



# FLYING FLOWERS



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## I

The mountain stream plunged down a three-hundred-foot precipice. Gaining the edge in a tearing hurry it made its first madcap leap; from a distance it seemed that a bluish-green ribbon hung from a grey rock. The other end of the ribbon was lost in a white cloud of spray where the stream smashed against the gargantuan boulders.

All in a lather of white foam now and generously tossing it to either side, the stream leapt on impatiently from level to level as it hurried down the slope. After a final dash into the grey murkiness of the gorge it joined a bigger stream and together they continued their journey to the sea.

Zavyalov half-lay oft a narrow ledge of rock just above the place where the spray shot from below met the bluish column of water. Occasional gusts of wind drove spray against his face. The ledge was wet and slippery and not exactly a safe place to linger.

Zavyalov pressed his right cheek against the cold roughness of rock. The waterfall was right in front of him. From so close it no longer looked a bluish-green ribbon, but what it was: a torrent of water, mighty and furious, in veins of foam and dirt, eager to snatch up and batter to death anything that got within reach of its cold embrace. He turned his head gingerly and pressed his left cheek against the rock. His glance travelled along the bare basalt. No, there was no hope of climbing that wall. A seasoned mountaineer, he had realised that when he was standing at the foot of the cliff, appraising, some forty minutes before. But he thought he would try all the same. And he had, seeking precarious purchase in every crumbly bit of weather-worn rock, every cleft produced by roots of some plant. It had taken him forty minutes to get to that ledge, forty minutes of tremendous risk. He ought not to have indulged himself, not really, he thought now.

Again Zavyalov moved his head cautiously, glancing up this time. His goal was quite near. About sixty feet higher and across the fall, where there were human figures carved in the cliff face, some aiming their bows, standing on one knee, others throwing spears, still others rowing.

Just below the group of carvings gaped the dark mouth of the cave. A big black cross topped it, running through the whole group and badly damaging some of the figures; obviously a later addition.

It was those primitive ornaments that had first roused his interest. Quite a find at this altitude too, almost next to the snow-line, and he thought that many an archaeologist or ethnologist would have given much to be in his place. Of course a party of geologists, only four of them at that, including their guide, a local hunter, could not be expected to do archaeological investigations. But then what actually interested him at the moment was something different. How did the people who had left behind eternal marks of their presence manage to get to the cave? Did they use other, easier means of access? Or, perhaps, the waterfall, which was in his way, appeared at a later stage, cutting access to the cave from this side?

And, indeed, across on the other side he could pick out a few likely footholds. By stepping on that fawnish knob one could reach as far as a small bush, that should mask a cleft of some sort. From there, placing one's left foot on that black slab, one could pass into a fifteen-foot-long chimney. That would be easy to scale. And above it there was something in the nature of a ledge, barely noticeable from this distance. Yes, the way to the cave continued just beyond the waterfall. By no means easy, but certainly climbable.

On their way up, two fat green caterpillars crawled busily past Zavyalov's cheek. It's easy for them, he thought, they've got eight legs, and I only four, legs and arms together.

Zavyalov moved a bit. His body felt numb. Pressing his side to the rock, he eased one leg for a few moments, then the other. Then, finding the best position, he reached out his left hand for his field-glasses. They felt extremely heavy: the arm seemed to outweigh his whole body. For one fleeting moment he felt he was losing balance and falling. Vertigo swooped on him. With a great effort he steadied himself, chin pressed against wet rock, drew the hand with the glasses up to his face and again turned his head. The other side of the cliff face was so close in the eyepieces that it seemed he could touch it with his hand. And it was definitely climbable, right to the cave mouth, as he was able to ascertain, picking out the way with an eager eye. But

how could one get there over that fifteen-foot-wide quivering ribbon of water?

Zavyalov lowered the glasses; the wall he had been examining leapt back into place. Even as it did so the stone his right hand had been gripping dislodged, ready to fall. Automatically his left hand dropped the field-glasses and clutched at the rock for support. As he recovered his balance, his glasses disappeared in the spray below.

"Must climb down, I'm dead tired," he told himself aloud and never heard his own voice for the roar of the falling water. It was only then that, for the first time, he became aware of that mighty roar. He shouted as loud as he could, but still could not hear himself.

Snake-like, he inched his way forward along the cold slippery stone. At a point where the ledge was almost petering out he finally stopped and looked at the foamy fringe of the water column right next to his face. The main mass of water curved out from the cliff, it was a leap, not a glide. A few large drops struck his cheek. Hugging the wall, he began the descent.

