram?"

"Recorded in full."

"I told you before he's a real find."

"Shall I turn on the isolator?"

"Turn it off, you meant to say? Give it zero three, and then zero ten. Let his eyes get used to light gradually."

The blackness lifted a bit. As if a crack had opened somewhere letting in a tiny ray of light. Though invisible, it made the objects around me visible. With each passing second they grew more clear-cut, and soon I saw Zargaryan's face before me, as if on a cinema screen.

"Ave, homo, amici te salutant. (*Greetings, man, friends salute you.- tr.*) Do I need to translate?"

"No," I answered.

There was now full light. The astronaut's helmet lightly slipped from my head and lifted up. The chair-back gave me a push as if suggesting that I get up. I did. Nikodimov was already in his place at the desk, inviting me to join them both.

"Did you have many experiences?"

"Many. Shall I relate them?"

"Not in any case. You are tired. You will tell us tomorrow. What you need now is rest, and a proper sleep. Without dreams."

"But what I saw ... were they dreams?" I asked.

"We'll put off all exchange of information till tomorrow," he smiled. "Today, don't relate a thing, not even at home. The main thing is sleep, and more sleep."

"But shall I fall asleep?" I doubted.

"Without a doubt. After supper, take this tablet. And tomorrow we'll meet again here. Let's say at two o'clock. Ruben Zargaryan will come for you."

"Now I'll have him homo in a jiffy. Swift as the wind," said Zargaryan.

"And don't think about anything. Don't try to recollect anything. Don't live it over again," added Nikodimov. *Urbi ot orbi*, not a word. Need I translate?"

"I guess not," I said.

PROGRESS TOWARD THE SOLUTION

I kept my word, and gave Olga only a general outline about what had taken place. I myself did not want to relive all I had seen in my artificial dreams, even in my thoughts. Nor did I ask Olga about anything that had the slightest connection with my dreams. But late at night, in bed, I could not restrain myself.

"Did we ever get an invitation from the Hungarian Embassy?"

"No," said Olga in surprise. "Why do you ask?"

"Which of your acquaintances is called Fedor Ivanovich, and who is Raisa?"

"I haven't the faintest," she answered, more surprised than ever. "I don't know any people with those names. No wait ... I remember. You know who Fedor Ivanovich is? The head of a polyclinic. Not ours, but the one I was asked to work in, the one attached to the ministry. And Raisa — that's his wife. It was she who made me the offer. When did you get to know them?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Right now, my mind is a muddle. Forgive me," I muttered, and fell asleep.

I woke up late, after Olga had already gone leaving my breakfast on the table and coffee in the thermos. I didn't want to get up. I lay in bed, unhurriedly going over the events of yesterday. I remembered with particular clarity the dreams I had seen in Faust's laboratory — not dreams, but living, concrete reality. I remembered them in detail, down to the little things you usually don't notice in real life. And immediately I recalled even the paper pad in the hospital consulting room, the colour of the buttons on Mikhail's raincoat, the sound of the probe falling on the floor, and the taste of the apricot palinka or brandy. I recalled all the Hoffman-style confusion, compared the conversations, actions and interrelations, finally coming to strange conclusions. Very strange, though their strangeness hardly lessened their cogency.

A telephone call got me out of bed. It was Klenov, who had already found out from Zoya about my meeting Zargaryan. I would have to take a hard line.

"Do you know what 'taboo' means?"

"Suppose I do?"

"Then get this: Zargaryan is taboo, Nikodimov is also taboo, telepathy's taboo. That's the works."

"I'll tear my clothes to ribbons."

"Tear away! By the way, have you got a cottage in Zhavoronki?"

"A garden plot, you mean to say? Only it's not in Zhavoronki. We were offered two choices: Zhavoronki or Kupavna. I chose the last."

"But you could have chosen Zhavoronki?"

"Naturally. Why are you interested?"

"I'm interested in a lot of things. For instance, who is press-attaché now at the Hungarian Embassy? Kemenes?"

"You haven't got encephalitis, by any chance?"

"I'm asking in all seriousness."

"Kemenes is press-attaché in Hungary. He hasn't been sent to Moscow."

"But he might have been?"

"I get it. You're writing a thesis on the subjunctive mood."

In a way, Klenov almost guessed it. In my attempts to figure out the secret hovering around me, I tripped over the subjunctive mood time and again that morning. What might have happened if.... If Oleg hadn't been killed at Dunafoldvar? If it hadn't been Oleg that married Galya, but I? If I had gone

in for medicine after the war instead of entering the faculty of journalism? If Olga had agreed to work at the ministry's clinic? If Tibor Kemenes hadn't gone to work in Belgrade, but had come to Moscow? If, if.... Over the subjunctive mood, this Hoffman devilry burst into rich bloom. I might have gone to a reception in the Hungarian Embassy. I might have gone on the Ukraine around Europe. I might have been a Doctor of Medical Sciences, a surgeon operating on a living Oleg. All of these things might have been in real life, if....

And another if. What if I had seen not dreams at Zargaryan's, but a hypnotic stream of life, altered here and there according to circumstances? Then the fantastic Jekyll and Hyde story would have received a lawful vote. If Gromov the journalist could be turned into a surgeon for a certain time, then why shouldn't Gromov the surgeon become journalist Gromov for a time? He had that day on Tverskoi Boulevard. In a flash, flooded with Indian ink and lilac mist. In a flash, like Hyde jumping into Jekyll's body from the foam-rubber chair in Faust's laboratory. You see, Dr. Gromov had his Nikodimov and Zargaryan who controlled the same mysterious forces.

That meant that Zargaryan, Nikodimov and I, the three of us equally, had taken part in the simultaneous current of certain parallel non-intersecting lives. How many parallel lives were there? Two, five, six, a hundred, a thousand of them? What course were they following, and in what space or time? I remembered Galya's talk with Hyde about the plurality of worlds. What if it wasn't a fantastic hypothesis, but a scientific discovery — one more mystery solved about matter?

But my mind refused to accept this explanation. All the more so because my mind was untrained in the exact sciences. I could only bewail the limited knowledge of our education in the humanities. I did not have enough brains to think over, to ponder upon, the problem I had brought to light,

That was the state of mind I was in when Galya dropped in on her way to work. She had learned from Olga last night that I'd gone to see Zargaryan, and she was literally burning with curiosity to know if I'd found the key to the puzzle.

"I found it," I said. "Only I can't turn the key in the lock: I haven't the strength."

I told her about the chair in Faust's laboratory, and about my three 'dreams'. She was silent for a long time before she gave me a question. "Had he grown old?"

"Who?"

"Oleg."

"What did you expect? Twenty years have gone by."

She fell silent again, lost in thought. I was afraid that her personal curiosity overshadowed that of a scientist. But I was mistaken.

"Something else interests me," she said, breaking the silence. "The fact that you saw him grown older. With wrinkles. With a scar that never existed. It's impossible!" "Why?"

"Because you've never read Pavlov. You cannot see in a dream what you've never seen in real life. The blind from birth do not see dreams. And

what was Oleg like when you knew him? A boy, a youth. Where did the wrinkles of a forty-year-old man come from, and the scar on the temple?"

"But if it's not a dream?"

"You've already got an explanation?" Galya shot back.

I got the idea that she had guessed exactly what explanation I thought the most likely, and the most frightening.

"So far it's only an attempt at an explanation," I reminded her hesitantly. "I keep trying to compare my adventure with these dreams.... If Hyde could play such a joke on Jekyll, then why couldn't they both exchange roles?"

"Mysticism."

"But don't you remember your talk with Hyde about the plurality of worlds? Parallel worlds, parallel lives?"

"Rubbish," objected Galya.

"You simply don't want to take it seriously," I reproached her. "It's easy enough to say 'rubbish'. They said the same thing about the Copernicus hypothesis."

I didn't make her give in by this remark but at least forced her to think about my own thesis.

"Parallel worlds? Why parallel?"

"Because they don't intersect anywhere."

Galya laughed, openly scornful.

"Don't try writing science fiction: that's my advice. You wouldn't get anywhere. Non-intersecting worlds?" She snorted. "So Nikodimov and Zargaryan have found a point of intersection? A window into an anti-world?"

"Who knows?" I said.

I found out the answer to that two hours later in Faust's laboratory.

OPEN, SESAME!

To tell the truth, I went there as if to an examination, with the same inner trepidation and fear before the unknown. Again and again I ran over the dreams I recalled, the visions I'd seen during the experiment. I called them 'dreams' from habit, though I had come to the final conclusion that they weren't dreams at all. I compared all details suggesting such a comparison, and systematized my conclusions.

"Have you got it well rehearsed?" asked Zargaryan merrily when he met me.

"Rehearsed what?" I muttered, embarrassed.

"Your story, of course."

He saw through me. But rising anger made me overcome my embarrassment. "I don't much like your attitude."

He only laughed in answer.

"Do all the complaining you like. The tape-recorder isn't turned on yet."

"What tape-recorder?"

"The 'Yauza-10'. For purity of sound, it's wonderful."

I hadn't expected to make a tape-recording. It's one thing to tell a story, bat

quite another to tape-record. I shook my head, almost refusing.

"Sit down and begin," Nikodimov encouraged me. "You'll make your mark in science. Pretend you're dictating to a pretty stenographer."

"Only no hunter's tales," added Zargaryan with sly humour. "The tape's supersensitive, with Munchausen tuning.... I'm switching on."

Childishly, I stuck my tongue out at him, and my shyness disappeared at once. I began my story without any prologue, quite freely, and the more I talked the more colourful it became. I did not simply relate it: I explained and compared, looking into the past; compared the vision with reality and my experiences with my subsequent views. All Zargaryan's irony disappeared like smoke: he listened greedily, stopping me only to reverse the tape. I resurrected for them all the impressions I had in the lab chair: Lena's anger in the hospital, Sichuk's face convulsed with evil, and the lifeless smile of Oleg on the operating table, everything that I recalled and that had staggered me, that even shocked me now while I tape-recorded my still vivid recollections.

The tape reel was still turning when I finished: Zargaryan did not immediately turn it off, and it recorded the whole minute of silence that reigned in the room.

"So you didn't see the department store arcade," he observed bitterly. "Nor the road to the lake. A pity."

"Wait, Ruben," Nikodimov stopped him. "That's not the point. You see. The phases are almost identical. The same time, the same people."

"Not quite."

"Only infinitesimal deviations."

"But they are there," said Zargaryan,

"Not mathematically."

"And the difference in the signs?"

"Does such a difference change a man? Time changes, perhaps. If it's a minus phase, then it's possibly time coining from an opposite direction — counter-time."

"Don't be so sure. Perhaps it's only a different system of counting time," said Zargaryan.

"All the same, everybody will call it fantasy! And reason?"

"If you don't violate reason, you won't get anywhere in general. Who said that? Einstein."

The conversation didn't get any clearer. And I coughed.

"Excuse me," said Nikodimov, embarrassed. "We got carried away. Your dreams don't give us any peace."

"But are they dreams?" I expressed my doubts.

"You doubt it? So you've been thinking, have you? Maybe we'll start off the explanations with yours?"

I remembered all Galya's sneers, but I was not afraid of hearing the same again. So I stubbornly repeated the myth of Jekyll and Hyde, who met on the crossroads of space and time. If this was an anti-world, plurality, mysticism, the ravings of a mad dog — so be it! But I had no other theories to explain it with.

However, Nikodimov did not even smile.

"Have you studied physics?" he asked suddenly.

"Through a school textbook," I admitted, and thought: 'Now he'll start!'

But Nikodimov did not mock me, he merely stroked his beard.

"A rich training. But how, with the help of a school textbook can you define a plurality of worlds? Let's say, in Cartesian co-ordinates?"

Searching my memory, I found the Wellsian Utopia that Mr. Barnstaple got into, without turning off an ordinary highway.

"Excellent," agreed Nikodimov. "We'll begin with that. What did Wells compare our three-dimensional world to? To a book whose every page was a two-dimensional world. So, one might suppose that in multi-dimensional space there might also be neighbouring three-dimensional worlds, moving in time along nearly parallel routes. That's according to Wells. When he wrote his novel after the First World War, the genius Dirac was still a youth, and his theory received popular acclaim only in the thirties. You can, of course, picture up what Dirac's 'vacuum' is?"

"Approximately," I said carefully. "Generally speaking, it is not a void, but something like a neutrino-antineutrino pulp. Like plankton in the ocean."

"Picturesque, but not lacking sense," agreed Nikodimov again. "And this very same plankton from elementary particles, the neutrino-antineutrino gas, constitutes a border between worlds with a plus sign and those with a minus sign. There are scientists who look for anti-worlds in other galaxies, but I prefer seeking them right next door. And not only a symmetrical system — world and anti-world, but the infinity of this symmetry. As we have an infinite number of combinations in a game of chess, so even here there are infinite combinations of worlds and anti-worlds, adjacent to each other. You ask how I picture this adjacency? As a stable, geometrically isolated existence? No, on the contrary. In a simplified form this is the idea of the inexhaustibility of matter, of its perpetual motion generating these worlds along certain new, still unknown co-ordinates. To be more exact, along certain phase-like trajectories.

"Well, but what about ordinary motion then?" I interrupted, perplexed. "I'm also a particle of matter, but I move through space independent of your quasi-motion."

"Why 'quasi'? One is simply independent of the other. You are moving through space independent of your moving through time. Whether you sit at home or travel somewhere — you get equally older. So it is here: in one world you might, let's say, be travelling by sea; in the other, at the very same time, you are playing chess or having dinner at home. More than that: in the infinite repetition of worlds you may travel, be ill, or work; while in other infinite plurality of similar worlds, you don't actually exist, perhaps through an unfortunate accident or suicide, or you were simply never born at all because your parents never met. I hope I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear."

"He's shamming," said Zargaryan. "What he needs right now is a vivid example — that's clear at a glance. Look here, imagine an unusual reel of film. In one frame you are flying in an aeroplane, in another you are

shooting, in a third you are killed. In one frame a tree is growing, in another it is cut down. In one, the Pushkin monument stands on Tverskoi Boulevard, in another in the centre of the square. In a word, life shown in separate frames, moving, let us say, vertically from below upward or from above downward. And now picture the same life in separate frames, but moving horizontally from every frame, from left to right or vice versa. There you have an approximate model of matter in multi-dimensional space. Now what do you think is the most essential difference between this model and the simulated object?"

I didn't answer. What was the use of guessing?

"The difference is that there are no identical frames, but identical worlds exist."

"Similar," I countered.

"Not only," Nikodimov interrupted. "We still don't know the law by which matter moves in these dimensions. Take the simplest law: the sinusoidal. With the ordinary sinusoid, the slightest change in the argument brings about a corresponding change of function, and that means another world. But in a period, we get the same value of the sine and consequently the same world. And so on into eternity."

"That means I might also find myself in a world like ours? Exactly the same?"

"You wouldn't even notice any difference," said Zargaryan.

"And how do you explain what happened to me on the boulevard?"

"The same as you do. Jekyll and Hyde."

"A Gromov from another world who looks the same as me?"

"Precisely. A certain Nikodimov and a Zargaryan in that world transferred the conscious mind of your double. This did not occur momentarily, not all at once. Your own mind protested, argued: that explains the dualism during the first few minutes. But afterwards it gave in to the aggressor."

I suggested the proposition that my trying episode in the hospital was an exchange visit, but Nikodimov doubted it.

"It's possible, of course, but scarcely likely. It would be closer to the truth to suppose that it was a Gromov more or less like your aggressor. The same profession, the same circle of acquaintances, the same family situation. But I've already told you of the possibility of an almost complete, and even utterly complete, identity...."

"To put it more vividly," interrupted Zargaryan, "we have visited worlds whose borders fit into the borders of ours, touching the interior. We call them adjacent worlds, conditionally of course. And there are even more interesting worlds intersecting ours or, shall we say, perhaps in general not having points of contact with ours. There, time is either in advance of our time, or it lags behind. And who knows by how much?" He was silent, then added almost dreamily:

*Far beyond a certain birch-tree,
So long, so very dear to me,
In sudden silence is revealed*

The unknown — strange and most unreal.

"You didn't finish," I laughed, remembering the same verses. "It's different farther on!"

*To reach an unknown world we strive,
'It's sad, not all who go arrive.*

The desk telephone rang.

