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MAKAR'S DREAM

A Christmas Tale

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I

This is the tale of the dream which poor Makar who dwelt in a harsh and rigorous climate dreamt—the very Makar who is proverbial for his poor luck.

His birthplace was the out-of-the-way village of Chalgan lost in the wild taiga of Yakutia. Makar's fathers and grandfathers had wrested from the taiga a small piece of frozen ground. And although a hostile wall of dense dark woods surrounded it, they did not lose heart. Soon fences were running across the cleared land, ricks and stacks dotting it, and small smoking yurtas growing fast on it; finally, on a hill, in the middle of the settlement, like a victory signal, a church steeple shot up into the sky. By and by Chalgan became a big village.

But in the course of the war they waged against the taiga, scorching it with fire, and attacking it with iron, Makar's fathers and grandfathers, almost without knowing it, became themselves a rude part of it. They married Yakut women, and adopted the language and customs of their wives, their own features of the Russian race to which they belonged becoming obliterated and fading altogether with time.

Be as it may, but my Makar remembered well that he came of the early Chalgan peasant stock. It was the place where he was born, where he lived and where he was destined to die. He was exceedingly proud of his lineage, and would now and then call others "foul Yakuts", though, to tell the truth, he himself was in no way different from the Yakuts in the ways and habits of his life. His Russian was poor, and he spoke it seldom; he dressed in animal skins, wore the short native deerhide boots, ate a single flatcake with a brew of brick tea on ordinary days, and on holidays and special occasions consumed as big a pot of drippings as was put before him on the table. He was extremely adept at riding on the back of a deer, and when he fell ill, he would call the medicine man; the latter, gritting his teeth fearsomely, would hurl himself in a frenzy on the sick man to scare off and

expel from his body the illness which had settled there.

Makar slaved, lived in poverty, suffered hunger and cold. But did he have any other thoughts except the constant worry to earn his bread and tea?

Indeed, he had them.

When he was drunk, he wept and bemoaned his lot: "My God, what a life!" Besides, he kept saying that he would get away from everything and go up to the mountain. There he would not work the land nor sow, neither cut nor cart wood; nor would he even grind grain by hand on the millstone. He would only try to save his soul. He did not know what the mountain was like, nor where it was; but he was certain it existed, for one thing, and for another, that it was far away, far enough for him to be out of the reach of the *ispravnik* [Head police officer of the district.] himself.... And, of course, he would not have to pay any taxes....

When sober he dropped the idea—perhaps because he saw the impossibility of finding such a marvellous mountain; but when drunk he grew bolder in his belief. He admitted, however, that he might not reach the right mountain and land on the wrong one. "I'd be lost then," he said. And yet he was determined to go to the mountain one day; if he had not carried out his intention, in all likelihood, it was due to the Tatars selling him poor brandy, which was hopped up with coarse tobacco for added strength, and which quickly sapped him of his vigour and made him ill.

II

It was Christmas Eve. Makar remembered that the following day was a great holiday. And he was overcome by an intense craving for vodka, but he had no money to buy it with. The corn was nearly all gone, and he was already in debt with the local shopkeepers and the Tatars. All the same tomorrow was the great holiday ... on which he should not work—so what could he do if he did not get drunk? He felt wretched. What a life! There was the greatest feast-day in the whole winter—and he not able to drink a bottle of vodka!

A happy thought struck him. He rose and began to pull on his ragged furcoat. His wife, who was a tall, wiry, remarkably strong and equally ugly woman, wise to all his tricks, guessed his intention at once.

"Where are you off to, you devil? Going to drink vodka by yourself?"

"Hold your tongue! I'm off to buy a bottle and we'll drink it tomorrow." He gave her a slap on the shoulder which nearly threw her off her balance, and winked slyly. Such is the heart of woman: she knew Makar would cheat her, and yet was taken in by her spouse's caress.

He went outdoors, found his old horse in the clearing, led it by its mane to the sleigh and got it into harness. Soon the horse took its master out of the gate, stopped, turned its head and cast a questioning look at Makar who was lost in thought. Whereupon Makar gave the left rein a tug, directing the horse towards the outskirts of the village.