He stopped for a breather on a flat rock. He had not yet reached the bottom, but what remained was not so difficult. He sank down with his back propped against a rock and stretched his legs. His knees were shaking, all the strength was drained out of his arms, so that he would not even have been able to undo a button.

He felt fear....

The sun emerged from behind a mountaintop; the slope was decked out with yellow, blue and red flowers, pastel-tinted and fragile-looking, but really quite tough and well adapted to fight stern nature. Their subdued beauty made them especially dear to him. For a long time he watched a large velvety bumble-bee making rounds of the flowers. He would cling to the edge of a flower, plunge head first into the calyx until almost nothing was seen of him, then reappear in a little while, clean his front legs matter-of-factly and, yellow with pollen, buzz on to the next.

A large, exceptionally beautiful butterfly alighted on his damp shirt. Settling down comfortably, it opened and closed its wings as if fanning itself. Zavyalov sat quite still. Another butterfly perched on his knee, a freak with one wing much smaller than the other. A third one fluttered down on his forearm. Its body was noticeably bigger

than the bodies of the other two. They all opened and closed their gaily-coloured wings in unison, as if keeping common time.

## II

Nikolai and Olga lingered just outside the circle of light from the camp-fire. Zavyalov guessed why:

Nikolai had been carrying both rucksacks and now one of them was changing hands.

Their job for the day had been to explore the western branches of the valley. Zavyalov was a bit surprised when Nikolai, a tall lithe boy, showed him their route on the map: he had never expected they would be able to cover so much.

"Well, and what have you got to show?"

Nikolai produced the specimens: a few chips of granite and quartz, several kinds of rock-crystal, and an assortment of pebbles picked up on the banks of mountain streams. Pebbles were useful as an indication of the type of rock one could expect upstream.

Zavyalov took out the Geiger counter and, putting on the ear-phones, checked the specimens for radioactive content. (Uranium prospecting was the purpose of their expedition.) The granites and gneisses gave the usual two to three clicks, while the rest did not yield a sound.

"My luck's been no better," he said, "the mineral's lying low. And plenty of it too, believe me, I can smell it. My nose has never let me down yet. Well, we'll talk business tomorrow. Let's have our meal."

While they ate Zavyalov told (hem about the cave, omitting the climbing part of it as pedagogically unsound. Foolhardy risk should not be encouraged in budding geologists. There is enough danger in a prospector's work as it is.

His story, however, failed to evoke any response in the two students, tired after the day's exertions. But it did in the fourth member of their team, their guide, who went by the somewhat familiar, though affectionate nickname of Dad.

"That place's called Gamayun's Cross and the cave—Gamayun's Cave. But there's no path to it. Nobody has ever been in it. Only the

mountain spirits can carry you inside there. You've got to know the magic word for it."

"You say nobody has been there, but who carved those figures and the cross then?"

"Oh, that's a different story. Gamayun did it."

"Tell us about Gamayun," Olga wanted to know.

"Gamayun was a rich hunter, they say. A greedy and evil man he was, would never do a good turn to anybody. He had an only daughter who was called Din. Beautiful as a picture she was. There was not a lad in the village who wasn't gone on her. The richest men in the district offered huge bride prices for her. But she fell in love with Gits, her father's herdsman. They decided to run away and get married. 'The world is big,' Gits would say to her, 'there must be other places where I can fetch a mountain ram with an arrow or spear a bear.' Gamayun learnt about this plan—he was a wizard and nothing could be kept secret from him—and in the night when his daughter was to run away he gave her a sleeping-potion. Then he called the mountain spirits and with their help took her to a hiding-place which even Gits, who knew all the paths in the mountains, would never find. Gamayun had his own plans for Din: he wanted to marry her off to a rich old man from a neighbouring village and get a really big bride price. The old geezer already had three wives but was eager to marry Din. And she was fifteen at the time—best age for the bride in our parts.

"All that night Gits waited for Din with a pair of horses at the end of the village. When dawn came he decided she had betrayed him, swung into saddle and galloped off into the mountains. His horse was quite winded when he dismounted at midday near a mountain spring. He sat down and thought what was to be done. Meanwhile Din woke up in the cave where the mountain spirits had carried her. In the very same cave you saw today, Sergei Andreyevich. Dripping wet she was, for 'the spirits had dipped her into the stream. She got up from her grass bed, went up to the cave mouth and saw a sheer wall of rock and a waterfall roaring away at her feet. No way out! What could she do? And suddenly she heard a few thin blades of grass that hugged the cliff speak to her in human voices.