"Not all who go," repeated Nikodimov thoughtfully. "Our chief wouldn't arrive."

The telephone kept ringing.

"Talk of the devil, and.... Don't answer."

"All the same, he'll find us."

The trip into the unknown was put off till the evening when we were to meet in the Sofia Restaurant, where freedom from the top brass was fully guaranteed.

NOSCE TE IPSUM (KNOW THYSELF)

I did not see Olga until supper time: she was delayed at the polyclinic. There was nobody to talk with, about what had happened. Galya didn't ring up, and I was careful to avoid Klenov because of his insufferable instructive manner; because of it I even slipped away from an editorial meeting.

I wandered the streets for about an hour, so as not to arrive at the restaurant too early and have to hang around the entrance looking foolish. Trying to collect my thoughts, I sat by Pushkin's monument, but everything I'd heard that morning was so new and surprising that I couldn't even think it all out. Finally, all the flow of my thoughts led to the question of how to evaluate my meeting the two scientists. As an unusual success, 'reporters' luck', or as a menace that always lies hidden in something the mind cannot grasp. I was inclined to think it was 'reporters' luck'. If a lab guinea-pig could reason, it would probably be proud of its association with scientists. And I was proud of mine. Another sign of reporters' luck was the type of scientists my friends belonged to. I read somewhere that scientists are divided into classic and romantic types. The classic type is he who develops something new on the basis of the old, on what is firmly established in science. But the romanticists are dreamers. They are interested in fields of knowledge close to their own or remotely connected with them. They not only produce something new founded on the old: more often they do it by using utterly unlooked-for associations. I had even expressed my admiration of this type in an article I wrote. Now 'reporters' luck' had thrown us together. Only romantics can so bravely and recklessly sin against reason. And, apparently, I was very anxious to continue my part in this sinning.

Such were my thoughts as I went to keep my appointment, arriving not earlier but even later than my new friends. They already awaited me at the entrance: Zargaryan all in smiles and Nikodimov, dressed in an old-

fashioned stiff jacket, modestly effacing himself in the rear. The stand-up starched collar, popular around the turn of the century, would have suited him perfectly — he looked as severe as a prophet out of the Old Testament. The irresistible Zargaryan more than made up for it. Wearing a strict dark suit, with just enough of his tie showing to display a gold pin linked to a rounded shirt-collar, he so impressed the stout, bald maitre d'hotel that Nikodimov and I went unnoticed. We walked behind, half-smiling at the waiter bustling ahead of our tall Ruben and captiously selecting the secluded table we ordered.

When dinner was served, Zargaryan poured the cognac.

"The first toast is mine ... to chance meetings."

"Why 'chance'?"

"You can't possibly imagine how great a role chance plays in my life. By chance I met Zoya and through her, by chance, you. I even met Pavel Nikodimov by chance. Five years ago I read his article on the concentration of the sub-quantum biofield in the Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences. I went to him at once. It turned out that we were approaching one and the same problem along different paths."

He was silent. I remembered Klenov telling me that they worked in absolutely different fields of science, but before I could utter my question Zargaryan read my mind.

"A strange union, eh? Physics and neurophysiology," he laughed.

"What are you, a mind-reader?"

"And why not? I must be according to my staff position. After all I'm a telepathist. I'm engaged in many things in this field, but most of all I'm interested in dreams. Why do we so often dream of what we never saw in our conscious lives? How is this connected with Pavlov's teaching that the essence of dreams is a reflection of reality. What stimulations, in such cases, act on the brain cells? Perhaps things one is accustomed to — light, sounds, contacts, smells? But if not? Then there must be certain new stimulations we are not aware of..."

I remembered why my dreams drew his attention: they were not reflections of reality. But, apparently, many people have seen such dreams. Only these dreams weren't stable, as Zargaryan had explained. They were easily forgotten, hazy in the conscious mind, but the main thing was they did not repeat themselves.

"I figured it this way," he continued. "If, according to Pavlov, dreams reflect what is seen in our waking hours, yet the one experiencing them never actually saw the things he dreamed of, then it means somebody else did. But who? And how can what he sees be imprinted on the conscious mind of another?"

I interrupted him.

"Then my department store, street scene, the road to the lake or pond — they are some stranger's dreams?"

"Without any doubt."

"But whose?"

"I still didn't know at the time. There arose a supposition that it was

hypnotic transmission. But suggestion does not occur by chance, suggestion out of nowhere. It is always sent from the hypnotizer to the hypnotized. Not one of the cases I observed showed any evidence of suggestion. I put forward the idea of mental telepathy. In parapsychology, we call the brain sending the signal the inductor, and the brain receiving it the percipient. And again, not in one case investigated did we manage to discover the inductor. Characteristic examples are your more stable dreams. Who transmits them to you? From where? You were lost in conjectures. I was, too, though I inclined to the supposition that it is some other living person existing in another form and perhaps in another world. However, that would be almost mysticism.... I stood before a closed door. It was Pavel Nikodimov who opened it for me, or rather his paper did. Then I said: 'Open, Sesame!' Isn't that the way it was, Pavel?"

"Just about," affirmed Nikodimov good-heartedly. "But you skipped the most picturesque details: Sesame did not open so easily. You see, I'm a crabby fellow ... get along rather badly with people. My assistant ... well, he ran away when they began to put pressure on us. Took you for a lunatic, Ruben. I can even remember the district psychiatrist he phoned to. But even that didn't stop you. But you're right, our collaboration began from a chance meeting. So I back your toast. Let's drink to it."

"And afterwards?" I asked. "It's a big jump from an idea to experimental tests."

"We didn't jump, we crawled. The mathematical idea led to the physical state of the field. We started off with biocurrents. You see, the biocurrents of the brain are actually electro-magnetic fields originating in its nerve cells. Through their radiation they generate a sort of single energy-field — the so-called conscious and subconscious of a person's mind. Take your analogy. The fields of Jekyll and Hyde are only similar: they are incompatible or, as we say, antipathetic.

While you are awake, while your brain is active, the antipathy of the fields is constant and invariable. But when you fall asleep, the picture changes. The antipathy is now weakened, so the fields of the 'doubles' are superposed, so to say, and your dreams automatically repeat what the other has seen. But for Jekyll to become Hyde a complete compatibility of fields is necessary, which is possible only during exceptional activity on the part of the inductor's field. And we've discovered that you possess this exceptional gift of activity."

I listened eagerly to Nikodimov, but not all of it sank in, some of it escaped me. It was as if I had spells of deafness and from time to time lost the guiding thread in this devilish labyrinth of fields, doubles, frequencies and rhythms; but with sheer force of will I would catch it again. It looked like a speech interrupted by dots to indicate omissions.

"... through our experiments," Nikodimov was saying, "we came to the conclusion that under reciprocal transmission the fields activate waves with a frequency much higher than the usual alpha-rhythm. We called this new type of frequency kappa-rhythm. And the higher the frequency of the kappa waves, the more vivid are the dreams received by the sleeping receptor.

Further on it wasn't so difficult to establish the regularities as well. Complete compatibility of fields is connected with a sharp rise in frequency. So we got the idea of making a concentrator, or a transformer of biocurrents. By establishing the directed current of radiation we apparently transfer your conscious mind, locating an identical mind for it beyond the borders of our three-dimensional world. Of course, we are still at the very beginning of the road — the movement of the field along a phase trajectory is somewhat chaotic for the time being, because we cannot yet control it. We cannot say exactly where you will regain consciousness — in the present, past or in the future, going by our time. Dozens of experiments must still be made...."

"I'm ready," I interrupted him.

Nikodimov did not answer.

A husky, boyish voice drifted down to us from the stage where a juke-box stood that a young pop-music fan had turned on. The voice floated over the noisy dining-hall, over the short- or long-haired or bald heads, over the wine-darkened crystal goblets, floated invisibly and powerfully with a strength and purity of feeling unexpected in a restaurant almost blue with cigarette smoke.

"A song with an undercurrent," said Zargaryan.

I listened. "You are my destiny," sang the boy, "you are my happiness...."

"And you are our destiny," Zargaryan picked up the words with a serious and even triumphant note. "And maybe our happiness. You alone."

I averted my eyes, embarrassed. Whatever you say, there is something good about being somebody's destiny and happiness. Nikodimov at once caught my movements and the rather vain idea behind it.

"But perhaps we are your destiny, too," he said. "You will know a lot more, and particularly about yourself. You see, you are only a particle of that living matter which is 'you' in an endlessly complicated vastness — time. In a word, as the ancient Romans said: *Nosce te ipsum* — know thyself."

THE LAST SUPPER

I was ready to know myself in all the sum total of dimensions, phases and co-ordinates, but I didn't tell Olga about it that night. I gave her a vague sketch of my talk with the scientists and promised to relate it in greater detail the following day, which was her birthday. We usually celebrated it alone, but this time I invited Galya and Klenov to be our guests. I wanted very much to include Zargaryan and Nikodimov, the guilty parties in this unexpected — I could even say wonderful — event in my life. I had mentioned it in passing when we left the restaurant, but Nikodimov either wasn't listening attentively or missed it through absent-mindedness.

"Best leave it," Zargaryan had whispered confidentially. "He won't come anyway — he's a hermit, as he admitted himself. But I'll come when I can get away, perhaps a bit late though. We haven't finished our talk yet," and he slyly stressed it, "about self-knowledge, have we?"

He certainly came later than the rest of our company, arriving when the table-talk had already turned into argument, so hot an argument that there

was shouting, an argument stubborn to the point of rudeness when you forget all formalities in an effort to get your word in.

My story of what I experienced during the test and of my later talk with the scientists had made the impression of maniacal raving.

"We-ell..." Klenov muttered uncertainly, and was silent.

"I don't believe it," cried out Galya excitedly, red in the face and with sparks in her eyes.

"Why not?"

"It's nonsense! And it's sensation-hunting, as my lab colleagues say. A shady business. They're pulling the wool over your eyes."

"But why should they?" snapped Klenov. "What's their game? Nikodimov and Zargaryan aren't glory-hunters or schemers. It would be all very well if they wanted publicity, but they demand silence, d'you see. With their names, they don't want to arouse even a shadow of doubt that it's a truly scientific venture."

"Everything new in science, all discoveries, are built on past experiments," said Galya heatedly. "And where can you see that in this experiment?"

"The new often refutes the old."

"There are different kinds of refutations."

"Exactly. Einstein wasn't believed either, at first, for it was Newton he refuted!"

Olga kept stubbornly silent and out of it all, until it drew Galya's attention.

"Why don't you say something?"

"I'm afraid to."

"Whatever for?"

"You people are only arguing about certain abstract ideas, but Sergei is taking a direct part in the experiment. And, as I understand it, it won't stop here. If everything he says is true, why, the brain of an average person can scarcely sustain it."

"And are you so sure that I'm an average person?" I joked.

But she did not take it as a joke, nor did she answer me. Galya and Klenov again ruled the conversation. I had to answer dozens of questions and again repeat my story of the dreams I'd had in Faust's laboratory.

"If Nikodimov can prove his hypothesis," Galya finally admitted, "then it will turn physics upside down. It will be the greatest upset that ever occurred in our knowledge of the world. If he proves it, of course," she added stubbornly. "The experiment on Sergei is still not proof."

"But I'm interested in something else," said Klenov thoughtfully. "If you accept the truth of the hypothesis a priori, another question arises that's of no less importance: how did life develop on every space phase? Why are they so similar? I'm not referring to the physical but their social aspect. Why is it that each transformed Moscow of Sergei's is a present-day, post-war Moscow which is capital of the Soviet Union and not tsarist Russia? Look, if Nikodimov's hypothesis is proved, do you realize what they will ask about in the West, before anything else? Politicians, historians, church dignitaries and journalists will ask: is it obligatory that all worlds have a similar social

structure? Is it absolutely certain that their historical development has been identical?"

"Nikodimov spoke of still other worlds from different currents of time, perhaps even with counter-times. In that case, one might hit on Neanderthal man or on the first of Earth's stellar flights."

"That isn't my point," Klenov said impatiently. "However brilliant Nikodimov and Zargaryan's discovery may be, it does not reduce the importance of the question of social systems in every world. According to Marxism, all is clear: the physical similarity presupposes a social similarity. Everywhere the development of productive forces determines the character of production relations. But can you imagine the song that will be sung by those adherents of the cults of personality and chance? The barbarians might not have reached Rome, and the Tatars, Kalka. Washington might have lost the war of American independence, and Napoleon might have won at Waterloo. Luther might not have become head of the Reformation, and Einstein might not have discovered the theory of relativity. Bradbury carried this dependence of historical development on blind chance to the absurd. A traveller in time accidentally kills a butterfly in the Jurassic period, and it leads to a change in the American presidential election campaign: in place of a progressive and radical candidate, they elect a fascist and obscurantist as President. We know, of course, that Gold-water wouldn't have been elected any way even if all the dinosaurs of the Jurassic period had been killed. And we know that if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, he would probably have been defeated somewhere near Liege. And somebody else would have headed the Reformation instead of Luther; and if Einstein hadn't discovered the theory of relativity, someone else would have done so. Even not rising to the heights of historical materialism, Belinsky wrote more than a hundred years ago that blind chance did not rule either in nature or in history, but strict, irrevocable, inner necessity did."

Klenov spoke with that professional erudition of a lecturer, which so annoyed me at editorial meetings, and I cut in purely in the spirit of contradiction.

"Well, but just imagine if there had never been a Hitler in some neighbouring world? He was never born. Would there have been war or not?"

"Can't you answer that yourself? And Goering, Hess, Goebbels, Rommel, and lastly Strasser? The Krupps would have passed the conductor's baton to somebody. And I visualize you as a great delegate with a mission, Sergei. Don't laugh — truly great. Not only in helping to prove Nikodimov's hypothesis, but in the fact that you will be strengthening the position of the Marxist conception of history. That everywhere and always, under similar conditions of life on our planet, no matter what changes, phases or whatever you call them take place, the class struggle always determined and still determines social development until it becomes a classless society."

At this moment Zargaryan appeared with a bouquet of chrysanthemums. In ten minutes he won over Olga and Galya, and Klenov's professional erudition changed into the respectful attention of a college freshman.

Zargaryan gathered up all the threads of the talk at once, spoke of the proposed Nobel prize winners, of his recent trip to London, interchanged remarks with Galya about the future of laser technology. With Olga he discussed the role of hypnosis in paediatrics. Then he praised Klenov's article in the journal Science and Life. But he purposely, or so it seemed to me, diverted the conversation from my part in the scientific experiment.

However, when it struck eleven he caught my perplexed glance and said with his characteristic smile: "I know, d'you see, what you're thinking. Why is Zargaryan silent about the experiment? Am I right? Actually, old chap, I didn't want to leave right away, because further conversation will be impossible after I've said my say. Intriguing?" he laughed. "It's simple enough, really. You see, tomorrow we intend making a new experiment, and we are asking you to take part."

"I'm ready," I said, repeating what I had already told him in the restaurant.

"Don't be in a hurry," Zargaryan stopped me, and now there was a note of seriousness in his voice which I had noticed once before, and agitation as well. "First, the new experiment is to be much longer than the previous one. Maybe it will last several hours, perhaps even twenty-four.... Second, the test will cover more remote phases. I say 'remote' only to keep it within the bounds of comprehension. The point is hardly a matter of distances, the more so that we cannot determine them; and besides, what we mean by distances is of no importance for the activities of the biocurrents. The diffusion of the radiation is practically instantaneous and does not depend either on the spatial arrangement of the phase or on the sign of the field. But I must honestly warn you that we do not know the degree of risk involved."

"So it's dangerous?" asked Galya.

Olga asked no questions, though the pupils of her eyes seemed a shade larger.

"I cannot answer that definitely." Apparently Zargaryan had no desire to conceal anything from me. "If the aiming is not accurate enough, our converter might lose control of the superposed biofield. What the results would be to the test-subject, we don't know. Now imagine something else: in this world he is unconscious, in the other his conscious mind has been imparted to a certain person ... let's say somebody travelling by plane. What would happen to Sergei's conscious mind if there were a crash, we don't know. Would the converter manage to switch over the biofield in time, or would two people die, one in that world and one in this?"

Zargaryan was answered with silence. He stood up, and resumed.