A small *yurta* stood at the very end of the village. A pillar of smoke, rising from it as from the other chimneys, hid the cold glittering stars and the bright moon behind a white billowing mantle. The firelight from within shone through the blocks of ice which served as windows. It was very quiet outdoors.

In this yurta dwelt strangers from afar. Makar did not know what ill luck had brought them to this distant wilderness, nor did he care in the least. He liked to do a little job for them now and then because they were not exacting and did not haggle about the pay.

Makar entered the yurta, walked straight up to the hearth, and stretched his hands which were numb with frost close to it.

"Tcha!" he ejaculated to inform them that he was cold.

The strangers were at home. A candle burned on the table, wastefully it seemed, for the strangers were not engaged in any work. One of them was lying on his bed, smoking and pensively eyeing the rings of blue smoke as they curled into the air, perhaps following some train of thought. The other was seated by the fireplace, in thought, too, watching the flames lick the burning logs.

"Hallo!" said Makar, eager to break the uncomfortable silence.

Needless to say, he knew nothing of the sorrows that weighed heavily on the hearts of the strangers, nothing of the memories that haunted them on that very night, of the pictures brought into their mind by the flick of firelight and the smoke. Makar had his own big worry.

The young man sitting by the fire raised his head, and stared at Makar rather blankly as though he had not recognised him. Then he shook his head as though to clear it, and rose quickly from his chair.

"Oh, it's you, Makar! Hallo! It's good to see you. Will you have a glass of tea with us?"

The offer pleased Makar.

"Tea?" he repeated inquiringly. "That's very good!... Real good! Capital!"

He began briskly to take off his things. When he had laid aside his cap and coat, he felt far more at home, and the sight of the samovar with the glowing coals made him turn to the young man with a burst of warm feeling:

"I'm fond of you! It is the truth! So fond of you, so very much! I can't sleep at night for thought of you!"

The stranger turned around with a wry smile on his face.

"You're fond of us, you say?" he said. "Then what is it you want?"

Makar hesitated.

"I do have something in mind," he replied. "But how could you guess? Well, I'll tell you about it after I've had my tea."

Seeing that his hosts had offered him the tea of their own accord, Makar thought he might press things further.

"Any roast meat? I love it," he said.

"No."

"Never mind," said Makar reassuringly. "I'll take it some other time," and added, "some other time, eh?"

"All right."

Makar now took it for granted that the strangers owed him the roast meat; and he never forgot debts of this kind.

An hour later he was sitting in his sleigh, having earned a whole ruble by selling five prospective cartloads of firewood on quite satisfactory terms. True, he had promised solemnly not to spend the money on drink on that same day, knowing that he would do just that. The pleasure he anticipated stilled any pricks of conscience he might have, and he did not even give a thought to the beating he would be sure to get from his faithful wife when he returned home drunk, having

deceived her.

"Where's that you're going, Makar?" one of the strangers called out laughingly when he saw that Makar's horse instead of going straight on turned to the left, to the Tatars, establishment.

"Whoa! Did you ever see such a wretched horse? Where are you going?" Makar shouted, blaming the horse, tugging hard at the left rein, and giving the animal furtive little slaps with the right.

The clever beast whisked its tail reproachfully, and trotted quietly in the needed direction. And then the squeak of the runners abruptly ceased at the door of the Tatar pub.

III

Near that gate there stood several tethered horses with the high Yakut saddles.

In the small hut the air was suffocating. Acrid fumes of poor tobacco formed a thick haze and were slowly blown out into the chimney. Visiting Yakuts sat on benches behind tables on which stood mugs of vodka; here and there were groups of men playing cards. The customers' faces were flushed and streaming with perspiration. The eyes of the players were wildly intent on their cards. Money flashed quickly from one player's pocket into another's. In one corner of the room a drunken Yakut sat on a bundle of straw rocking himself to and fro and singing. In shrill, grating notes, he repeated in a variety of tunes that tomorrow was a great holiday and that today he was drunk.