" 'Do you want us to tell Gits where to look for you?' they asked her.

"Oh, yes,' said Din.

" 'What will you give us for it?'

" 'What do you want?'

" 'Your beauty and your strength.'

" 'What do you need them for?' Din asked, surprised.

" 'We need your strength the better to cling to rock and fight the wind. We need your beauty to be admired by everybody. Look how weak and ugly we are now.'

" 'And what will remain for me if I give you my beauty and strength?'

" 'You will have your love. Why, surely that is your proudest possession.'

"Indeed What's there in strength and beauty when there is no love, thought Din and agreed.

"And that very moment the most beautiful flowers blossomed forth everywhere she could see. The bluebells took the blue of her eyes, the carnations the scarlet of her lips and the violets the whiteness of her arms and shoulders. Din did not know it all had been taken from her, only she felt a sudden weakness all over her body and sank down on the granite. And when she looked at her arms she saw that they had become grey, coarse and flabby like an old woman's. But even that did not make her feel sorry, because there was nothing but love in her heart now.

" 'But when will you do what you promised?' she asked.

"Then one of the flowers broke off its stem and, flapping its petals, flew away. It rose higher and higher, so high that it could at last see Gits sitting beside a spring. Then it dropped on his shoulder and told him where to look for Din.

"Gits sprung into the saddle and galloped off. He was strong and brave. But nobody could get to Gamayun's cave without the help of the mountain spirits. Gits climbed half the way and knew he could get no further. So he hung on to the cliff, Din sat in the cave and the waterfall roared between them.

"Then Gits struggled upright, found a foothold in a cleft and shouted so loud that Din could hear him above the torrent's roar.

" 'Jump over to me!' he shouted.



"The former Din could have jumped over the stream straight into Gits' arms but, having given all her strength away, she only jumped halfway. The waterfall seized her and swept her down, but Gits stretched his arm and caught his beloved, though they both nearly perished as he did so. With Din in his arms. Gits got down the cliff, mounted his horse and galloped away.

"Gamayun came back to his cave and could not find Din. He understood it was Gits who had taken her away and was so angry he decided they both must die. To cast an evil spell on them he had to draw those who were to fight Gits. But he had nothing to draw with. So he seized a rock and began hewing figures with it in the cliff face. He first sent a bowman against Gits. The bowman shot his arrow but Gits caught it in the air, turned it and hurled it back. And it flew and pierced the bowman's chest. That night Gits was stronger than all the enemies Gamayun had sent against him. Nothing is stronger than true love in this world.

"When the lovers had galloped so far away that Gamayun's magic could no longer reach them, Gits dismounted and made a fire. He laid Din down beside it because she was so weak she could not even sit up. There was only love in her heart and one cannot live by love alone. And so she died, her head in Gits' lap, her arms round his neck.

"They say Gits died soon afterwards. How could he live when every flower reminded him of Din—the roses, of the gentle colour of her cheeks, the bluebells, of her blue eyes? ..."

"And Gamayun," Olga asked softly, "what happened to him?"

"Gamayun? When Gamayun learnt about his daughter's death remorse began tormenting him, they say. He took a rock and hewed a cross in the cliff above the cave. And the mountain spirits left him, for a cross strikes fear in them. Then he disappeared. Whether he died in the cave or threw himself into the waterfall, nobody knows...."

"How long ago did all this happen?" asked Zavyalov.

"My grandfather told me this story, and he heard it from his grandfather, who used to say that *his* grandfather, when he was quite young, knew an old man who, as a small 'boy, saw Gamayun."

"You told it beautifully, Dad," said Olga. "Do you think it's a true story?"

"Hard to say. Tales aren't all lies, I s'ppose, nor all truth either. But there's always a bit of wisdom in them. It's wise people who tell them in our parts."

"What splendid, all-powerful love," Olga said, gazing at the dying embers. "And what a wise philosophy: love is stronger than anything in this world but man cannot live by love alone. How beautiful and how true.... So the alpine flowers' loveliness is the beauty of the dying Din.... But what could that flying flower symbolise? I have never met the metaphor before. Have you, Sergei Andreyevich?"

Zavyalov started. He, too, was under the spell of the hunter's tale but his train of thought had been different. He had remembered things from his past, things that were gone but not forgotten. How he longed the girl would call him Sergei, and not Sergei Andreyevich. She was at once like and unlike the other one. Yes, of course, she was better than the other one, if for no other reason than because she was here with him at the camp-fire. The other one would never dream of going away from the comforts of the city unless she went to a fashionable seaside resort. How he longed— But Olga would never know about it. He was past thirty and she just twenty. Besides Nikolai was obviously attracted by her. They'd make a perfect match. And he, as head of the team, really had no business going about courting a student on her field work with him.