"I've already told you that after my explanation the small talk would end. You are free, Sergei, to make your decision. I'll come for you in the morning and hear it with full respect even if it is a refusal."

We saw him out in silence, returned to the table in silence, and the conversation was not resumed for a long time.

Finally, Galya asked me point-blank: "You're waiting for my advice, I suppose?"

I silently shrugged my shoulders. What did it matter whether she advised me or not?

"I already started believing in this delirium," she continued. "Just imagine — I believed it. And if I were suitable for the test and had received the offer you have... I should not think twice about my answer. But as to advice.... Well, that's Olga's job."

"I won't talk you out of it, Sergei," said Olga. "Decide for yourself."

I still kept silent, not taking my eyes off my empty glass. I waited to hear what Klenov would say.

"You know, it would be interesting to know..." he suddenly began, not speaking to anyone in particular. "That is, I wonder if Gagarin thought it over when they offered him the chance to make the first flight into space?"

PART TWO

JOURNEY ACROSS THREE WORLDS

It is not enough to have this
globe, or a certain time — I will
have thousands of globes, and all time.
Walt Whitman, *Poem of Joys*

But, looking into the future,
As through a mirage-like prism,
What a supreme paradise I desire—
Out of one eye to glimpse communism.
Ilya Selvinsky, *Sonnet*

THE EXPERIMENT

Zargaryan came for me in the morning before Olga left for work. We had both got up early, as we always do when one of us is leaving on a holiday or a business trip. But the feeling of the abnormality and strangeness of this morning, compared to other such moments in the past, cast a darkness over the window, the sky, and the spirit. We purposely didn't speak of what lay ahead but conversed as usual in little more than monosyllables. I kept looking for my missing toothbrush and Olga couldn't get the water to run at the proper temperature.

"Now it's hot, now it's cold. You try the taps."

I tried my hand at it, and got nowhere.

"Are you nervous?"

"Not a bit."

"But I'm afraid."

"Wasted emotion. Nothing happened before. T sat a couple of hours in the chair, and that's all there was to it. Fell asleep and woke up. Didn't even have a headache afterwards."

"But you know this time it won't be for two hours. Maybe ten, maybe twenty-four. A long experiment. I can't even understand how they could permit it."

"If it's permitted, then everything's okay. You needn't have any doubts."

"But I do have doubts." Her voice rang a bit shrilly. "First, I doubt it as a doctor. Twenty-four hours without consciousness. Without the supervision of a doctor...."

"Why without a doctor?" I interrupted. "Outside of his speciality, Zargaryan has had medical training. Besides, there's lots of pick-ups to keep everything under control — pressure, heart and breathing. What else do you want?" Her eyes shone suspiciously close to tears. "And if you don't return...." "From where?"

"Do you know from where? You haven't the faintest idea. Some sort of

transferred biofield. Worlds. A wandering conscious mind. It's terrifying to think of."

"Then don't think of it. People fly in aeroplanes. It's also terrifying, but they do it. And nobody worries over it."

Her lips trembled, the towel slipped from her hand to the floor. I was glad when the telephone rang and I could avoid a recurrence of the dangerous topic.

It was Galya. She wanted to come over, but was afraid she mightn't make it in time. "Zargaryan isn't there yet?"

"Not so far. We're waiting." "How's your mood?" "Not bad. Olga's crying." "How silly. In her place I'd be glad — her man off on a feat of glory."

"Let's not overdo it, Galya." "Why not? That's how they'll see it when it's all over. No other way. A leap into the future. The very thought of such a chance is enough to make your head swim."

"Why into the future?" I laughed, wanting to tease her. "What if it's into some Jurassic period? With pterodactyls!"

"Don't talk nonsense," interrupted Galya. Doubting Thomas has now turned fanatic. "Don't you dare even think it."

"Man proposes, God disposes. Well, let's say chance rather than God."

"What did you learn in the faculty of journalism? A fine Marxist I've found!"

"Look, baby," I prayed. "Don't force me to repent of my political mistakes right now. I'll do that when I come back."

She laughed, as if we were talking about a trip to the cottage.

"Well, good luck, you hear? And bring me back a souvenir."

"It would be interesting to know what souvenir I could bring her," I told Klenov who had joined Olga and I for morning coffee. "A pterodactyl-claw or a dinosaur-tooth?"

I was touched. He hadn't been too lazy to come to see me off on my rather unusual journey, and had even managed to calm Olga down.

The tears had gone from her eyes.

"To get a gander at dinosaurs wouldn't be bad," observed Klenov philosophically. "You could organize some kind of safari in time. That would make a big noise."

I sighed.

"There'll be no noise, Klenov. And no safari. I'll meet you somewhere in an adjacent bit of life. We'll go to the cinema and see *Child of Montparnasse*. We'll drink palinka again. Or Hungarian tsuika."

"You have no imagination," said Klenov angrily. "They won't send you into an adjacent little world. Remember what Zargaryan said? It's quite possible there are worlds moving in some other course of time. Let's suppose their time is behind ours. But not by a million years! What if it's a half century behind? You look around and on the streets it's October 1917."

"And if it's a hundred years ago?"

"That wouldn't be bad either. You'll go to work at the *Sovremennik* magazine (*The Contemporary*.-Tr.) Maybe they put out a *Sovremennik* with

the same trend? Probably. And there you'll see Chernyshevsky sitting at a desk. Interesting, right? You're not drooling at the mouth?"

"Drooling."

We both laughed, and loudly enough to upset Olga.

"I want to cry, and they laugh!"

"We have a shortage of sodium chloride in our bodies," said Klenov. "So our tear ducts have dried up. And, by the way, Olga, tears from a hero's wife are contra-indicated. Better have a drink of cognac. What if you wake up in the future and find there's a dry law?"

I had to refuse the cognac, because Zargaryan was already ringing at the front door. He looked severe and official, and never dropped a word all the way to the institute. I was silent, too. Only when he had parked his Volga car alongside its twins in the institute's parking lot, and we were going up the granite steps to the door, did bespeak. There was no smile, no funny accent, none of the usual whimsy that accompanied his sly remarks or a laugh.

"Don't think I'm afraid or disturbed. It's Nikodimov who figures it is possible that a certain per cent of risk is involved. The problem, he says, is not yet mastered, too few experiments. And I think that everything is in our hands, that it's a hundred per cent ours. I'm sure of success. Absolutely!" The last he cried so that it echoed through the near-by grove of trees. "And I'm silent because one is sparing of words before the battle. Got that, Sergei?"

"Absolutely, Ruben."

We shook hands on it, and were silent till we reached the laboratory. Nothing had changed since my last visit. There was the same soft-toned plastic, the golden gleaming copper, shining nickel, the smoke-coloured glass panels reminiscent of television screens only several times larger. My chair stood in its usual place in the network of coloured lead-in wires, both thick and thin, some as tiny as spider-webs. The spider was in ambush awaiting his victim. But the soft, comfortable chair, lit from the window by an unexpectedly appearing sun, did not incite alarm or suspicion. It reminded me more of a heart set in a nest of blood vessels. As yet the heart did not beat: I was not sitting there.

Nikodimov met me in his stiffly starched white gown, and with a smile that was just as stiff and starched.

"I should be glad, of course, only glad that you've agreed to participate in this risky experiment," he told me after an exchange of friendly compliments. "For me, as a scientist, this may be the final and decisive step toward my goal. But I must ask you to consider your decision once more, weigh all the pros and cons before we begin this particular test."

"But it's already decided," I said.

"Wait. Think it over. What urges you to agree to it? Curiosity? To tell the truth, that's not a very admirable stimulus."

"And scientific interest?"

"You have none."

"What drives journalists to go, let us say, to the Antarctic or into the jungles?" I parried. "They don't have scientific interests either."

"So, it's inquisitiveness. I agree. And a love for sensation, which all

reporters have in common to some degree, even in the best sense of the word. Stanley was chasing sensation when he went to Africa to search for the lost Livingston, and as a result won equal fame. Perhaps that's what is turning your head, I don't know. I can imagine how Ruben talked with you," laughed Nikodimov, continuing in Zargaryan's voice: "'Yes, d'you see, it's a daring feat — one never yet seen in the annals of science! The glory of a globetrotter in time, equal to that of the first man to fly into space! I'm sure he called it just that, didn't he? Globetrotter in time?'"

I glanced sidewise at Zargaryan who was listening, not at all put out and even smiling. Nikodimov caught my glance.

"Of course he said it! That's what I thought. A barrel of honey. And I will now add to it my spoonful of tar. I cannot, my dear fellow, promise you either the fame of a time-globetrotter or a ceremonial meeting on the Red Square. I don't even promise there'll be a special article in your honour. In the best case, you will return home with a fund of sharp sensations, and with the knowledge that your part in the experiment has been of some use to science."

"And is that so little?" I asked.

"It depends. You see, only we three will know of your valuable contribution. Your oral testimonial is still not proof where science is concerned. You will always find sceptics who might declare it a hoax, and they probably will. The same goes for apparatus which could describe and reproduce the visual images arising in your conscious mind — to our sorrow, we have nothing like that as yet."

"It's possible to obtain another form of evidence," put in Zargaryan.

Nikodimov pondered. I impatiently awaited his answer. What evidence did Zargaryan have in mind? All the material evidence of my being in adjacent worlds remained there: the probe I had dropped during the operation, my note on the hospital writing pad, and Mikhail's split lip. I had brought nothing back but memories.

"Now I'll explain to you what Ruben means," pronounced Nikodimov slowly, as if to stress each word he said. "He has in mind the possibility of your penetrating a world far ahead of us in time and development. If such a possibility happens and you can make use of it, then your conscious mind might take images of not merely visual objects but abstract ones — mathematical ones, let us say. For example, the formula of a physical law or an equation expressing in conventional mathematical symbols something as yet unknown to us in cognition of the surrounding world. But all this is pure supposition, only theory. No better than telling fortunes from tea-leaves.... We shall try to transmit your conscious mind somewhere farther than the immediate worlds bordering our three-dimensional one, but we cannot even tell you what this 'farther' means. Distance in these measurements is not counted in microns, or kilometres or even par-sees. Some other system of measuring distance acts here, and so far we have no knowledge of it. But most important, we don't know what you risk by undergoing this experiment. Before, we did not lose sight of your energy field, but is there any guarantee we won't lose it this time? In a word, I won't at all be offended

if you say 'let's put off the test'."

I smiled. Now Nikodimov awaited an answer. Not one wrinkle on his face deepened, not one hair of his long, poetical locks stirred, not one crease in his gown moved. How different he was from Zargaryan! Here was true prose and poetry, ice and flame. And the flame behind me was already flaring up — the chair fell over as Zargaryan stood up.

"Well then, let's put off..." I spoke slowly, deliberately, slyly glancing at Nikodimov. "Let's put off ... all this talk about risk till the experiment's over."

All that happened afterwards was condensed into a few minutes, perhaps seconds.... I don't remember. The chair, the helmet, the pick-ups, the darkness, the scraps of conversation about scales, visuality, the certain ciphers accompanied by familiar Greek letters — perhaps pi or psi — and finally Boundlessness, blackness, and the coloured mist swirling upward.

A DAY IN THE PAST

The swirling stopped, the mist acquired a transparency and dullish grey shade resembling a spring rather than a winter morning. I could see a cluttered yard all in puddles that were sheeted with bluish ice, also the dirty-red crust on the melting snow by a fence and a dark green van right beside me. The back doors were wide open.

A heavy blow on the back knocked me to the ground. I fell into a puddle, the ice crackled, and the left sleeve of my quilted jacket was wet through.

"Aufstehen!" came a cry from behind.

I got up with difficulty, hardly keeping my legs, and before I could look behind me another blow on the spine threw me against the van. Somebody's hand reached out from its dark maw, caught me and pulled me inside. The doors were immediately clapped to, and the heavy bolts clanged.

Then I heard the purr of a motor, the metallic creaking of the van, and the crunch of ice under its wheels. As it turned sharply, I fell over and hit my head on a bench. I groaned.

And again the familiar hands reached for me, raised me and sat me on the bench. In the semi-darkness around us, I couldn't make out the face of the man sitting opposite.

"Hold on to the bench," he warned. "The road here is God knows what."

"Where are we?" I asked, in what seemed to me to be a strange voice, hollow and hoarse.

"Perfectly clear where. In the death car." My neighbour sniffed the air. "No-o-o.... It seems there's no smell. So they're taking us to confession."

"Where are we?" I asked again. "What town?"

"Kolpinsk. Regional centre before. Look out the small window — and you'll see."

I stretched up toward the little square opening, unpaned, with three iron bars across it. Past the small opening flashed by a water-pump, an entrance path to the gap in a fence, one-storey squat cottages, a sign on a second-hand store printed in black on a yellow matting, then naked poplars by the curb of

a muddy pavement.

The deserted little street stretched out, long and unsightly. The rare passers-by, it seemed, were in no hurry.

"You'll have to excuse me," I told my companion, "apparently something's happened to my memory."

"Not only the memory suffers here — they kill the soul," he replied briskly.

"I can't remember a thing. What year it is, or the month, the day.... Don't be afraid, I'm not crazy."

"I'm not afraid of anything now. Besides, it's easier dealing with a lunatic than a Judas. This is a hard year — forty-three. It's either the very end of January or the beginning of February. There's no use remembering what day it is, it's all one for we won't live till morning. What's your cell number?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Six, probably. Yesterday they brought in a pilot that was shot down. Right from the town hospital. Patched him up and brought him in. Was that you?"

I was silent. Now I remembered how it was, or rather how it might have been. In January of forty-three, I was flying home from the Skripkin pine forest in the partisan area north-west of the Dnieper. Somewhere near Kolpinsk we had run into heavy flak from a German anti-aircraft battery. The plane broke out of it almost by a miracle and made home base safely. But in this phase of space-time, we probably hadn't got through. And it was probably the wounded passenger who was taken to the town hospital and not the pilot. From the hospital to cell six, and from there to 'confession' as my companion called it. What he meant needed no exact definition.

We didn't talk any more, and only when the van stopped and the bolts clattered on the doors did he whisper something in my ear, but what it was I couldn't make out and never managed to ask. He had already jumped onto the road and, pushing aside the convoy, helped me down. A blow on the back from a gun stock threw him toward the entrance. I followed him, and the German soldiers hurried along beside us screaming shrilly: "Schnell! Schnell!"

We were separated on the ground floor. My companion — I never even got a look at his face — was led off somewhere down the corridor. And I was dragged upstairs to the first floor, literally dragged, because every kick was for me a knockdown. So it went on till I got to a room with blue wallpaper where a fat blond officer sat behind a desk, his boyish blue eyes matching the paper. His black SS-jacket fitted him like a schoolboy's uniform, and he himself was like the plump schoolboy pictured in German confectionery shop advertisements.

"You have the right to sit down. Right here. Here," he repeated in German and pointed at a plush chair by the table. The chair must have been requisitioned from the local town theatre. My legs were shaking, my head spinning, and I sat down without concealing my relief which was at once noticed.

"You are completely recovered. Very good.

And now tell the truth. Wahrheit!" said the boyish SS-man, and fell into an expectant silence.

I was silent too. I had no fear. I was saved from that by the feeling that all this was illusory; I felt remote from all that was going on. This wasn't, you see, happening in my life and not to me; this puny, emaciated body in a dirty quilted jacket and broken army boots did not belong to me but to another Sergei Gromov living in another time and space. Thus I comforted myself with the help of physics and logic, but physiology painfully refuted them with every breath I drew, with every movement I made. For now this body was mine and it had to take what was destined for it. I asked myself in alarm whether I had, in the long run, enough strength and will, enough endurance, courage and inner pride.

In the war days it had been easier. We were all prepared for such a contingency by all the conditions of the war years, by the way of life, by the spirit of the times — severe and hard as they were. I was ready then, and probably so was the Sergei Gromov whose place I now occupied in this room. But was I ready now? I felt chilled for an instant and, I'm afraid to confess it, terribly frightened.

"You understand me?" asked the SS-man.

"Perfectly," I nodded.

"Then talk. Wieviel Soldaten hat er? Stolbikov? What detachment? Soldier, partisan? Number of men?"

"I don't know," I said.