Makar put down his money and a bottle was handed to him. He tucked it into his bosom and retired unperceived into a dark corner. Pouring himself out one glassful after another, he swilled the brandy greedily. It was very bitter; it had been mixed three quarters with water owing to the holiday, but the tobacco had been put in freely. After each gulp Makar gasped for breath and saw red rings dancing before his eyes.

He was soon drunk, and he, too, sank down on the straw, locked his arms around his knees and laid his heavy head on them. In this position, he began to produce strange shrill sounds, singing the song that tomorrow was a great holiday and that he had drunk five firewood loads' worth of brandy.

Meanwhile the hut was getting more and more crammed with customers. The Yakuts who had come to attend the church service and drink the Tatar vodka kept pouring in. Seeing that in a short while there might be no more room for newcomers, the keeper stood up and took a good look around him. His eye fell on the Yakut and on Makar in the dark corner.

Whereupon he walked over to the Yakut, grabbed him by the collar of his coat and flung him out of the hut. Then came Makar's turn. As he was a local inhabitant, the Tatar keeper accorded him a greater honour: he opened the door wide and gave him such a hearty kick that Makar flew out of the hut and fell on his nose upon a mound of snow.

It is hard to say if he felt affronted by such treatment. The snow stuck to his face and penetrated inside his sleeves. With difficulty he dragged himself up from the snow and staggered towards his sledge.

The moon had risen high overhead. The tail of the Great Bear pointed

downwards. It was getting frostier. In the north, from behind a hemispheric dark cloud appeared the first fiery flashes of the northern lights.

Aware apparently of its master's state, the horse slowly and prudently wended its way home. Makar sat upon the sledge, rocking himself and singing the same song. He sang that he had drunk five fuel loads' worth of brandy and that his old lady would give him a beating. The sounds that escaped from his throat shrilled and moaned through the evening air. And there was something so doleful and plaintive about Makar's singing that the stranger who had climbed on top of the yurt to shut the chimney felt even more heavy of heart. Meanwhile the horse had brought the sleigh up to a hilltop from which the country around opened to view. The snow sparkled in the moonlight, but when the light of the moon seemed to fade, the snow grew shadowy and shimmered faintly with the reflected glow of the northern lights. And in that shifting glow the snow-covered hills and the forest on them seemed now to crowd in upon Makar, now to recede far into the distance. Makar thought he saw distinctly the snowy bald patch of Yamalakh Hill on the other side of which he had set traps of or animals and birds.

This launched him on a new train of thought, and he sang joyfully that a fox had been caught in his trap. He would sell the skin the next day and thus escape a beating from his wife.

The bells started to ring when Makar entered his hut, and he at once told his wife that a fox had been caught in his trap. He had quite forgotten that his wife had not shared his bottle, and therefore when she landed him a heavy blow in the small of his back in answer to the joyful tidings, it took him by surprise. And before he had time to throw himself on the bed, she cuffed his neck.

Meanwhile the bells were ringing for the midnight mass in Chalgan, their sounds floating far away in the air, across the snows.

IV

He was lying on his bed. His head was burning and a fire seemed to be raging inside him. The mixture of brandy and tobacco was like a liquid fire coursing through his veins. Melting snow ran down his face and back in ice-cold streamlets.

His old woman thought he was asleep, but he was awake, and could not get the fox out of his mind. He was now quite sure it had been trapped, even knew in which gin it was caught. He could see it distinctly—kept under by the heavy block, tearing at the hard snow with its claws and trying to escape. Moonbeams streaming through the thick underwood gleamed on its golden fur. And the animal's eyes glowed with a beckoning glint in them.

The vision was too much for him. He rose from the bed and directed his steps towards his faithful horse to drive to the taiga.

What was that? Did his wife grab him by the collar of his coat and was she pulling him back?

No, he has left the village behind him. He could hear the even crack of the snow beneath the runners of the sleigh. He has left Chalgan far behind. The bells were still ringing solemnly. And he could see rows of riders sharply silhouetted with their high peaked hats against the dark line of the horizon. They were Yakuts on their way to church.