"Why don't you say something? Have you also fallen asleep?"

"No, I was thinking."

"But tell me, have you ever heard of flying flowers in some folk legend or other?"

"Not that I know of."

"Must be a local image then. They usually stand for something quite concrete."

### III

"To think that you could fall asleep in the middle of such an absolutely wonderful legend! No, you're not human, Nikolai. Not a live spark in your heart."

"I'm a geologist. Legends interest me to the extent they have some bearing on my job. Had there been mention of an abandoned quarry or some such thing in it, I'd have pricked up my ears.

But there was the usual rigmarole: beautiful daughter, tyrannical father, and, of course, poor but valiant suitor."

"But what about flying flowers? Even Sergei Andreyevich says he hasn't heard about this image."

"Flying flowers might interest botanists, but I'm a geologist."

"Stop harping you're a geologist. Sergei Andreyevich is also a geologist but look how wide his interests are. Archaeology, ethnography, Chinese medicine.... And d'you know what he's most keen on?"

"No."

"Prospecting on other planets. Going as a geologist with the very first space expedition. He has even written poetry about space flights."

"How do you know?"

"They remember his verses at the Institute ever since he was a student. Want me to recite them?"

"Fire away."

Zavyalov made a wry face. The youngsters were apparently not aware he had returned and could hear them from the tent. But how had that inquisitive girl laid her hands on his rhymes? He had written them and he had wanted to become the first astroarchaeologist. For that matter he was still very active in the astronautics section.

But he wrote no poetry any more. Ever since that time.... Rita had been married for five years now, yet he still felt stunned. Working like a beaver, lecturing, doing research—anything to help forget. Perhaps he shouldn't have done it? After all it was he who gave up Rita because she wouldn't go his way. Perhaps he should have gone her way? Then Rita wouldn't have become the wife of that fellow .... "that accountant fellow", as he called him at their last meeting. What did she say to that? Trotted out a proverb: she believed in proverbs, particularly in the type coined for the specific use of the well-fed and satisfied. Something like "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush". He was the bush part of it—WT operator-gunner in the war years, later honours graduate, then research student at the Geological

Prospecting Institute, until he gave up his post-graduateship in the second year for field work. That was what had caused the break.

"You don't know how to get on in life, like people do," she told him. Yes, he did know how to get what he wanted, but he wasn't looking for the same things in life as she was, their ideas of happiness were different. But what *is* happiness?

Last night Dad said that man can't live by love alone. But can man live without love? He had— for five years. But could that be called life?

Yes, of course, work you like was the main thing in life and the choice he had made was right. But then why all these memories? And now this young girl, Olga.... And again somebody else's....

Outside, the howling of the wind in the ravine added to the rattle of the mountain torrent rushing along in its stone bed. This made a fitting background to the tale of space conquest that a girl's voice was reciting with great feeling and utter conviction.

*A thrilling journey! Though terrestrial skies  
Seem blue and clear, yet on our way through  
space  
Uncounted obstacles and dangers will arise:  
Magnetic storms, tremendous meteors, cosmic  
rays,....  
But we shall triumph! Yes, we shall! And  
there, afar,  
Beyond the reach of any poet's dream,  
There, luring us, our goal—another star  
Through endless night mysteriously shall  
gleam.  
Our trajectory nearer as we trace,  
Upon our radar's palpitating screen,  
A strange and lovely planet's clearing face  
Adorned with streaks of lightning, will be  
seen....  
With chains of islands scattered there and  
here,  
And weird contours of unearthly sea and land,*

*Before our gaze, fantastic and austere,  
A new world will arise—and then expand...*

The voice stopped, as if snapped at the highest pitch of emotion. There was a few moments' silence. Then the dialogue started afresh.

"He spreads himself thin, your Sergei Andreyevich. Fewer rhymes would have got him his doctorate long ago. And here he is, climbing rocks with us. Is that your idea of life—tent, fire and all?"

"Stop it, Nikolai!" Olga nearly screamed. Zavyalov visualised a wrathful face with a pair of deep, burning eyes, now a much darker shade of blue than usual.

"Oh, what a rotten thing to say! Why, he's had several invitations from his Institute and from the Academy of Sciences.... His articles are quoted in textbooks. And you—you're just a schoolboy compared to him."