I was not lying. I honestly didn't know the strength of all partisan formations under Stolbikov's command. It continually changed. Now a number of groups would go scouting deep in the rear and not return for weeks, now a detachment would be reinforced by formations operating in neighbouring sections. Besides, my Stolbikov had one complement of men, but the Stolbikov living in this space-time might have another, either more or less. If I told all I knew, it would be interesting to know whether it would coincide with the reality the SS-man was interested in. Judging by his insignia, he was an Obersturmführer.

"Tell the truth," he repeated severely. "It's better that way. Wahrheit ist besser."

"But I honestly don't know."

His blue eyes became noticeably blood-shot.

"Where are your documents? Here," he cried, and threw my wallet on the desk. I wasn't sure it was mine, but I presumed it was. "We know everything. Alles."

"If you already know, then why ask?" I said quietly.

Before he could answer, the field-telephone buzzed on the desk. With an agility that surprised me, he grabbed the receiver and stood at attention. His face was transformed into a mixture of servility and delight. He kept repeating 'Ja, Ja', in German and clicked his heels. Then he put my wallet into a drawer and pushed a buzzer.

"They will take you away now," he told me in bad Russian. "Keine Zeit. Three hours in a cell."

He indicated where with his thumb.

"Think, remember, and we'll talk some more. Otherwise, it will be the worse for you. Zehr schlecht."

I was taken into the cellar and pushed into a barn-like room with no window. I felt the walls and the floor. The first were of stone, sticky with mould, and the Door was covered with wet mud. My legs would no longer support me, but I did not risk lying down. I sat against the wall on my hands, just the same it was drier.

The reprieve I got aroused the hope of a safe way out. The experiment might end, and the lucky Hyde abandon the Jekyll buried here in the mud. But I was immediately ashamed of my thoughts.... Both Galya and Klenov would have called me a coward without blinking an eye. Zargaryan and Nikodimov wouldn't have said it, but would have thought it. Maybe, somewhere in the depths of her soul, Olga would as well. Thank goodness I had thought of this in time. I began to think of a lot of things. About the fact that now I had to answer for two — for him and me. How he would have behaved, I could guess: I might even say I knew. You see, he was myself, the same particle of material in one of the forms of its existence beyond our three-dimensional world. Chance might change his lot, but not his character, not his line of conduct. So it was all clear: I had no choice, not even the right to desert with the help of Nikodimov's wizardry. If I were returned now, I would beg Nikodimov to send me back to this hole.

I must have fallen asleep there, despite the damp and cold, because dreams overtook me. His dreams. A bearded Stolbikov in a sheepskin hat, a middle-aged woman in a padded jacket with a tommy-gun slung from her shoulder who was slicing or shredding a round loaf of rye bread. Naked children were on the bank of pond covered with green duckweed. I immediately recognized the pond with the crooked pines on the shore, could see the road between steep clay cliffs leading down to it. It was my dream, long remembered and always incomprehensible. Now I knew where it came from.

The dreams shortened my reprieve. Again the boyish SS-man demanded my presence. This time he was not smiling.

"Well?" he shot out. "Are we going to talk?"

"No," I said.

"Schade," he drawled. "A pity. Put your hand on the table. Your fingers so." He snowed me how with his puffy palm and wide-spread sausage-like fingers.

I obeyed. Not without fear, I admit; but going to the dentist is also terrifying at times.

Fatty pulled from beneath the table a piece of wood with a handle, something like an ordinary joiner's wooden hammer, and cried:

"Ruig!"

The wooden hammer smashed deliberately down on my little finger. The bone crunched and a savage pain shot up my arm to the shoulder. I could barely restrain a scream.

"Ve-ry good?" he asked, stressing the syllables with satisfaction. "Will

you talk or not?"

"No," I repeated.

Again the hammer was raised, but I involuntarily pulled back my hand.

Fatty laughed.

"You can save your hand, but not your face," he said, and instantly slashed me across the face.

I lost consciousness, but came to almost at once. Somewhere close by I heard Nikodimov and Zargaryan talking.

"There's no field."

"None at all?"

"No."

"Try another screen."

"The same thing."

"And if we try more power?"

Silence. Then Zargaryan answered: "Got it. But very weak visuality. Maybe he's sleeping?"

"No. We registered the activity of the hypno-genetic system a half hour ago. Then he woke up."

"And now?"

"I can't see it."

"I'll give more power."

I couldn't interfere. I could not feel my body. Where was it? In the lab chair or the torture chamber?

"Got the field," said Zargaryan.

I opened my eyes, or rather I partly opened them. Even the slightest movement of my eyelids aroused a sharp, piercing agony. Something warm and salty trickled from my lips. My hand seemed to be burning over a fire.

The whole room, from floor to ceiling, seemed full of turbid, quivering water through which I could dimly make out two figures in black uniforms. One was my fat man, the other looked slender and more symmetrically built.

They were talking abruptly and fast, in German. My German is poor, so I didn't listen. But I thought the conversation was about me. First I heard Stolbikov's name mentioned and then mine.

"Sergei Gromov?" repeated the thin one in surprise, and said something to the other.

Then he ran over to me and carefully wiped my face with a handkerchief that smelled of perfume and sweat. I did not stir.

"Gromov ... Sergei..." repeated the second SS-man in pure Russian, and bent over me. "Don't you know me?"

I looked at him and recognized the man's face; though older, it still retained the long-remembered features of my former classmate, Genya Muller.

"M tiller," I whispered, and lost consciousness again.

COUNT SAINT GERMAIN

I woke up in a different room in someone's dwelling. Not a cosy room, but

one furnished with the pretentiousness of vulgar chic. A potbellied cabinet filled with crystal glasses, a redwood buffet, plush sofa with round bolsters, branching deer-horns over the door, and a copy of Murrillo's Madonna in a large gilded frame. All this had either been accumulated by some local official or brought here from various flats by requisition of the Hauptsturmführer to make a quiet little nest for top brass.

The Hauptsturmführer himself, in an opened jacket, was sprawled lazily on the sofa looking at an illustrated magazine, and I stole a look at him from the morocco leather chair in which I sat beside a table laid for supper. My bandaged hand was no longer painful. But I was devilishly hungry. However, I kept silent and did not stir, hoping to avoid showing it in the presence of my former classmate.

I had known Genya Muller from the age of seven. Together we entered the same school situated in a quiet Arbat side-street, and had shared all our joys and troubles right through to the ninth form. Muller senior, a specialist in weaving looms, had come to Moscow from Germany soon after the Treaty of Rapallo. He had first worked in the Altman Concession and later on somewhere in the Mostrikotazh, the Moscow Weaving Mills. Genya was born in Moscow and in school nobody counted him a foreigner. He spoke Russian as well as we did, studied the same things, read the same books, sang the same songs. He was not liked in school, and I hadn't liked his arrogance and boastfulness either. But we lived in the same block of flats, sat at the same desk, and were considered friends. With the years our friendship had dwindled away through a rising difference in viewpoint and interests. And when the Hitlerites had occupied Poland, the Muller family moved to Germany, and Genya even forgot to say goodbye to me when he left.

True, my Genya Muller wasn't this Muller who now lay on the sofa with his boots off. and I also wasn't this Gromov, all in bandages, who sat opposite him in the red morocco chair. But as the experiments had shown, phases of adjacent existences do not change a man's temperament or character. So even my Genya Miiller had all the grounds to grow up into Heinz Muller, Hauptsturmführer in the Nazi stormtroopers and chief of the Kolpinsk Gestapo. And, as a result, I could conduct myself with him accordingly.

He lowered the magazine and our eyes met.

"So you've woken up at last," he said.

"Regained consciousness, rather."

"Don't put on. After our sorcerer and magician Dr. Getsch amputated your finger and did a good job of cosmetic stitching, you slept for two hours. Like a log."

"But what for?"

"What d'you mean — what for?"

"Why the cosmetic stitching?"

"To fix your face. Kreiman overdid it with his hammer. Well, so now you're a good-looking fellow again."

"Maybe Herr Muller has a fiancee he wants to marry off. If so, he's too

late."

"Gut out the Herr business. Here it's Genya Muller and Sergei Gromov. Somehow they ought to be able to get together."

"But why, I'd like to know?" I asked.

Muller got up and stretched.

"Isn't that enough of your 'why's and wherefore's'? I pulled you out of the grave today. And you still can ask 'why'?"

"Then I won't ask. You want to make me an informer, or some other kind of rat. I'm no good for that."

"You're good for the grave."

"So are you," I parried. "We'll still make it. And now I could eat a horse."

He laughed. "You sure hit the nail — we'll still make the grave all right."

He sat at the table and poured cognac for us both.

"Our vodka's junk, but the cognac's excellent. Right from Paris. Martel. What'll we drink to?"

"Victory," I said.

He laughed even louder. "You amuse me, Sergei. A clever toast. I drink to it." He drank, and added with a crooked smile, "And next I'll drink to getting out of this dirty hole fast. I've got an uncle in Berlin, who has connections. Promised me a transfer this summer. To Paris, or Athens. A little farther from the firing line."

"So they're bothering you?"

"Of course they are. Any minute some skunk may throw a grenade from round a corner! They got my predecessor. And sentenced me."

"So you won't live long," I observed indifferently.

Without taking a bite, he again filled the glasses. His hands shook. "That's why I'm hurrying up my transfer. If only they don't drag it out, I'll be sitting there in Paris and, before I can look round, the war will be over."

"We'll still keep fighting," I said. "You'll have to wait for two and a half years."

His hand holding the glass froze in mid-air above the table.

"To be precise," I explained, "two and a half years from now on May 8, 1945, an agreement of unconditional surrender will be signed. And wouldn't you like to know who will surrender? The Germans, friend, the Germans. And where do you think this will happen? Right in Berlin, almost on the ruins of your imperial chancellery."

Without tasting his cognac, Muller slowly put his glass back on the table. At first he was amazed, then frightened. I intercepted his glance directed at the small table by the sofa where his Walther pistol lay. Probably he thought I'd gone crazy and immediately remembered his gun.

Before he could reply, the buzzer of the intercom-phone went. He grabbed the receiver, gave his name, listened and said something fast in German. I caught one word: Stalingrad. Then I remembered what my companion had said in the Gestapo's dark-green 'Black Maria' — 'now it's either the very end of January or the beginning of February'. And it was.

Muller returned to the table with a gloomy face.

"Stalingrad?" I inquired.

"Do you understand German?"

"No, I merely guessed. Your Paulus is done for. Kaput."

He tapped his knife cautiously on the plate.

"Don't talk nonsense. Paulus has just been made a General Fieldmarshal. And Mannstein has already reached Kotelnikov."

"Your Mannstein has been defeated. Smashed and thrown back. As for Paulus — it's the end. What's the date today?"

"February 2."

I laughed. How wonderful to know the future!

"Well then, this is the day that Paulus capitulated at Stalingrad, and your Sixth Army, or what's left of it, have become prisoners with 'Heil, Hitler' on their lips."

"Shut up!" he screamed, and took his pistol from the table. "I won't forgive anybody who makes such jokes as that!"

"But I'm not joking," I said, putting a piece of tinned ham in my mouth. "Can you check it somewhere? Go ahead, call up."

Muller thoughtfully played with his gun.

"All right. I'll check. I'll call von Hennert—he should know. Only get this: if it's a hoax, I'll shoot you personally, and right now."

He went to the telephone, took a long time getting connected, and asked something, standing as straight as if on review as he listened. Then he hung up and tossed the pistol onto the sofa without deigning to glance at me.

"Well, was I right?"

"How did you know?" he asked, approaching me. His face was a picture of astonishment and perplexity. He looked at me as if asking whether I was *I* or a representative of the High Command in my person.

"Von Hennert was quite surprised that I knew. I had to do some quick thinking on that score. It hasn't been proclaimed officially yet, but Hennert knows."

"And did he say that Hitler had already ordered general mourning for the Sixth Army?"

"You know that too?"

He continued to stand, not taking his eyes off me, puzzled and unable to figure it out. "Come now, where did you get it from? You couldn't have known yesterday, that's for sure. But today.... Who could have told you? You were brought here with somebody else, I believe?"

"That was this morning," I said. "At that time, your Paulus was still kicking back."

He blinked his eyes.

"Somebody might have picked up a Moscow broadcast?"

"Where?" I laughed. "In the Gestapo?"

"I don't get it." He spread his hands in a gesture of despair. "Nobody knows about it yet in town. I'm convinced of that."

Suddenly I had an idea. It struck me that I might still save my unlucky Jekyll. Nothing threatened him till morning, but he would meet the morning fully conscious and free of my aggression. Then his life wouldn't be worth a cent. Muller wouldn't stand on ceremony with him, the more so if he

explained that he remembered nothing of today's business. I had to think. The play would be tough.

"Don't try guessing, Genya," I said. "You won't figure it out. It's simply that I'm not the ordinary fellow you think I am."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Did you ever hear that in one of our scientific research institutes," I began, improvising as if inspired, "a research group was liquidated in 1940? There was a lot of fuss about it abroad. Putting it broadly, it was a group of telepathists."

"No," he replied vaguely. "Never heard of it."

"But you know what telepathy is?"

"Something like transmitting thoughts at a distance?"

"Approximately, yes. It's not a new thing, even Sinclair wrote about it. Only idealistically, with all kinds of other-world nonsense. But we made experiments on specifically scientific grounds. The brain, you see, is looked upon as a microwave radio-set, picking up idea-signals at any distance like ultra-long wavelengths. A bit less than a micron. Everybody has this inherent possibility, but in rudimentary form. However, it can be developed if you find a precipient brain, that is, one specially tuned in to inner induction. Many were tested, I among them. Well, so I turned out to be an exceptional precipient."

Muller sat down and rubbed his eyes.

"Am I dreaming, or what? I don't get it."

I could already see by his face that I'd won the game: he almost believed. Now I had to erase the 'almost'.

"Have you ever read about Gagliostro or St. Germain?" I asked. Noting his naive and empty eyes I realized he hadn't.

"History cannot explain them, especially St. Germain," I continued. "The count lived in the eighteenth century, and he could relate events of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as if he had witnessed them. He was considered a wizard, an astrologer, an Agasphorus, European monarchs vied with each other in inviting him to their courts. He foretold the future too, incidentally, and rather successfully. But nobody's been able to explain what kind of man he was, not so far. Historians ignore him, or call him a charlatan. But they should have used the term telepathist. That's it in a nutshell. He received ideas from the past and the future. Just as I do."

Muller was silent. I could not imagine what he was thinking of. Maybe he guessed that I was a fake? But for all that, I had one irrefutable and invincible trump — Stalingrad.

"The future?" he repeated thoughtfully. "So you can foretell the future?"

"I mustn't go too far," I mused silently. "Muller's no fool and he's used to down-to-earth thinking." And that was what I played on.

"It's not hard to foretell yours," I said aloud, no less craftily than his sly question. "You know yourself that after Stalingrad the underground and partisans will be more active everywhere. You won't live till summer, Muller. You haven't a chance."

His mouth curved in an ironical smile, as if saying 'all the same I'm master

of the situation'.

"I can also foretell your future," he snapped at me aloud, "and without telepathy. Tit for tat."

"Man to man," I laughed. "But we can change the future. You mine, and I — yours."

He raised his brows, again not getting the drift. "Okay then, let's lay down the cards."

"You send me to the partisans today. And I'll guarantee your immortality to the end of the month. Not a bullet or grenade will touch you."

He was silent.

"You don't lose much. You grant me life, and you win the kitty — yours."

"To the end of the month," he laughed.

"I'm not God almighty."

"And the guarantee?"

"My word and my documents. You saw them. And you must have guessed that I can do something."

He pondered a long time, his eyes roaming silently and vaguely around the room. Then he poured the rest of the cognac into our glasses. He hadn't eaten, and the drink was already taking effect. His hands shook even more.

"All right, then," he ground out. "One for the road?"

"I'm not drinking," I said. "I'll need a clear head and a firm hand. You give me a gun, even if it's only your Walther, and tie my hands loosely so I can free them quickly."

"And what tale am I to use to send you off? I've got a boss, you know."

"So you're sending me to the top brass. Along some forest road."

"There'll have to be a driver and a convoy. Can you handle them?"

"I hope you won't regret the loss of the convoy?"

"I'll regret, the loss of the car," he frowned.

"So I'll return you the car and the driver. Agreed?"