Meanwhile the moon sank lower in the sky, while way in the zenith a whitish cloud appeared and shone with a phosphorescent light. The cloud expanded and then suddenly burst with flashes of bright colour spreading on all sides. These flashes leapt across a hemispheric dark cloud in the north which from the contrasting brightness looked even blacker. It became blacker than the taiga towards which Makar was now making his way.

The road wound between low shrubs, with hills on the left and the right. As he drove on, the trees grew taller, and the undergrowth thicker. The taiga was silent and full of mystery. Silvery hoarfrost rested on the bare branches of the larches. But as the soft glow of the northern lights threaded its way from the tree-tops to the ground below there would suddenly flash into view a snow-bound glade, or, beneath the snow-drifts, the huge skeletons of fallen woodland giants.... Then darkness again, utter silence and the spell of mystery.

Makar stopped his horse. He had reached the spot, quite close to the road, where all the traps were laid. In the phosphorescent light he could see distinctly the low wattle fence, and even the first trap. It was made up of three heavy beams resting on a slightly slanting pole, all held together by a clever contraption of levers and horsehair cord.

Now, this was another man's gin; what if the fox had gone into it? Makar climbed quickly out of his sledge, left his smart little horse standing on the road, and listened.

There was not a sound, except for the solemn chiming of the bells coming from the village, which was now far away and out of sight.

He had nothing to fear. The man to whom the traps belonged, Alyoshka of Chalgan, who was Makar's neighbour and sworn enemy, was probably in church. Not a single print was to be seen on the smooth surface of the freshly fallen snow. Makar walked around the traps, the snow crunching beneath his tread. The traps were wide open, waiting with gaping maws for their prey. He went back and forth—nothing; he retraced his steps to the road.

Pst!...pst! There was a faint rustling. A fox! Its fur gleamed red in the moonlight so close to Makar that he could see the sharp-pointed ears, and with a whisk of the bushy tail the fox seemed to entice him further into the thicket. The animal now vanished between the trees in the direction of Makar's own traps. And a dull thud soon rang through the woods setting off a broken muffled echo which died down in a far off gulley.

Makar's heart began to pound: the trap had closed.

He broke into a ran, making his way through the undergrowth. The cold twigs struck him in the eyes, powdering his face with snow. He stumbled and gasped for breath.

Presently he reached a clearing which he had made himself. On two sides of it stood trees white with hoar frost, and further down, tapering, ran a path at the end of which was the opening of a trap eagerly awaiting its prey.... He was now close to the spot....

But what did he see? The flicker of a figure on the path near his traps. He recognised Alyoshka—it was his short squat figure, his sloping shoulders, and his clumsy bear's gait. Makar thought that Alyoshka's swarthy face had grown even darker and his grin was wider than usual.

Makar felt deeply outraged. "The scoundrel! He is after my gins." To be sure, Makar had just been himself around Alyoshka's traps. But there was a difference.

When prowling about others' traps he feared to be caught, whereas when others trespassed on his ground he was resentful and was most eager to lay his hands on the offender.

And he ran now quickly towards the trap in which the fox had been captured. Alyoshka shuffled with his bear's gait in the same direction. Makar knew that he needed to get there first.

There was the trap with the block down. And from under it he caught a glimpse of the trapped fox's red fur. The fox was tearing up the hard snow with its claws just as he had imagined it would be doing and glared at him with its sharp burning eyes.

"*Tytyma* (Don't touch it)!" shouted Makar in Yakut. "It's mine."

"Tyfyoma!" retorted Alyoshka, like an echo, "It's mine."

Both men reached the trap at the same time, and, jostling each other, began lifting the trapping block to get at the fox. As the block came up the animal leapt forward; then it paused, cast a somewhat disdainful look at both men, licked the spot which had been bruised by the block, and ran merrily off with a whisk of its tail.

Just as Alyoshka was going to make off after it, Makar caught hold of the tails of his coat.

"Tyfyoma!" he shouted. "It's mine!" And he hurried after the fox himself.

"Tyfyoma!" repeated Alyoshka, his voice again ringing echo-like. Makar felt his own coat tails being dragged back and the next moment Alyoshka was running in front.