"Tut, tut, my dear girl, I should have thought you could spare my silver-haired head that avalanche of wrath," Nikolai sounded somewhat taken aback by Olga's outburst. "All right. They invited him and he said no. He's a genius, and I'm a schoolboy. But all I was trying to say was that he spreads himself thin over too many undertakings. And that goes for you too. Take today's butterflies. What's in them for you? See my point? Catch *me* saying no to a readership at the Institute."

It was high time he had put an end to this involuntary eavesdropping. Zavyalov coughed. The voices stopped abruptly.

He stepped outside and went over to the shed.

"Well, what're you doing?"

"I'm sorting out the specimens and Olga's amusing herself with butterflies."

Nikolai's reply was a patent challenge but Zavyalov chose to ignore it. He looked through Nikolai's entries in the team's log-book, making a few casual remarks. The young man knew his job well. Then he turned to the girl who was bent over an empty food box topped by a piece of glass. A few fair curls had escaped from under her square on to her knitted brow. She was peering inside the box. Under the glass there was a colourful collection of luxuriant butterflies such as those Zavyalov had seen by the waterfall.

"Aren't they absolutely lovely," the girl said. "If I'm not mistaken this is a species not described before."

"But you are. That is an ordinary species, though changed a lot through certain environmental conditions."

"These being?"

"Radioactivity. Look at all these mutations, in colour and form and size. Incidentally, where did you catch this lot?"

"By the waterfall. I went to have a look at Gamayun's Cave. But you know it's not as untrodden by man as it looks. People have been there before and not so long ago."

"What makes you think so?"

"Here's what I have found there." Olga showed him a badly battered metal binocular casing that seemed to have passed through a crusher. There was anxiety in her eyes.

"Stop worrying, Olga, those were my field-glasses. I broke them accidentally and threw them in the water, which did the rest. But what is it that interests you in those butterflies?"

"I was dead keen on collecting all kind of insects when I was a kid. It's very interesting, really.

It's a world apart, full of its own mysteries. Do you know, for instance, that a butterfly can locate another at a distance of a little under a mile even without seeing it?"

"Yes. They say butterflies have an acute sense of smell."

Olga shook her head.

"No, I don't think that's the answer. How could a sense of smell, however acute, help a butterfly amidst a flower-field full of the most different aromas of the greatest intensity? Is it possible to single out a faint smell from that riot of scents? It's something else, I'm sure. I did a bit of an experiment today. I placed a butterfly under a tumbler downwind from another butterfly—in case a little of the smell got out—" "And what did you find?"

"I repeated the experiment several times and on all occasions the second butterfly was soon fluttering round the tumbler."

"How do you explain this remarkable communion? By telepathy?"

"I don't know.... Of course, butterflies don't think but they might emit some radio waves. And locate one another as if by a radio beacon."

"I was struck yesterday by the way they opened and closed their wings, basking in the sun—all in time, as a company of soldiers at drill. Of course they could see one another. I don't think telepathy has anything to do with it, really."

"Well, let's see."

Olga turned over the pane of glass covering the box. There were a few butterflies on it. One of these fluttered away. The others, comfortable where they were, began moving their wings in unison. Though well apart, they seemed to operate as identical components of a single mechanism.

Olga took a piece of cardboard and put it vertically on the glass, cutting the group of butterflies in two. Wing movements in both groups remained synchronous.

"There you are, Sergei Andreyevich, it's not sight, you see, it's something else."

Zavyalov was obviously interested. And he liked the neat and clever way in which Olga had done that little experiment. So it was not sight. What was it then? Radio waves? Some kind of tiny oscillations, not detectable, or, perhaps, not detected by anybody? And if so, was it endemic or common to all lepidoptera?

These questions merited further study. For all he knew nature might have employed some novel principle here that man could benefit from. It wouldn't be - such a bad thing, for instance, - to develop a one-mile-range receiver-transmitter the weight of a butterfly. That would presumably be a hundred times lighter than existing types.

#### IV

Again Zavyalov was on the narrow ledge above the waterfall. Again alone. Over the past two days he had progressed from surmise to conviction but he felt the evidence he had was too slim to share with others. So he had gone out alone for a final check.

The sun shone brightly aloft and there was a brilliant rainbow arched over the quivering silver-specked mass of water. The drops that reached the warm granite evaporated quickly; fine wisps of vapour curled up and disappeared. Taking every precaution Zavyalov stood upright, facing the wall. His left hand clutched at the cliff wall

almost at the water's edge whence he now proceeded to inch his way, very slowly, until his face felt a cooler current of air caused by the precipitous fall of water. But this wasn't the main stream, this was just its left flank, and he had counted on it not being very thick.