He went to the telephone and began making calls. I was surprised at the speed with which he carried everything out. In about half an hour, a Gestapo Opel-Kapitan was already ploughing its way through the village all powdered with snow. Beside me sat an evil-looking Fritz with a tommy-gun across his knees. Let him stew in his bad temper. That didn't worry me any more than my promise to Muller did. You see, / had promised, and not the Gromov who would finally take my place. Only when would this happen and where? If in the car, then I must do all I could so that my ill-starred Jekyll would quickly get the hang of things. I stretched the slack bonds that tied my arms behind my back. They loosened at once. Another jerk and I could put my free hand in my jacket pocket and grip the butt of the blue-steel pistol. Now I had only to wait. With a sixth or maybe sixteenth sense, I could feel the approach of that strange lightness of my body, the head-spinning and the mist that put out everything — light, sounds and thoughts.

And so it was. I woke up when I felt Zargaryan's hand removing the pick-ups.

"Where were you?" he asked, still invisible.

"In the past, Ruben. Too bad."

He let out a loud and mournful sigh. Nikodimov was already holding the tape against the light to observe it, pulling it from the container.

"Did you follow the time, Sergei Nikolaevich?" asked Nikodimov. "That is, when you entered and left the phase?"

"Morning and evening. One day."

"It's twenty minutes to twelve midnight now. Does that agree with your count?"

"Approximately."

"A trivial lag behind our time."

"Trivial?" I laughed. "More than twenty years."

"On a scale of a thousand years, that's almost nothing."

But I wasn't worried about thousand-year scales. I was anxious about the fate of Sergei Gromov whom I'd left about twenty-five years ago in the suburbs of Kolpinsk. I think, by the way, he did not waste any time.

TWENTY YEARS AFTER

The new experiment had become as humdrum as a visit to the polyclinic. Now I didn't gather friends together before leaving, Zargaryan didn't come for me, and nobody accompanied me in the morning. I took the bus to the institute and Nikodimov at once sat me in the chair without testing the degree of my good will and readiness for the test.

He only asked: "When did you get into difficulties in the last experiment? Was it toward evening, in the late afternoon?"

"About then. It was already dark outside."

"The apparatus focused the sleep period, then there was an increase of nervous strain, and finally a state of shock...."

"That's quite correct."

"I think we can now anticipate such a complication, if it should arise," he said. "And bring your psyche back."

"That's exactly what I don't want. You already know..." I broke in.

"No, this time we aren't taking any risks."

"What risk? Who's talking about risk?" thundered Zargaryan, appearing like a phantom, all in white against the background of the white doors.

He had been in the next room, checking the power generator.

"I'd give a year of my life for one minute of your journey," he went on. "It isn't a science, as Nikodimov thinks. It's poetry. Do you like Voznesensky? "

"More or less," I answered.

He recited:

In autumn time when leaves are dying
Within a dawn-lit perilous wood,
Someone's fate and name come flying
Like seeds — and in our minds intrude.

He broke off and asked: "What words stick in your memory?"

"Dawn-lit and perilous," I told him.

I could not see him now, and his voice came from the darkness. "The main thing is 'dawn-lit'. So let's be solemn. Remember that you are at the gateway to the future."

"You're sure of that?" came Nikodimov's voice.

"Absolutely."

I heard no more. Sounds died out until the dead silence was broken by a monotonous, rumbling roar.

Now there was no silence, no mist. I found myself in a soft chair by a wide, slightly concave window. Strangers sat in similar chairs beside and opposite me. The surroundings reminded me of the interior of an airliner or the coach of a suburban train where people sit in threes across from each other, with a passageway running from door to door. This passageway or aisle was probably about forty metres long. I tried to orient myself without looking at my neighbours, slipping sidelong glances from under lowered lids. My attention was drawn first to my hands — large, oddly white, with a dry clean skin such as occurs after frequent and hard scrubbing. The significant thing was that they were the hands of an old man. "How old am I and what's my profession?" I pondered. "A lab man, doctor, scientist?" The suit I wore provided no direct answer — it was not new but neither was it much worn, and it was made of a smooth material with an unusual pattern. There was no use trying to guess.

I looked out the window. No, it wasn't an airliner because we were flying too low for an aeroplane of this size, lower than flight at zero altitude as they call it. But it wasn't a train either, because we were flying over the earth, over homes and small groves, almost scraping the tops of the pine and fir trees and, incidentally, flying so fast that the landscape outside the window ran together into a sickening blur. From want of habit, it hurt to look at it.

I got a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped my eyes.

"Do they hurt?" grinned a passenger sitting opposite. He was a thin grey-haired man wearing gold-framed glasses without ear-pieces — no knowing how they stayed on. "We forget when we're older that we shouldn't look out the window. It's not the fifties now. Galt it an observation car!"

"What, you don't like it?" asked a young fellow challengingly from an aisle seat.

"Of course I do. And why not? Who wouldn't like it? An hour and a half from Leningrad to Moscow. Bit of a novelty."

"Why a novelty?" said the young man with a shrug. "Even twenty years ago they were talking of monorail roads. It's only modernization. And why look out the window? Turn on the TV," he told me.

I felt confused, not having the faintest idea where the television was or how to turn it on. I was anticipated by my grey-haired neighbour opposite. He pressed some kind of lever at the side, and the window was covered by the familiar frosty screen. The picture arose somewhere in its depths, so that it could easily be seen by those sitting sidewise to it, as I was. It was in stereo-colour and depicted a huge, multi-storey building beautifully ornamented with grey and red tiles. A helicopter was landing on its flat roof out of a pure blue sky.

"We bring you the latest news," said an unseen announcer. "Party and Government leaders visit the three-hundredth housing-commune in the Kiev district of the capital."

A group of well-dressed middle-aged people left the cabin of the helicopter and disappeared under a cupola of plexiglas. Express lifts and escalators flashed by. The eye of the camera was aimed down at the gleaming windows of the ground floor.

"This floor is occupied by a large department store, repair shops and dining-rooms to serve the building's occupants."

Now the guests strolled slowly from floor to floor, through rooms furnished and decorated in shapes and colours quite new to me.

"One turn of the plastic lover and the bed goes into the wall, and out comes a concealed book-case. And this couch may be widened or lengthened: its metal supports and the foam-rubber surface expand to double the size."

There followed an open vista of public foyers with giant television and cinema screens.

"This floor is wholly given over to young people who prefer living separately," commented the announcer, sliding walls apart for us to see the unusually-furnished rooms.

"I can't understand it. Why do they do all this?" broke in one lady, knitting away and giving a scornful sniff as she gave me a sidelong glance.

I looked at the young man on the aisle seat, awaiting his remark, and I wasn't left disappointed. How like he was to the young people I knew! He had caught from them the torch of enthusiasm, almost boyish vehemence, an uncompromising attitude to everyone who wasn't in step with the times.

"House-communes weren't just built today ... they're not new ... yet you still don't know why..." he said.

"I certainly don't know!" insisted the lady. "Glory to God, we no sooner get rid of shared flats, and they're back again!"

"What's 'back again'?"

"Your house-communes. We're resurrecting living in shared flats."

"Don't talk nonsense. People are not leaving separate, private flats to go into communal flats — whatever they are, I certainly don't know. They leave to go into house-communes! You're looking at them now. They provide a new, wider capacity of living conveniences!"

The lady with the knitting fell silent. Nobody supported her. And on the screen smoked the oil derricks conquering a leaden garnet sky over fir and larch trees.

"We are with you in Third Baku," continued the announcer, "at the newly opened section of the Yakutsk oil region in Siberia."

A Third Baku! In my time, I had only known two of them. How many years had gone by? I gave the same silent question to the white-gowned surgeons on the screen who were demonstrating a bloodless operation using a pencil neutron-ray and to the inventors of a compound for sealing wounds. I addressed my silent question to the announcer himself who finally appeared before the viewers. "In conclusion, I want to remind our audiences

of the deficit of specialists in occupations which our economy is much in need of. As before, we need adjusters for automatically operated shops, controllers for tele-guided mines, operators for atomic electric stations, assemblers of multi-purpose electronic computers. "

The screen blanked out, and from somewhere overhead came a voice that slowly announced: "We are arriving in Moscow. The warning lights are on. With the green light, the escalator will be turned on."

Above the door in front there was a flicker of red lights. They darkened to blue and changed to a bright green. Entering the aisle, the passengers were carried along on a moving floor. I joined them, so I never noticed the monorail station. Nor did I see it from outside. The escalator road, moving fast, swept us into the lobby of a Metro station. I didn't recognize it and, to speak honestly, never had a chance to get a good look at it. We were moving at almost hydrofoil speed, slowing down only at the escalator stairs which took us down to the platform. "Where's the ticket booth?" I wondered. "Can the Metro be free of charge?" This was answered affirmatively by the stream of passengers pushing into the open doors of an incoming train.

I got off at Revolution Square, which I recognized at once: below ground where I came across the familiar bronze pieces of sculpture in the arcade, and above where the yellow columns of the Bolshoi Theatre looked down at me from a distance across the green sweep of the square.

And Marx's monument stood in the same spot, but in place of the Grand Hotel there towered a gigantic white building with flashing ribs of stainless steel; and, instead of the side wing of the Metropole Hotel and to the right, ran a vista of noisy, multi-layered streets. But the street movement seemed as familiar as of old, almost unchanged. Along the wide pavement, as tightly-packed and unhurried as always, went the varicoloured droplets of the human current, more colourful than ever under the high summer sun. And along the asphalted canal road, skirted by buildings and squares, rumbled another current of motor cars, also colourful. By careful observation, I could easily make out the diversities. Different styles and trends in clothing, the changed lines and shapes of cars. Most of the latter rode on air-cushions rather than wheels, and reminded you of the bulging brows of whales or dolphins as they moved soundlessly on a violet haze of air. "How many years have passed?" I asked myself, and again could find no answer. Impossible to cross the square: an iron tracery of grilles ran along the pavement, openings for passengers were only at stops of cigar-shaped buses. I walked down toward the Alexandrovsky Gardens, passed the Historical Museum, glanced fleetingly at the Red Square. Nothing there was changed — the same tooth-tipped ancient red walls, the clock on the Spasskaya Tower, the severe monolithic block of the Mausoleum and that miracle of architecture — the cathedral of Vasily Blazhenny. But the huge hotel we had built in Zaryadye wasn't there at all. A bit farther on, across the Moskva River, rose unknown tall buildings behind the cathedral.

I went into the gardens and sat on a bench. And though the town was tumultuous with its full-blooded impetuous life, in the morning hours here, as in our world, the park was almost deserted. To tell the truth, I was feeling

a bit lost. Where should I go, and what for? Where was my home? Who was I? And what experiences lay before me this day in my new life? I felt a wallet in my pocket, very plump and compact, made of flexible, transparent plastic. Without taking out the identification card, I could read my name, profession and address through the plastic. Again I was a servant of Hippocrates, some kind of director in a surgical clinic, and probably an eminent man because the wallet contained congratulations from three foreign scientific societies sent to Professor Gromov on his sixtieth birthday.

So twenty years had passed! For me, it was already old age; for science — 'seven-league boots.' D'Artagnan, on his way to meet Aramis and Athos was tormented by doubts: would it be a bitter experience to see his friends grown old? His doubts had been dispersed, but would mine? In my mind I imagined myself calling at the address on the card. Probably the door would be opened by Olga, twenty years older. And what if it wouldn't be Olga? I certainly did not want to complicate the situation. I mechanically thumbed through the pack of money in the wallet. It was probably enough for one day in the future. So what should I do? Perhaps simply walk along the streets, travel around town, see it a little more, breathe the air of the future in the literal sense? Was that such a little thing? For Zargaryan and Nikodimov, it was. What material affirmation could I bring them from the future? Go to the Lenin Library — it probably existed here — dig into index files and interest myself in topics found in scientific journals? Suppose I even managed to find something close to the work of my scientific friends. Let's suppose. But how would I be able to grasp anything from the articles of scientists of the eighties, if sometimes even the attempts of Zargaryan to express things in an elementary and popular form had been hopeless to overcome my mathematical ignorance! Memorize some kind of formula? But I would forget it at once! And if they were in a series? And if I came across absolutely unknown mathematical symbols? No, no, it was nonsense — nothing would come of it.

Wrapped in such thoughts, I made my way to a taxi stand. Ahead of me stood a woman, apparently in a hurry for she kept looking at her wrist-watch.

"I've been waiting ten minutes, and not one car," she said. "Of course, the bus is simpler and costs nothing. But the auto-taxi is more amusing."

"The auto-taxi?" I repeated.

"You're new here, of course," and she smiled. "That's what we call the driverless taxis, with automatic controls. Simply lovely to ride in!"

But the first auto-taxi gave me the shivers. There was something wild and unnatural in this snub-nosed car without wheels or driver that soundlessly floated up to us and discharged four spider-legs as it came to a stop. The invisible man behind the wheel opened the door, the passenger got in and said something into a microphone. The legs vanished as noiselessly as they had appeared, the doors closed, and the car disappeared round a corner. I probably stared after it rather long and stupidly, asking myself in perplexity: 'What do you say into the microphone, and how do you pay if you haven't enough change?' I was already thinking of taking flight when another

passenger approached the stop. There was something uniquely elegant about his accentuated leanness and pepper-and-salt hair, even the carefully trimmed spade-like beard gave him a sort of challenging look.

"I'm in a hurry," he admitted, impatiently looking round the square. "Here's one coming, I think."

A snubby auto-taxi had floated up and come to a stop.

"I'll be glad to give you my turn," I said. "I'm in no hurry."

"Why? Let's go together, if you've nothing against it. First we'll deliver you, and then me."

Something familiar flashed in his dark eyes. And he had the same high, sloping and pure forehead, the same piercing and amused glance. Only the beard transformed his face almost beyond recognition.

AN OLDER ZARGARYAN

I looked into his eyes again, questioningly. It was he. My Zargaryan, twenty years older.

But I didn't let on I knew him.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

I merely shrugged. Did it matter where a man goes who hasn't seen Moscow for twenty years?

"Then off we go. Don't object, mind you. I'll be a wonderful guide. By the way, where are you having dinner? Would you like to go to the Sofia? With me? Honestly, I hate having dinner alone."

Even nearing fifty, he hadn't lost his boyish ardour. And he entered hotly into the role of guide at once.

"We won't go along Gorky. It's hardly changed. We'll take Pushkin, quite a new street. You won't know it. That will be our programming."

He fed the programme into the microphone, adding where to turn and where to stop. The taxi, soundlessly closing its doors, floated off and skirted the square.

"And how do you pay?" I inquired.

"Put the money here in this small box." He pointed to a slot in the panel under the windshield.

"But if you've no change?"

"We'll see that we get change."

The taxi had already turned onto Pushkin, as much like the Pushkin Street of my days as the Palace of Congresses is like a factory club. , Perhaps it was outwardly different even in the sixties — you see, similar worlds do riot mean they are identical — but now it was different on a grand scale. Twenty-storey buildings of glass and plastic, all different, united into an ornamental rock canyon, along whose depths rolled a colourful stream of cars. The two-level pavements, like in a shopping centre, ran along the ground storeys and the upper levels, being connected by curved parabolic bridges over the street. Bridges also joined the buildings and formed auxiliary pathways at roof-top level. "For bicycles," explained Zargaryan, catching my glance. "There we have swimming-pools and landing strips for

helicopters."

He played the role of guide with a conscience, smacking his lips with satisfaction at my surprise. And our snubby dolphin had by this time crossed the boulevard, flown along an unrecognisable Chekhov Street, and was now floating along Sadovaya to the Sofia skyscraper. I recognized neither the square nor the restaurant. Mayakovsky, flashing in the sun as if poured of bronze glass, brooded over the square on a pedestal higher than the Nelson column in London. The parallelepiped-shaped restaurant Sofia was also flashing, dancing with reflected sunlight as if made of crystal and gold. The restaurant inside astonished me. The usual white tables under old-fashioned starched tablecloths stood cheek by jowl with strange geometric figures like marquee tents made of rain-like and argon strings. "What's this?" I said, almost struck dumb. Zargaryan smiled like a magician anticipating an even greater effect.

"You'll see. Have a seat."

We sat at one of the ordinary starched tables.

"Would you like to be unseen and unheard to those around you?"

He raised a corner of the tablecloth, pressed something and the room disappeared. We were separated from it by a tent of rain that had neither moisture nor damp. Through the curtain of rain were entwined shining threads that were neither of glass nor of wire. We were surrounded by the blessed silence of an empty cathedral.

"Can one go through it?" I asked.

"Why, it's only air, but not transparent. Light- and sound-proof. In our labs we use black ones. Absolute darkness."

"I know," I said.

Now it was his turn to be surprised, catching something in my answer quite new to his ear.

I was fed up playing guessing games.

"Is your name Zargaryan? Ruben?" I asked, though I was absolutely sure I wasn't mistaken.

"Caught red-handed," he laughed. "So the beard didn't help?"

"I knew you by your eyes."

"By the eyes?" He was again surprised. "The eyes don't show up well in photos put in journals or newspapers. So where else could you have seen me? At the cinema?"

"Are you engaged in the physics of biofields, the same as before?" I began carefully. "Then don't be surprised at what you're going to hear. I lied when I told you I'd not been in Moscow for twenty years. Actually, I've never been in this Moscow. Never!"

I slowed down, waiting for his reaction, but he was silent and continued to examine me with growing interest. "On top of that, I'm not the person you are now looking at. I'm a phantom in his image, a visitor from another world. The phenomenon is probably very familiar to you."

"Have you read my works?" he asked in unbelief.

"No, of course not. You haven't published them yet in our world. You see, our time is twenty years behind yours."

Zargaryan jumped to his feet.

"Excuse me, I'm only beginning to understand. So you're from another phase? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Precisely."

He was silent, blinking his eyes, and stepped back. The shining shroud of rain-air partly concealed him, ridiculously cutting off part of his head, spine and feet. Then he again dived out of it and sat opposite me, with great difficulty restraining his excitement. His face seemed to light up from within, and it held the shattering surprise of a man seeing a miracle for the first time, the joy of a scientist that the miracle had happened in his presence, the happiness of a scientist who had the power to control such miracles.

"Who are you, then?" he asked at last. "Name and profession."

I laughed. "Somehow it's amazing to answer for two people, but I have to. The name is the same here that it is there — Gromov. Here I'm a professor, there I'm without any title, a private person one might say. The professions differ — here a doctor and surgeon, famous in fact; there a simple newspaperman. Yes, and there I'm twenty years younger. Just as you are in that world."

"Curious," said Zargaryan, still eyeing me with interest. "I might have expected anything but that. I myself have sent people out of our world, but to meet such a visitor here — I never dreamed of that! What a fool. All matter is one — along all phase trajectories. I am here and I am there: and now we're sending each other visitors," he laughed, suddenly asking me with a changed intonation: "Who carried out the experiment?"

"Nikodimov and Zargaryan," I answered slyly, ready for a new explosion of astonishment. But he only asked, "What Nikodimov?" It was my turn to be surprised. "Pavel Nikitich. Wasn't it his discovery? Don't you work with him?"

"Pavel died eleven years ago, and while he lived he never received the recognition he deserved. Factually, it is his discovery. I came to it by other ways, as a psychophysicologist." (I heard restrained grief in his words.) "To my sorrow, the first success with biofields came only afterwards. His son and I made the experiments." I hadn't known that Nikodimov had a son. Incidentally, maybe that was only here.

"You're luckier than we are," said Zargaryan thoughtfully. "You began earlier. In twenty years you will be farther ahead than ourselves. Is this your first experiment?"

"The third. First I went into adjacent, completely identical worlds. Then farther, into the past. And now further still — to you."

"What do you mean by 'nearer' or 'farther'? And 'adjacent!'" he repeated sarcastically. "What naive terminology!"

"I mean to suggest," I faltered, "that worlds or, as you put it, phases with other currents of time may be found farther away from us than the coinciding worlds...."

He didn't conceal his laughter.

"Nearer, farther! Is that how they explained it to you? Children."

I was outraged for my friends' sake. All in all, I liked my Zargaryan more.

"And hasn't the fourth dimension its own extension?" I asked. "Is the theory of the infinite plurality of its phases a mistaken one?"

"Why the fourth?" seethed Zargaryan, flaming up as was his custom. "What if it's the fifth? Or the sixth? Our theory doesn't define its sequence or course in space. And who told you it was an incorrect or mistaken theory? It is limited, and only that. The term 'infinite plurality' simply cannot be taken literally. Any more than the infinity of space. Even your contemporaries knew that. Even then, relativity in cosmology excluded the absolute contraposition of the finite and the infinite. You must understand one simple thing: the finite and the infinite do not exclude each other, but are inwardly connected. Con-nec-ted!" He repeated the last word in syllables, and laughed, looking into my blankly staring eyes. "Complex, is it?"

And it's just as complex to explain to you what 'nearer' and 'farther' mean in this case. I can transfer your biofield into an adjacent world that outstrips ours by a century, but where it is, near or far, I am unable to define geometrically." He suddenly gave a start and stopped speaking, as if something had broken off his train of thought.

For a second or two we were both silent.

"You know, that's an idea!" he exclaimed.

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm thinking about you. Do you want to leap even farther into the future?"

"I don't get it."

"You will in a minute. I'll mix into your experiment. You go to my lab with me, I'll switch off your biofield and transfer it to another phase. What d'you say?"

"Nothing, so far. I'll think it over."

"Scared? But the risk is the same. There you are forty, and not sixty, with a strong heart ... otherwise we wouldn't risk it. I'd be delighted to change places with you, but I'm not a suitable subject. You know how hard it is to find a brain-inductor with such a highly active field?"

"You found one before."

"Three in ten years. You are the fourth. And consider yourself lucky. I promise you a trip more interesting than a flight to Mars. I'll find your descendant of the fifth generation with the same field. A hundred-year jump, eh? What are you worried about?"

"My biofield. What if they lose it back there?"

"They won't. First I'll send you back. Just a moment's walk in your time and space, and then you'll wake up in another. Don't be afraid, there'll be no explosion, no eruption, and no radiation. And your apparatus will fixate everything that's necessary. Well now, shall we fly?"

He got up.

"And dinner?"

"We'll have dinner later. We — here, and you in the future."

Actually, I thought, I had nothing to lose.

"Let's fly," I said, and also stood up.

OUTRAGING TIME

When I repeated Zargaryan's words, I had no suspicion that we would really fly. First, we took the express-lift to the roof where speedway-taxi-helicopters landed. In two or three minutes' time, we were sailing over Moscow and headed south-west.

To my dying day I shall never forget the panorama of Moscow at the end of the twentieth century. I kept assuring myself that it wasn't my Moscow, not the one I'd been born and brought up in and which was separated from this Moscow by an invisible border of space-time, as well as by twenty years of great reforms in building practice. I stubbornly told myself this, but my eyes convinced me that I must be wrong. You see, with us, in my world, this same construction went on at the same speed and along similar trends: the same forces inspired it, with the same aim in view. So, in our world, the city was, comparatively speaking, just as beautiful and perhaps more so.

It was as if a magician with a camera was showing me an amazing picture of the future. I viewed it avidly, searching for remembered details, happy as a boy when I recognized the old and the new, familiar, though it had changed as a young man does when he reaches the prime of life. All that was familiar immediately hit me in the eye — the Palace of Congresses, the golden cupolas of the Kremlin cathedrals, the bridges over the Moskva River, the Bolshoi Theatre, all of them toys from this height. And there was the Luzhniki stadium and the university. I lost sight of other tall buildings of my day among the many-storey stone forest-like structures, and perhaps they weren't there at all. The city had overflowed far beyond the border ring of the circular highway: it ran in the same place, at least it followed the same curve, but was wider or seemed wider, and the ant-like cars crawled along it to form a similarly wide and rarely narrowing ribbon.

The traffic's monstrous scale and colourful-ness astounded me most of all. Like rivers flowed the streets and alleys filled with iridescent automobiles. Bicycles and motorcycles on asphalt tracks criss-crossed the town over the roofs of the buildings. The centipede cars chased each other along the strings of monorail trestle-roads. And over all this, from landing-strip to landing-strip, flitted the black-and-yellow or blue-and-white dragon-fly helicopters.

We dropped down on one such landing-strip on the roof of a huge tall building, and alighted from the cabin. I didn't manage to see the building itself during the flight, but the first thing that struck my eye on the flat roof, guarded by a high metallic netting, was a large swimming pool. The pool was filled with clear, pure water lit from below by greenish, scintillating lights. Around the pool were deck-chairs, rubber mattresses, tents and a canteen under a tightly stretched awning.

"It's the dinner break," said Zargaryan, his eyes searching among the bathers and the half-naked people in swim-suits sitting in the canteen. "We'll find him in a moment. Igor!" he yelled.

A tanned athlete in dark sun-glasses playing on the near-by tennis court now approached us, still holding his racket.

"Is there somebody in the lab?" asked Zargaryan.

"Why should there be?" the boy answered lazily. "They're all in the sixth sector."

"And the apparatus hasn't been switched off?"

"No. But what's up?"

"I'd like you to meet this professor to start with, Professor Gromov."

"Nikodimov," murmured the athlete removing his glasses. He was not at all like the longhaired Faust.

"Has something happened?" he asked.

"Something unforeseen and very curious. You'll know in a minute," said Zargaryan, not without a note of triumph in his voice.

A man with a sense of humour would doubtless have found something in this situation that was common to my first visit to Faust's laboratory. Zargaryan pressed the lift button with the same sly, significant look and then turned on the escalator — before, a moving corridor had taken me to the entrance to the laboratory, now a stair escalator ran from the roof directly into the lab. It moved smoothly down, clicking on the turns.

"With your permission," he smiled at me, "I'll explain everything to this child in the jargon of biophysics. It will be more accurate, and take less time."

I tried hard to get something out of the conglomeration of unfamiliar terms, ciphers and Greek letters. I had never been so overwhelmed by the lexicology of my Zargaryan, even when he got carried away and forgot I was there. A few things were clear, at least. But young Nikodimov caught it all on the fly and looked at me with unconcealed curiosity. He didn't appear to me to be in the mental heavyweight class, and I was surprised at the ease with which he darted about among the 'maze of plugs, levers and handles' that I knew so well.

Incidentally, I didn't know them so well, to tell the truth. Everything in this duplicate-world room was bigger, greater in scale, and far more complex than the equipment in the neat laboratory I had left somewhere in another space-time. Where one might be compared to a doctor's surgery, this one reminded you of the control-room of a large automated factory. Only the blinking control lamps, the tele-screens, the haphazardly hanging wires, and the chair in the centre of the room, of course, were somewhat familiar. Not more so, by the way, than a new Moskvich car reminds you of an old 'Emka'. I directed my attention to the arrangement of screens — they were built in an arc along panels curving around the room, something like the control panels of electronic BRAIN computers. The mobile control panel could, apparently, slip along the line of screens according to the observer's wish. And it was interesting to look at them, even now when they weren't in use. Now they would light up, now go out, now flash as if reflecting some inner lighting, now blindly freeze into a cold leadish dullness.

"Well," laughed Zargaryan, "so it's not much similar? What differences are there, in particular?"

"The screens," I said. "We have a different arrangement. And there's no helmet," I pointed at the chair.

There actually was no helmet. And no pickups. I sat in the chair, as if in my own sitting-room, until Zargaryan spoke.

"If you compare your adventures with a game of chess, you are in time trouble. You have played your opening move in the space of your world. In ours, you begin the midgame, without any hope of winning. You understand right away that you can't bring back any souvenirs with you except sporadic impressions. In other words, one more failure. How many times Igor Nikodimov and I have been in the same position. How many endless nights there were, errors in calculations, unjustified hopes, until we finally found a brain-inductor with mathematical development. He brought a formula back in his memory, one that set the academicians on their ears! Now it is known as the Janovski equation, and is used to figure out complex cosmic routes. To our great regret, your memory won't help here. But then appeared a saving variant — you met me. The candle of hope is lit again, a slender candle, but it's burning. Now we have to hurry, now the endgame is ahead of you, and you're in time trouble, friend. We are all in time trouble. The activity of the field is at its limit, is on the point of falling. Before you realize it, Ulysses will have to return to Ithaca. Igor!" he cried. "Finish up, it's time." At this point he sighed and added in a faint voice: "Time to say good-bye, Sergei Nikolaevich. Happy landings! We can't count on meeting again, I'm afraid."

Only now the awesome thought got through to me of what was going on. A leap across a century! Not simply into an adjacent world, but into a world of absolutely different things-different machines, habits and relations. For several hours, or maybe twenty-four, Hyde would own Jekyll's soul, but could he deceive those around him if he wished to remain incognito? He would be hidden by Jekyll's face, Jekyll's suit — but would he be given away by his tongue, out-of-date ideas and feelings, conditional reflexes long unknown in that world? Had the terrible risk of the jump gone to my head?

However, I said nothing to Zargaryan, did not reveal my sudden awareness of danger, did not even start when he gave the command to turn on the protector. Darkness, as before, again surrounded me. Darkness and silence through which as if from a distance — to be exact, through a thick grey fog — pierced scarcely discernible voices, also familiar but almost forgotten as if they were already separated from me by a hundred-year leap through time.

"I can't understand it at all. What about you?"

"It's disappeared. Something probed through, but there's no image."

"But on the sixth there is. Only the brightness is weakening. Can you figure it out?"

"There is something showing. Again it's out of phase. Like that other time."

"But we haven't registered any kind of shock."

"Nor did we then."

"That time the encephalograph charted sleep. The phase of a paradoxical sleep. Remember?"

"In my opinion, this is different. Take a look at Screen Four. The curves

are pulsating."

"Raise the power, perhaps?"

"Let's wait."

"Are you worried?"

"So far there's no reason to. Check the breathing."

"As before."

"Pulse?"

"The same. And the blood pressure hasn't gone up. Perhaps some change in the biochemical processes?"

"So far, there's no proof. But I have the impression that there is outside interference. Either resistance from the receptor or artificial braking."

"It's fantastic."

"I don't know. Let's wait."

"But I am waiting. Though...."

"Look! Look!"

"I don't get it. Where is that from?"

"There's no use guessing. How's the reflection?"

"In the same phase."

"In the one we need?"

And again silence, like ooze, swallowing all sound. I no longer heard, nor saw, nor felt.

A LEAP ACROSS A CENTURY

The transference from darkness to light was accompanied by a strange state of peacefulness. As if I were swimming in transparent cool oil or was in a state of weightlessness in milky-white space. The quiet of a sound-proof chamber surrounded me. There were no doors, no windows — light came from nowhere, soft and warm like sunlight through clouds. The snowy cloud of the ceiling invisibly fused with the cloudy swirl of the walls. The whiteness of the sheets dissolved in the whiteness of the room. I could not feel the touch of blanket or sheets; it was as if they were woven of air like the clothing of Andersen's naked king.

Gradually I began to make out the things around me. Suddenly I saw the outline of a screen with white leather behind it. At first it was completely invisible, but if you looked at it hard it took on the appearance of a metal sheet, reflecting like a mirror the white walls, the bed and myself. It was facing me as if it were somebody's eye or ear, and it seemed to be listening and watching my every movement or intention. As it turned out later, I was not mistaken.

Beside the bed floated a flat white pillow with a fine-grained surface. When I reached out to touch it, it turned out to be the seat of a chair resting on three legs made of thick transparent plastic material which was quite new to me. In addition, I noticed the same kind of table, and something like a thermometer or barometer under a glass-like dome, apparently an apparatus for registering air fluctuations.

The snowy whiteness all around me created the feeling of peace, but

alarm and curiosity were beginning to grow inside me. Throwing back the weightless blanket, I sat up. The underclothing I wore reminded me of a hunting outfit: it fitted snugly yet one wasn't aware of its presence. I gave a sudden start, though, when I noticed the blurred image of a person sitting up in bed reflected in the dim surface of the screen. He wasn't at all like me, seemed taller, younger and had a more athletic build.

"You may get up and walk to and fro," said a woman's voice.

I looked around involuntarily, though I realized I wouldn't see anybody in the room.

"Don't be surprised at anything, not at anything!" I ordered myself, and obediently walked to the wall and back.

"Once more," said the voice.

I repeated the exercise, guessing that somebody, somewhere, was observing me.

"Raise your arms."

I obeyed.

"Lower them. Once more. Now sit down. Stand up."

I conscientiously did everything required of me, without asking questions.