Zavyalov felt no fear this time. On the contrary, he was buoyed up and sure of success. Presently, finding a secure foothold, he ran his left hand along a crevice into the stream and beyond it. The impact on his arm of that accelerated mass of water was terrific but he knew he could just make it. Then his foot followed, and, surprisingly enough, quickly found firm purchase. He made a dash and emerged—after a cold shower—behind the greenish-blue curtain of water.

As soon as his eyes got accustomed to the quivering twilight he saw that, despite the wetness of the rock and the water sluicing down in places, ascent was possible.

Then to his great surprise Zavyalov noticed an iron hook sunk into the wall not far from his face. It was ruinously rusty but it resisted the tug he gave it. So that was the mountain spirit that had helped Gamayun to get into his cave. If Gamayun had done it, surely he could do it. Soon he was at the cave mouth.

There was a small flat space in front of it, which had escaped his eye. The despotic father must have been standing on it while he hewed the figures meant to bring peril to his daughter and her lover. But was it really Gamayun who had carved them? The explorer's heart gave a leap. He noticed that some of the figures were worn smooth by time, others half-obliterated through cracking and the fall of weather-worn rock. That could not be the work of two or three centuries. Twenty to thirty millenniums, more likely. That was the estimate that his experience as a geologist suggested to him.

But if the Gamayun legend was an invention, pure and simple, a whole chain of circumstantial evidence would fall to the ground. No, that could not be so. It was Gamayun—a filicide and an unintentional suicide—who had sunk that hook into the rock and provided himself with a hiding-place that was to become his tomb.

He would of course take pictures of the figures and then make a detailed sketch of them in his notebook—in case his camera failed. In any case they would appear in *Problems of Archaeology* not later than



next spring. They had waited for so many centuries that a few more months would be of no importance.

Zavyalov swung into the cave. The entrance was lit brightly by the rays of the sun. His first few steps inside the cave felt as though he were treading a deep-pile carpet; an accumulation of cocoons of countless butterfly generations, he guessed. This soon gave place to rock floor. Here it was darker, and Zavyalov halted for a moment to allow his - eyes to accommodate themselves.

Suddenly there was a hollow thud behind him, the floor rocked slightly, stones rattled down from the vault, and he found himself in complete darkness. Zavyalov broke out in cold sweat. Cut off! Trapped in a cave where a few hours' stay spelt death. In that same cave that had robbed Din of strength and beauty, and her father of life.

Zavyalov switched on his torch. The subsidence was not extensive and apparently only involved a single slab of granite. But it was big, and had slid squarely across the entrance, all but sealing off the cave so that Zavyalov could only force an arm through in one place. Enlarge the hole? What a hope! That'd take him three to four days, which he didn't have. He could not even wait till the morrow when his companions would start a search for him. They would tumble to his going out to explore this cave, of course. But would they guess where he was? No, they'd more likely decide he'd fallen into the torrent and look for his body downstream. He might shout all he could, they wouldn't hear him above the roar of the waterfall even if Nikolai climbed up to that ledge.

He ought to get a grip on himself and think coolly.

It wasn't so much the thought of death, he reasoned. He'd faced it before as he hovered over towns looking like gigantic fiery hedgehogs, a target for searchlight beams and tracer flak. But he hated the idea of meeting his end in this way and shelving the riddle of Gamayun's Cave for many, many years. Though, in fact, he wasn't as yet quite sure he himself held the solution.

Playing the beam of his torch about him, Zavyalov went deeper into the cave. It gradually widened, though not much, while its ceiling receded sharply, making the cave a narrow cleft in the massif of granite. Suddenly shivers ran down his spine: picked out by the fitful light of his torch, a man appeared in front of him, eyes ablaze, lips

stretched in a malevolent grin, displaying a set of glittering teeth highlighted by little tongues of bluish flame. In fact, the very time-honoured image of a ghoul or one of the Devil's own minions.

Plucking up his courage, Zavyalov took a couple of steps forward and trained the torch beam on the ghost's face. It was the dead face of a mummy half-seated in the shallow recess in which the cave ended.

The man who had been thus mummified must have been a real giant in his lifetime: hunched as he was his head was level with Zavyalov's. He had to be, thought the geologist, to be able to drag his daughter all the way up to the cave. So this was Gamayun—clad in a linen shirt over trousers of the same material and a leather belt....