"Well, and now lie down."

"I don't want to. What for?" I said.

"One more check-up in a state of quiet."

Some strange force lightly pushed me back on the pillow, and my own hands pulled up the blanket. Curious. How did my unseen observer manage that? Mechanically or by suggestion? The imp of protest inside me burst stormily out.

"Where am I?"

"At home."

"But this is some kind of hospital room."

"It's an ordinary revitalizing room. We set it up in your home."

"Who's 'we'?"

"GEMS. Of the thirty-second district."

"GEMS?" I asked blankly.

"Central Medical Service. Have you forgotten?"

I fell silent. What could I answer?

"A partial loss of memory following shock," explained the voice. "Don't try to make yourself remember. Don't strain yourself. Just ask, if you want to know something."

"Then I'll do just that," I agreed. "Who are you, for instance?"

"A curator on duty. Vera-seven."

"What?" I asked in surprise. "Why seven?"

"You sound odd with your 'why seven?' Because in our sector, besides me, there is Vera-one, Vera-two, and so on."

"And your last name?"

"I still haven't done anything remarkable enough for that."

It was dangerous to ask more. A clearly risky turn of affairs had set in.

"Can you show yourself?" I asked.

"That is not obligatory."

Probably she's an ugly, disgusting old woman. Pedantic and nagging. I heard laughter.

"Nagging, that's true," said the voice. "Pedantic? Maybe."

"Can you read the mind?" I asked embarrassed.

"Not I, but the cogitator. A special apparatus."

I did not answer, wondering whether the devilish apparatus could be deceived.

"It can't be," said the voice.

"It's not fair, or even respectable."

"Wha-at?"

"It's not res-pec-ta-ble!" I cried angrily. "It's not nice! Dishonest! To look and listen in isn't honest, and to crawl into a person's skull-box is very low."

The voice was silent. Then it spoke severely and with reproach.

"The first patient in all my practice to object to the cogitator. We do not tune it in to a healthy, sound person. But with a patient, we observe everything: the nervous system, the heart vessels, the breathing apparatus, all the functions of the body."

"Then why do you use it on me? I'm sound as a bell."

"Usually observers do not meet their patients, but I am allowed to."

Now I could see who the voice belonged to. The reflecting surface of the screen darkened like water in a muddy pool, and faded out. Looking straight at me was the face of a young woman with short wavy hair. She was dressed in white.

"You may ask questions — your memory will come back."

"What's the matter with me?"

"You had an operation. A heart transplant. After an accident. Do you remember?"

"Now I remember," I cried. "Is it plastic?"

"Is what plastic?"

"The heart, naturally. Or is it a metal one?"

She laughed with the superiority of a school-teacher who receives a stupid answer from a pupil.

"It's not for nothing that they say you live in the twentieth century."

I was frightened. Could they know everything? But perhaps that was even better.... I wouldn't have to explain anything, not make up stories. But just in case, I asked: "Why?"

"But don't you? Artificial hearts were employed very long ago. We changed that, and use organic material grown in a special medium. But you think in terms of the twentieth century: the usual thing with historians. They say you know all about the twentieth century. Even what kind of shoes were worn."

"Heels on spikes," I laughed.

"What's that?"

"Spike-heel shoes."

"I don't understand."

I gave a start. The wide-spread, century-old daily word which had lived to the age of nuclear physics apparently had disappeared from the vocabulary

of the twenty-first century. What do they use in place of nails or spikes, I wonder? Glue?

"Look here, my dear girl..." I began.

But she interrupted with a laugh.

"Is that how they spoke in that century — 'my dear girl'?"

"Absolutely," I assured her seriously. "I'm fed up lying here. I want to get dressed and go out."

She frowned.

"You may get dressed: clothes will be given you. But you mustn't go out yet. The process of observation is still not over. The more so after shock with loss of memory. We shall still check your organism as to the neuro-functions habitual to you."

"Here?"

"Of course. You will receive your 'mechanical historian', the best and latest model, by the way. Without any button controls. Fully automatic, responds to your voice."

"And will you look and listen?"

"Certainly."

"Then it's no go," I said. "I'm not going to get dressed and work in front of you."

A merry surprise was reflected in her eyes. She had difficulty in muffling her laughter.

"Why not?" she asked, her hand covering her mouth.

"Because I live in the twentieth century," I snapped.

"All right," she said. "I'll turn off the video-graph. But the inner organic processes will remain under observation."

"All right," I said. "You may be the seventh, but you're smart."

Again she failed to catch my meaning, but I only waved good-bye. Either she had never read Chekhov or had forgotten. Her sweet face had already disappeared from the screen. Suddenly, part of the wall melted away, letting into the room something resembling a radiator made of interlaced right-angled pipes. The 'something' turned out to be an ordinary mobile wardrobe hanger, on which my proposed clothes were conveniently hung.

I chose narrow, light-coloured trousers, which fastened at the ankle like our ski-pants; then a sweater to match that reminded me of our familiar West-Side style. The reflection in the mirrored surface of the screen was not much like me, but quite respectable and nice to look at. It wouldn't do to meet the people of this new century in underclothing! I turned round when I heard a noise behind me, as if someone was tip-toeing in. However, it wasn't a person, but an object somewhat reminiscent of a refrigerator or a fire-proof safe. How it came in I don't know: it seemed to appear out of the air in place of the disappearing mobile clothes hanger. It came in and stopped, winking the green eye of its indicator.

"I wonder," I said aloud, "if this could be my 'mechanical historian'?"

The green eye turned red.

"Mist-12 for short," said the safe in an even, hollow voice lacking all richness of intonation. "I'm at your service."

MIST'S GLOSSARY

I was long silent before I opened the conversation. I trusted the girl: she wouldn't eavesdrop or watch. But what could I talk to this mechanical Cyclops about? Couldn't carry on social talk.

"How great is your information?" I asked carefully.

"Encyclopaedic," came the quick answer. "More than a million references. I can name the exact figure."

"No need of that. And the subjects of the references? "

"The limit of the glossary extends to the start of the twentieth century. The nature of the references is unlimited."

I wanted to check up on it.

"Give me the name and surname of the third cosmonaut."

"Andriyan Nikolaev."

It was quite correct — the answers coincided with the facts. I pondered, and asked another question.

"Who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1964?"

"Sartre. But he refused it."

"And who is Sartre?"

"A French writer and an existentialist-philosopher. I can formulate the essence of existentialism."

"No need for that either. When was the Aswan Dam built?"

"The first part was finished in 1969. The second...."

"Enough," I interrupted him, thinking with satisfaction that we had built it five years earlier. Apparently, not everything in this world coincided literally with ours.

The Mist was silent. It knew a great deal. I could begin a conversation about our experiment, the next important topic for me. But I couldn't decide to approach it directly.

"Tell me what the biggest scientific discovery was in the early part of the century," I began, choosing my way carefully.

"The theory of relativity," it replied without hesitation.

"And at the end of the century?"

"The scientists Nikodimov and Janovski discovered the phase trajectories of space."

I almost jumped up on the spot, ready to kiss this impassive Cyclops with the winking eye-it winked at me every time he rapped out an answer. But all I did was ask another question.

"Why Janovski and not Zargaryan?"

"At the end of the eighties, the Polish mathematician Janovski brought out additional corrections to the theory. Zargaryan did not take part, save in the early experiments. He died in a motor accident long before the success of the first cross-world traveller permitted Nikodimov to publish the discovery."

I understood, of course, that it wasn't my Zargaryan, but just the same my heart missed a beat.

"Who was the first cross-world traveller then?"

"Sergei Gromov, your great grandfather," rapped out the Mist in its hollow, metallic voice.

It was not at all surprised at the stupidity of my question. Who should know all about the doings of his forefather if not his descendant? But surprise had not been programmed into the crystals of the Mist's cybernetic brain.

"Do you need the bibliographic references?" he asked.

"No," I said, and sat on the bed gripping my temples.

However, my invisible Vera-seven hadn't forgotten me.

"Your pulse is fast," she said.

"That's possible."

"I'll turn on the videograph."

"Wait," I stopped her. "I'm very interested in working with the Mist. It's an amazing machine. Thank you for sending it."

The Mist waited. Its red eye was again green.

"Did Nikodimov have scientific opponents?" I asked.

"Even Einstein had them," said the Mist. "Who pays them any attention?"

"What were their objections?"

"The theory was completely refuted by the church. A World Congress of Church Organizations, held in Brussels in the eighties, looked upon the theory as the most harmful heresy to be proclaimed over the last two thousand years. Three years before that, a special Papal Bull had declared it a blasphemous perversion of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and a return to the pagan doctrine of many gods. As many Christs for as many worlds. This could not be endured by either bishops or patriarchs. And an eminent scientist, the Italian physiologist Pirelli, called the phase theory the most effective scientific discovery of the century as far as its anti-religious trend went which was absolutely incompatible with the idea of one God. It is true, however, that something was done to make it compatible. The American philosopher Hellman, for instance, explained that the Berkeleyian 'thing in itself' was a phase movement of material."

"Ravings of the Old Grey Mare," I said.

"I do not understand," responded my Cyclops. "A mare is a sexual gender of a horse. Grey is a colour. Ravings are disconnected speech. A crazy horse? No, I do not understand."

"Simply an idiom of speech. The approximate idea is absurd, below normal. Comes from 'The old grey mare, she ain't what she used to be' — a song."

"I shall programme it," said the Mist. "Correction of Gromov to idiomatic speech."

"All right," I stopped him. "Better tell me about phases. Are they all similar?"

"Marxist science affirms they are. By way of experiment, it has been shown that many are similar. Theoretically, it relates to all of them."

"And were there any objections to the idea?"

"Of course. Opponents of the materialistic conception of history insisted

that similarity was not obligatory. They proceeded from the premise that chance plays a role in the life of man and society. If it weren't for the crusades, they said, the history of the Middle Ages would have been different. Without Napoleon, the map of new Europe would have differed. And if Hitler had been absent from German political life, the world would not have been led into World War Two. All this has long been disproved. Historical and social processes do not depend on chance which changes one or another individual destiny. Such processes are obedient to the laws of historical development that are common to all."

I remembered my argument with Klenov and my question: 'But, you see, there is such a possibility — there is no Hitler. He was never born. What then?'

And the Mist repeated Klenov's answer almost word for word: 'There would have appeared another fuehrer. A little earlier, or a bit later, but he would have appeared. You see, the deciding factor is not a matter of personality, but the economic situation of the thirties. The objective chance of the appearance of such a personality obeys the law of historical necessity.'

"So everywhere it is one and the same thing?" I asked. "In all phases, in all worlds? The same historical figures? The same crusades, wars, revolutions? The same changes of social formations? "

"Everywhere. The difference is only in time, but not in development. The changes of the social and economic formations in any phase are akin. They are dictated by the development of the productive forces."

"So they thought last century. But now?"

"I don't know. I am not programmed on that. But my design conforms with the probability theory and I can make conclusions independent of programming. The laws of dialectical materialism remain true not only for the past."

"Another question, Mist. Is the mathematical expression of the phase theory very complicated?"

"It includes the general formulas, the calculations of Janovski and Shual's system of equations. There are three pages on it in the textbooks. I can recite them."

"Only orally?"

"I can give them graphically."

"Will it take long?"

"One minute."

I heard a slight noise, like the buzzing of an electric razor, and the front panel of the machine lowered to become a shelf on metal hinges. On the shelf lay two white accurate right-angled cards, closely covered with certain ciphers and signs. When I picked them up, the panel closed so tight I could not see any line of demarcation.

Behind me came a thin, childish voice.

"I'm here, Pop. Are you angry?"

I turned. A boy of six or seven years stood by the white wall. He wore a sky-blue suit tightly outlining his body. He looked like a picture from a children's fashion magazine where they always draw such handsome,

athletic-looking boys.

A FATHER'S RIGHT

"How did you come in?" I asked.

He walked backward and disappeared. The wall was as even and white as before. Then a cunning face peeked through it, and the boy appeared in the room like 'the man who walked through walls'.

"Light and sound protectors," I remembered. Here they used white to give a complete illusion of walls.

"I sneaked in secretly," admitted the boy. "Mom didn't see, and Vera turned off the eye."

"How do you know?"

"The eye looks in here through the gym. When you run in there, she cries out: 'Go away, Ram. You're in the field of vision.'"

"Where does she cry out from?"

"From far away. In the hospital." He pointed off somewhere as if pointing to it.

I didn't say the probably expected 'Clear enough' because it wasn't clear at all.

"And Julia's been crying," Ram informed me.

"Why is that?"

"Over you. You objected to the experiment. That's bad, Pop. That's no way to act."

"What experiment is it?" I asked out of curiosity.

"They want to turn her into an invisible cloud. Like in a fairy story. The cloud will fly and fly away, and then return. And it will become Julia again."

"And I wouldn't give my permission?"

"You refused to. You're afraid the cloud won't come back."

Now I was completely lost. Lost in the woods.

Vera came to my rescue by reminding me of my pulse again.

"Vera," I begged, "can you clear this up? Why did I refuse to let Julia become invisible? It's all my rotten memory!"

I heard a familiar laugh.

"How oddly you talk. Rot-ten.... It sounds so funny. As for Julia, you must decide that for yourself — it's a family matter. That's why Aglaya tries to get in to see you. I wouldn't let her, afraid of exciting you. But she insists."

"Let her in," I said. "I'll try to keep calm."

I couldn't risk asking who Aglaya was. I'd get by somehow. I looked at the place where Ram had just vanished, but Aglaya came in from the opposite side. She came in as if she had every right to be here, and sat across from me. She was a tall woman, under forty, and wore a dress of marvellous cut and colour. She would have looked just right in our world on the platform at any kind of international festival.

"You look well," she remarked, looking at me closely. "Even better than before the operation. And with a new heart you'll probably live to a hundred."

"But what if I won't live to a hundred?"

"Why shouldn't you? Biological incompatibility was frightening only in your favourite century."

I hesitantly shrugged, leaving the conversation in her hands. A game of surprises was beginning. Who was she to me? And I to her? What did she want of me? The ground was getting slippery, every step called for a quick wit, and fast thinking.

Our talk began at once.

"So you've agreed?" she asked unexpectedly.

"To what?"

"As if you don't know. I spoke with Anna."

"About what?"

"Don't pretend. You know what I'm talking about. You agreed to the experiment."

What experiment? And who was Anna? Why must I agree or disagree?

"Did they force you to?" she asked me.

"Who?"

"Don't mention names, the child will hear. And after such an operation. Before you're yourself again. A new heart. Blood vessels with cosmetic seals! And they come to you with an ultimatum: agree, and that's all!"

"There's no need to exaggerate," I said, feeling my way.

"I'm not. I know all about it. And Anna supports it because she's all wrapped up in science. She simply has no biological feelings! Julia's not her daughter. But she's yours. And she's my granddaughter."

I thought that for a father and grandmother, we were too young-looking to have a grown-up daughter who was going in for some kind of complex scientific experiment. I remembered Ram's story and smiled.

"And he can still smile!" cried out my companion.

I had to tell her the story of the invisible cloud, as Ram had interpreted it.

"So Anna hasn't told her. That was wise. Now you can withdraw your permission."

"Why should I?"

"And you will permit them to turn your daughter into some kind of cloud? What if it melts away? Or the atomic structure cannot be restored? Let Bogomolov experiment on himself! They won't let him, d'you see. Too old, they say, and weak. Is it any easier for you and I that she is young and strong?" Aglaya paced around the room like an angry Brunhilda. "I don't understand you, Sergei. You were so hotly against it."

"But I agreed, you see," I objected.

"I don't believe there was an agreement!" she screamed. "And Julia doesn't know anything about it. You tell her they'll have to cancel the experiment ... she'll be here in a minute. A person is not the sole master of his fate when he has a mother or father."

I had a flash of hope: "Maybe the experiment won't take place very soon?"

"It's arranged for today."

I thought it over. Julia, apparently, was around twenty, maybe a bit younger or older. She was the assistant of a professor, or something like

that. They were going to carry out an experiment which to us would seem utterly fantastic. And here, too, it was apparently associated with mortal danger. A father had the right to interfere, and not permit the risk to be taken. Now I had been handed this right. And I couldn't even refuse to use it without giving myself away and creating a far more critical situation. Aglaya's eyes stared at me with unconcealed anger but I could not answer her at once. To say 'no' to the experiment and eliminate the alarm of those people to whom the girl's fate was so dear? But her place would be taken by another, I was sure of that. Somebody else would just as readily take the risk as Julia. So how could I take away from her the right to do this brave act? But to say 'yes' and perhaps deal a death blow to the person who was unable now to interfere and correct me?

"So man is not the sole master of his fate when he has a mother or father," I repeated thoughtfully.

"Such is the tradition of this century," she snapped back.

"A good tradition when the risk is merely a foolhardy one. But if not? If a man or a girl takes the risk in the name of a higher interest than the happiness or grief of his or her dear ones?"

"Whose interests are higher?" asked Aglaya.

"Those of one's native land, of course."

"It is not threatened with danger."

"Then those of science!"

"It doesn't need human lives. If somebody dies, the scientists are to blame who permit death to occur."

"And if there's no blame, if the risk was a brave act?"

'Brunhilda' again rose to her feet, magnificent as a monument.

"They did not only transplant your heart."

Without another glance at me, she swept through the wall which parted before her like the obedient Red Sea in the Bible.

"You did right," said Vera.

I sighed. "But if not?"

"One more talk, and then we'll take off the observation."

The person I was to talk with was already in the room. It is difficult to describe her appearance, for men usually don't understand all the fine points about hair-do and dress. The latter was severe in cut, bright, and not so far in advance of our styles. The face had something in common with the photographs in my family album — the Gromov look.

I automatically studied the purity of her features, her discreet charm.

"I'm waiting, Daddy," she said dryly. "And they are waiting to hear at the institute."

"Didn't they tell you?" I asked.

"What?"

"That I'm no longer against it."

She sat down and got up again. Her lips trembled.

"Daddykins, you dear..." she sobbed, and buried her face in my sweater.

I was aware of a faint, strange scent. Like flowers on a meadow after rain when all the dust is washed away.

"Have you a bit of time to spare?" I asked.

"Tell me about the experiment. After the shock, I seem to have forgotten things."

"I know. But it will pass."

"Of course. But that's why I ask. Is it your discovery?"

"Well, really," she laughed. "Naturally it's not mine, nor Bogomolov's either. It's a discovery from the future, from some adjacent phase. Just picture any object in the shape of a rarefied electronic cloud. The speed of displacement is terrific. No obstacle can withstand it, it goes through anything. As the experiments have shown, you can throw anything you wish for an unlimited distance — transmit pictures, statues, trees, houses. By this means a day or so ago, they transmitted from near Moscow a single-span bridge right across the Caspian Sea, setting it down right on the spot between Baku and Krasnovodsk. And now the experiment is to be made on man. So far, only within the city limits."

"All the same, I don't see how...."

"Of course you wouldn't understand, Daddy, my dear old historian. But, roughly speaking, schematically, it's about like this: in any solid body the atoms are packed tight. They cannot spread out, nor do they penetrate each other because of the presence of electrostatic forces of attraction and repulsion. Now imagine that a way has been found to reconstruct these inner connections between the atoms and, without changing the atomic structure of the body, to reduce it to a rarefied state in which, let us say, atoms are found in gases. What do we get? An atomic-electronic cloud which one can again condense into the molecular-crystalline structure of a solid body."

"But if...."

"What 'if? The technological process was mastered long ago." She rose. "Wish me good luck, Daddy."

"One question, child." I took her hand. "Do you know the phase theory?"

"Of course. It's taught in school now."

"Well, but I never had it. And I need to memorize everything about it, even if I do so mechanically."

"There's nothing simpler. Tell Eric, he's Mother's chief hypnotist. You've forgotten everything, Dad. We have a suggestion-concentrator and a dispersion unit." She raised her wrist to her face and spoke into a tiny microphone on a bracelet.

"In a minute... just a minute. Everything's ready, and it's all right. No, that's not necessary, don't send for me ... I'll come by the movement. Of course, it's simpler. And more convenient. No rising, no landing, no noise or wind. I'll stand on the pavement ... and be there in two minutes."

She hugged me and, saying good-bye, added: "Only no watching. I've turned off the super. You'll be kept regularly informed and in good time. And tell Eric and Dir no tricks, and not to switch into the network."

And all in flight, tense and ethereal, as if skimming over waves, she disappeared through the white swirling wall which closed after her.

I walked over to what looked to me like a wall. Vera never raised her voice. Glancing over my shoulder like a thief, I walked through the wall.

Before me stretched a long corridor leading, apparently, to a verandah. Through the glass door, if it was glass, I saw a twilight-darkened sky and the rather distant outline of a skyscraper. When I came closer, there was neither glass nor door. I just walked through. A woman and two men sat at a low table. Ram was hopping on one foot along the verandah which was guarded by low, clipped bushes in place of a railing. They were covered by large creamy flowers, gleaming with evening dew, that reminded me of bright Christmas tree ornaments.

"Daddy's come," cried Ram, hanging on my neck.

"Leave Daddy alone, Ram," said the woman severely.

A soft light, falling from somewhere above, slipped past and left her in the shadow. "Probably Anna," I thought.

"Observation has been removed," she continued.

"So now you've complete freedom to move about," laughed the older man, who must have been Eric.

"Not complete," corrected the woman. "No farther than the verandah."

The younger man, Dir apparently, jumped up and walked along by the bushes, not glancing at me. Long-legged, dressed in shorts that fitted his waist snugly, he looked like an athlete in training.

"Julia just left," I said.

"You shouldn't have given permission," snapped Dir over his shoulder.

"We all heard it," explained Anna.

I was annoyed. Everybody in this house hears and sees all. Just try to be alone. Like living on a stage, I thought.

"But you really have changed," smiled Anna. "Only I can't put my finger on just what it is. Perhaps it's for the better?"

I was silent, meeting Eric's attentive and observant glance.

"Gromova has entered the eino-chamber," said a voice, but where it came from I couldn't make out.

"Do you hear that?" Dir turned to us. "All the time it was Julia-two, and now she's already Gromova!"

"Glory begins with a surname," laughed Eric.

I reminded him that the super was turned off, adding that Julia had asked the guests not to tune into the network.

"WHAT did you say — guests?" asked Anna in surprise.

"So what?" I asked guardedly.

"There certainly is something wrong with your memory. We haven't used the word 'guest' in its former meaning for half a century. Are you so buried in history that you've forgotten?"

"Now we use the word 'guests' only for visitors from other phases of space and time," explained Eric in a rather odd tone.

I didn't manage to answer — the voice again interrupted.

"Preparations for the experiment are proceeding in cycles," he rapped out. "No deviations have been observed."

"In twenty minutes," said Dir. "They won't begin earlier."

Everybody was silent. Eric did not take his attentive curious gaze off me. There was nothing unpleasant in his look, but it aroused my involuntary

alarm.

"I heard your request about formulas, when you were speaking with Julia," he said suddenly, with a quite benevolent intonation. "I'd be glad to help you. There's plenty of time, so come along."

I got up, glancing down past the green border. The verandah hung at skyscraper height. Beneath were the dark crowns of trees, probably the corner of a city park. I went out with Eric.

"Light!" said Eric as we entered a room, apparently not addressing anyone in particular. "Only on our faces and on the table."

The light in the room, as if compressed, was condensed into an invisible projector that picked out of the darkness my face and Eric's, and a small table I found beside me.

"Have you the formulas with you?" asked Eric. I gave him the cards from the Mist.

"I don't need them," he laughed. "This is your lesson. Put them on the table and give them your complete attention. Only the upper rows, the lower ones aren't necessary. Those are calculations which are filled out by the electronic computer. Now read the upper rows line by line."

"I shan't remember them," I protested.

"That isn't necessary. Merely look at them."

"For very long?"

"Until I tell you not to."

"Somewhere you have a suggestion concentrator," I remembered Julia's words.

"What for?" laughed Eric. "I work by the old methods. Now look at my face."

I saw only the pupils of the eyes, as big as burning icon-lamps.

"Sleep!" he cried.

Exactly what happened after that I don't remember. I think I opened my eyes and saw an empty table.

"Where are the formulas?"

"I threw them away."

"But look here, I remember nothing."

"It only seems that way. You'll remember later when you get home. You are a guest, aren't you? Am I right?"

"Quite right," I said decisively.

"From what time?"

"From the last century, in the sixties."

He laughed softly in delight. "I knew it from the results of the medical observations. Both the shock and loss of memory looked very suspicious. I studied you by videograph when Julia was speaking to Bogomolov. You had such a look on your face, as if you were seeing a miracle. When she said that she'd go by the 'movement', I realized you had never once stepped on a travelling panel-pavement. And we've had them for half a century. You had forgotten all that has come into being in our times, right up to the semantics of the word 'guest'. You might deceive surgeons, but not a parapsychologist."

"All the better," I said. "Lucky for me that I met you. I'm only sorry I must leave without seeing anything, neither the houses nor the streets, neither the travelling-panels, nor your technology, nor even your social system. To be on the heights of communist society — and not see anything but a hospital room!"

"Why on the heights? Communism isn't stationary, it's a developing system. We have to go far yet before we reach the heights. Now we are making a gigantic leap into the future ... with the conclusion of Julia's dream. Your world will do the same after you take back the formulas of our century that are imprinted in your memory. Although only minds meet so far, all the same these meetings of worlds enrich us, and advance the dreams of mankind."

I wanted to leave a remembrance behind me in this world, to a man whose brain I had usurped.

"May I leave a note for him?" I asked Eric.

"Why a note? Simply tell him. It will be his voice, but your words."

I looked around, perplexed.

"You're looking for a tape-recorder? We have another and better means of reproducing speech. Too long to explain. Simply talk."

"I beg you to forgive me, Gromov, for usurping your place in life for these nine or ten hours," I began hesitantly, but a sympathetic nod from Eric urged me on. "I am only a guest, Gromov, and I'm leaving as suddenly as I came. But I want to tell you that I've been very happy living these hours of your life. I interfered in it by giving Julia my blessing and letting her do this brave deed. But I couldn't do otherwise. To refuse would have been cowardly, and to stop her — obscurantism. I regret only one thing: I cannot wait for the victory of your daughter, nor for the victory of your science and system. That great happiness will belong to you."

"Sergei, Eric!" cried Dir, running in. "It's starting!"

"Too late," I said, feeling the familiar approach of the dark, soundless abyss. "I'm leaving you. Good-bye."

IN PLACE OF AN EPILOGUE

Outside my window lies the street lashed by wind and rain. The electric lamps in the murky rain-curtain are like spiders lost in their own webs. A bus goes tearing through the gloom of the slanting shield of water. It is an ordinary autumn evening in Moscow.

I have finished the last lines of the essay or memoirs, or perhaps personal diary — I don't know what to call it — which I shall not risk publishing. But it had to be written. Klenov rang up early this morning, stating the exact number of lines for the column. By the way, he immediately made a reservation; it all depended on the reaction of world scientific societies. Maybe I'd be given a whole page.

The Academy of Sciences starts its session tomorrow at ten in the morning, and nobody knows when it will end. There will be Nikodimov's report and Zargaryan's, then my speech and those of foreign scientists and

ours. According to Klenov, more than two hundred people have arrived. All the stars of our physico-mathematical galaxies, not counting visitors and correspondents. I shall not cite the government's communiqué, for everybody knows it. After it came out, not only my scientific friends but reporter Sergei Gromov woke up famous.

More than two months have passed since my return, but it seems like it was only yesterday that I woke up in Faust's laboratory in the familiar chair with its electrodes and pick-ups. I woke up tired and with a feeling of bitter, almost unbearable loss. Zargaryan was asking me something, but I answered unwillingly and uncertainly. Nikodimov silently looked at me, studying the oscillograph results.

"We began at 10.15," he said suddenly, "and at one o'clock we lost you."

"Not completely," said Zargaryan.

"Right. Brightness fell first to zero, then it revived but was very faint, and rose to the supreme point. Even with a more exact direction sighting. To tell the truth, I was all at sea."

"At one o'clock," I repeated thoughtfully, looking at Zargaryan, "at exactly one or a bit earlier, I was with you in the Sofia restaurant."

"Are you delirious?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Yes, with you older by twenty years and wearing a 'Kurchatov' beard that covered half your chest. In a word, it was Moscow at the close of the century. In that same Sofia. By the way, it's quite different from ours. And Mayakovsky, too. He stands taller than the Nelson column." I drew in a whole lungful of air, and blurted out: "And you got hold of me and threw me ahead by a whole century. That's when you lost me ... during the second transmission."

Now they were both looking at me, not so much with distrust as with sharp suspicion. But I went on, not even leaving the chair for I hadn't the strength to rise.

"You don't believe me? It's hard to believe, naturally. Fantastic. Incidentally, the screens in their lab are in one line forming a parabola, and with a mobile control panel. And on the roof there's a swimming pool...." I swallowed, and was silent.

"You need some doping," said Zargaryan. He mixed two egg yolks with half a glass of cognac and gave it to me, almost spilling it his hands were so shaky. The drink revived me. Now I could go on.... And I talked and talked without stopping for breath, and they listened as if bewitched, with the reverence of habitués of premiere performances at the conservatoire. Then they interrupted, shooting questions like machine-gun bursts. They questioned and cross-examined me. Zargaryan cried out something in Armenian, and over and over again I had to repeat my recollections: now about the monorail track, now the gold and crystal Sofia, now the chair without the helmet or pick-ups, now the white revitalizing room and the unseen Vera-seven, then about the Mist with its glossary and the story of Julia in which the mysterious image of a century was reflected as in frosted glass. I still could not bring myself to describe the most important thing of all — my meeting with Eric. And when I got to it, something suddenly

erupted in my memory like a blinding flash of magnesium.

"Paper," I cried out hoarsely. "Quickly! And a pencil."

Zargaryan handed me a fountain pen and pad. I closed my eyes. Now I saw them absolutely clear-cut, as if held before my eyes — all the rows of ciphers and letters expressing the formulas on the Mist's cards. I could write them one after another without missing a thing, without getting mixed up, reproducing exactly everything engraved in my memory in that other world, all of which appeared with indelible vividness. I wrote blindly, vaguely hearing Zargaryan's whisper: "Look, look ... he's writing automatically with closed eyes." And that is how I wrote, not opening my eyes, not stopping, with feverish swiftness and clarity until I had reproduced on paper the last concluding equation of mathematical symbols.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Nikodimov's face leaning over me, whiter than the sheet of paper I'd been writing on.

"That's all," I said, throwing down the pen.

Nikodimov took the pad and raised it close to his short-sighted eyes. Then he froze motionless — it was as if a cinema reel had suddenly been brought to a stop in the middle of a film showing.

"This needs a wiser mathematician than I," he said finally, passing the pad to Zargaryan. "And he won't manage without an electronic computer. It will have to be computed."

It took Nikodimov and Zargaryan one and a half to two months to do it, working in Moscow and the Brain centre in Novosibirsk. Academicians and post-graduate researchers worked with them. The baffling calculation secrets of the mathematics of the future were finally solved by Yuri Privalov, the youngest Doctor of Mathematical Science in the world. The phase theory of Nikodimov-Zargaryan was now firmly established on a sound mathematical basis proved by experiments from the future. The equations translated into mathematical language became the Shual-Privalov equations. And tomorrow they would be made available to all mankind.

Olga's asleep, faintly lit by a pencil gleam from my lamp. She doesn't seem very content, in fact there is a slightly frightened look on her face. She already told Galya and me of her fear that fame and popularity, all this sensational excitement that awaits me tomorrow, will become a barrier between us that might break up our life together. Of course, the talk of a barrier is nonsense, but even now my life is beginning to look like an idiotic Hollywood true story.

Foreign correspondents, who earlier sniffed out that something was brewing, follow me through the streets. The telephone rings all day and we have to smother it with a pillow at night, so that the sound of its ringing doesn't awaken us. Already a certain American publishing house has made me a wild offer for my impressions. And I, parrot-like, have to repeat over and over that no impressions are to be printed as yet; and when they are they can be read in Soviet publications. And Klenov chaffs me in a friendly way that all the same I shall have to write about my JOURNEY ACROSS THREE WORLDS.

I don't agree — not three! Many more. And among them there will

definitely be the one that I never really saw — that wonderful, inimitable world of Julia and Eric.