And that solved the riddle of Gamayun's Cave beyond a shred of doubt. The cave indeed was made up of minerals bearing fantastic, unheard-of radioactive concentrations. How big the valuable deposits were had yet to be explored, but their high grade was a certainty even now.

He retraced his steps back to the cave mouth. What could he do? Write a message, it occurred to him. By the vague light from the hole he jotted down a few lines about his discovery on a page torn from his notebook, made a dart with it and threw it outside. He repeated the motions nine times—the number of blank pages left in his notebook.

This done, he thought hard. What else could he do? In his place Din had sent her lover a flower. Perhaps she had just used it to scratch her message on? It didn't sound right though. Why a flower, when it was easier to scratch her message on a leaf or a piece of cloth torn from her dress?

The youngsters back in camp must still be unaware of anything. Dad was cooking their meal and Nikolai sorting the specimens. And Olga? Well, Olga would most likely be studying the mysterious mechanism of butterfly communication.

A flying flower.... Could Din not have written her last love-letter on a butterfly's gaudy wings? Supposing he tried.... No, what utter rubbish.... And yet—who knows—what if it succeeded?

An idea was struggling in his mind, which he had first dismissed as utter rubbish, then took up tentatively again, then— After all, as one condemned to death he had nothing to lose, he told himself. And his life was the stake.

V

"You think he overheard the little conversation we had this morning, do you? That might mean a failure for me in my field practice. What the devil made me blabber my opinion of him."

"How disgusting you are, Nikolai!"

"Why are you so rattled? I'm doing my job well, aren't I, and always will, all my life, be on top of my job whatever it is. And all the rest is just a. ruddy nuisance that gets on one's nerves—

Anyway I don't quite see what's biting you this time."

"It's just that doing your job well still doesn't make a man out of you."

Nikolai offered no reply. For a few minutes both went on with their work.

"Look, Nikolai!" Olga exclaimed all of a sudden. "What's that?"

"Butterflies," Nikolai said nonchalantly, stepping over to her.

"But look at the way they're moving their wings...."

"The usual way. All together. You've already admired the fact together with your darling Sergei Andreyevich."

"Look at them," Olga was saying, disregarding his words, "they've always moved their wings at even intervals before. Now they're uneven— longer and shorter."

"Using Morse code, eh?"

"No, impossible ... wait ... give me your pencil."

On a scrap of paper she began hurriedly putting down dots and dashes for shorter and longer wing movements. Soon she had a few lines ready.

"Now for the decoding," said Olga.

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

"Where did you learn?" "I went to a radio ham circle at school." "Whatever for? Too much time to spare?" "For this particular occasion. Just for this once. There you are. Just read it aloud."

" 'Am in cave. Need help. Zavyalov.'"

## VI

In the evening they gathered round the camp-fire as usual.

"You see, geologically this place looked a typical uranium-bearing area. There's no point in going deeper: you know all that stuff. But to strike uranium was an entirely different matter. There might not have been any at all in the first place, or it might have been dispersed in minute quantities in granite. It's the butterflies that I owe my hunch about there being an open deposit somewhere near. You know that radioactivity causes mutations in insects. And I'd never before seen so many mutations as at the confluence of the two streams. That was why Olga could not recognise an ordinary butterfly.

"Soon I managed to locate the rough boundaries of their habitat. It was in the area of the water-fall. The mutation butterfly was extremely rare farther upstream and plentiful downstream—carried there by the wind, I thought, which always blows in the same direction here. So I began exploring the area.

"The water and pebbles proved only slightly more radioactive than normal; so if there was any uranium about it had no direct contact with the water. Yet it was obvious that the local butterflies were exposed to high levels of radioactivity in the chrysalis stage. That prompted me to search for a deep crevice in the rock where the chrysalises might mature.

"Then it was that I stumbled on Gamayun's Cave.

"It's remarkable qualities must have been known to the stone age men. Possibly the cave and the whole cliff were held sacred in those days and used for pagan rituals. That must also have been the purpose of the figures carved in the cliff face.

"All this was very circumstantial, of course, and I hesitated to bring it up. I tried to reach the cave on my own and failed. The climb was much too risky. I ruined my field-glasses in the attempt and decided to stay content with taking pictures of the cliff face with a telephoto lens.

"However the tale Dad told us gave a new fillip to my speculations. A cave where a girl loses her strength and beauty could only have been a radioactive one. The same could have killed Gamayun. But in a

legend deeply rooted in folklore fact is inseparable from fantasy. In this one, for instance, Gamayun is credited with carving figures, which had existed for tens of millenniums before his time. So could the rest of it have been just fantasy, for that matter. And though personally I was almost convinced, I again said nothing to you and ventured out alone. Which nearly cost me my life.

"The final proof that the cave was a radioactive treasure-house was furnished by the mummy. The whites of its eyes, its teeth and nails were phosphorescent due to prolonged radioactive exposure. There were no signs of decomposition because radiation killed all the microbes. But I had this proof only when I myself became a prisoner and was looking for a place next to Gamayun.

"I wrote my message to you, threw out a few copies of it in the hope somebody might pick it up, and prepared for the inevitable.... But then an idea occurred to me.... You remember the legend mentions a flying flower. Now a butterfly could be that. I even seemed to remember I'd come across a similar metaphor in a Persian -epos I once read.

"You remember how amazed we were at the butterflies beating their wings in unison and even wondered who their drill-sergeant was. I'm not affirming anything, but I'd like to advance the idea that wing movements cause the impulse by means of which they manage to communicate. They are their own drill-sergeants, at it were. So why shouldn't I take over the job for a while, I thought.

"I knew that Olga would be studying her butterflies just then. So I caught a most gorgeous butterfly as it was about to flutter outside and stretched down at the hole. The rest I did with the help of two needles. Imagine my joy when I saw a butterfly basking outside open and close its wings in time with the one whose wings I was manipulating. Apparently quite a few butterflies in the locality must have been doing their physical jerks at that time in Morse.

"I'm not at all sure what learned lepidopterists will have to say on the matter. They might even say that nothing of the kind happened or could have happened. And any experiments they made would probably bear them out. But the fact is that here we're dealing with a unique case of mutation, going back countless generations. And, perhaps, this feature, which can be observed with the ordinary

cabbage butterfly, has, to my luck, reached a high level of development with this particular mutation.

"I replaced the tortured butterfly after a while by another one. There are millions of cocoons in the cave; it's an enormous nursery. And in about two hours I felt somebody tugging at the rope I'd payed out through the hole. That was Nikolai and just about time too. I pulled it in and found a stick of dynamite at the end. The rest was easy.

"As the senior member here I'd like to stress one point. Geology is by no means a narrow science. A geologist should know a thousand and one things which might appear to have nothing to do with his job. But this goes for other sciences too. Nowadays new developments are taking place increasingly in the border regions between two and more sciences, as Academician Zelinsky once put it. Without knowledge entirely optional for me as a geologist we could have missed our uranium deposits and I might have lost my life.

"And one more thing. For a scientist knowledge and opportunity to increase it should be the two most important things. And, believe me, the post he occupies, the string of letters he has after his name, the fees he gets—all that is secondary."

That night Zavyalov and Olga were the last to leave the camp-fire. The geologist was jotting down notes in the log-book, the girl, sitting with her arms round her knees, was peering into the dying embers of the fire.

"Sergei Andreyevich, would you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

"A question? Why, you're welcome."

"Why are you not married?"

Zavyalov had expected anything but that. He was not aware that a woman can detect a man's love for her on infinitely more slender evidence than he had used in unearthing the uranium deposits. A little embarrassed, but looking straight into her eye, he said softly:

"If you wish I will tell you about it. You and nobody else.... But not here—in Moscow when our field practice is over."

Zavyalov dialled a number. It was a number he knew by heart but for the last five years had never dialled more than once a year. And out of five times he had heard her voice only once. Hearing to the end all those "hallo, press the button, use another line," he had hung the receiver in silence. That had been two years ago. Now he answered at once.

"Rita, this is Sergei. You have not forgotten me completely, have you? I'd like to see you. For a minute, or for an hour, I don't know. But alone and immediately."

In ten minutes he saw her in the opening door. She had changed. She had filled out and was even more beautiful. But he knew at once she no longer had any sway over him....

He could go now: after all that was what he'd wanted to be quite certain about.

Meanwhile Rita searched in her mind for something to say. Weather was trivial, how-are-you and all that, too general.... She thought she knew what had brought this man here. But he never said a word and suddenly she noticed something.

"You have two new medals?" she said in astonishment and envy, looking at his chest with those blue innocent eyes of hers whose purity he had so loved. "My husband hasn't got a single one. And probably never will have, the imbecile. He doesn't know how to get on in life.... But where're you going, Sergei dear?" she said and stretched her plump, marble-white, beautiful arms to him.

Never saying a word, he turned on his heel and went away.

In the evening he told everything to the other woman.

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