Makar grew angry. And forgetting about the fox he dashed after Alyoshka.

Faster and faster they ran. Alyoshka's cap was torn from his head by the tree branches, but he did not stop to pick it up, because Makar, shrieking angrily was close on his heels. However, Alyoshka was far more cunning than poor Makar. Suddenly he stopped, turned and bent down his head, which hit the running Makar below the waist and he tumbled down into the snow. And as he fell, the wily Alyoshka snatched the fur cap off his head and disappeared in the taiga.

Makar rose slowly, feeling miserable and outwitted. He could not be in a more wretched frame of mind. To think that the fox had practically been his and now it was gone.... He thought he saw the mocking flick of its tail in the darkness as it scurried away for good.

It grew darker still, and there was only a tiny bit of the whitish cloud visible high above. From its fading glow there spread wearily and languidly the last dying flashes of the northern lights.

Cold stinging streamlets of melted snow trickled down Makar's hot body. The snow had penetrated inside his sleeves, his collar and into his boots. The accursed Alyoshka had carried off his cap. He had lost his mitts. Things looked bad for him. He knew only too well that it was no joke to be out on such a frosty night in the taiga without a cap or mitts.

He had been walking towards home for some time now, but the way seemed endless. He figured he should have been out of the Yamalakh Hill grounds and in sight of the church steeple. From afar came the ringing of the church bells, and though he thought he was approaching the sound, it became even fainter. Makar's heart sank and despair gripped him.

He was weary and miserable. His legs refused to carry him, his whole body ached. He gasped for breath. His feet and hands were numb with cold. And his

hatless head felt as though it were locked in a vice of red-hot steel.

"It looks like I'm lost," the thought throbbed in his head, but he trudged on.

The taiga was still. With a stubborn hostility the trees closed in on him, with no light anywhere in between them, no hope.

"I'm lost!" the thought persisted.

He felt very faint. Shamelessly the tree branches now lashed him in the face, mocking at his helplessness. A white hare ran across a clearing, sat down on its haunches, moved its black-dotted long ears, and began to wash itself, making faces at Makar. The hare meant to say that he knew Makar well enough, that he was the very Makar who had set traps in the taiga to catch it, and that now it was good to see him having fallen into a trap himself.

Makar's despair grew. Meanwhile the taiga was coming alive—with hostility. Even faraway trees now stretched out long branches to catch him by the hair and lash across the eyes and face. The grouse came out of their holes and stared at him with their curious round eyes, and the woodcocks hopped about between them with outspread wings, chattering loudly, and telling their wives about him and his tricks. Thousands of foxes peeped out of the thicket, sniffing the air, moving their sharp-pointed ears, and eyeing Makar scornfully. The hares sat on their haunches and gleefully informed each other that he had got lost in the taiga.

It was all too much for Makar to bear.

"I am lost!" thought Makar and there and then he made up his mind to get on with it.

He lay down on the snow.

It had become colder. The last flashes of the aurora glowed faintly in the sky, peeping at Makar from between the treetops. A soft treble of the church bells came floating softly through the air from Chalgan.

The aurora shimmered and faded away. The sounds ceased.

And Makar was dead.

V

He was not aware of just how it happened. He only knew that something ought to go out of him; he was expecting it to go out, yet it did not.

Meanwhile he knew that he was dead, and he lay there meekly, quite motionless. He remained motionless so long that he grew tired of it.

It was quite dark when Makar felt someone kick him. He turned his head and opened his eyes.

The larches stood high above him humble and still; they looked ashamed of the pranks they had been playing on him. The shaggy fir-trees stretched out their big, snow-covered arms and rocked softly. And sparkling little snowflakes floated just as softly through the air.

From between the many branches, the bright, kind stars peeped out of the sky. And they seemed to say: "Alas, the poor man is dead."

Over Makar's body stood the old priest Ivan, kicking him with his foot. The priest's long robe was powdered with snow; snow glistened on his fur cap, his shoulders and long beard. Most astonishing it was that the man should be the very priest Ivan who had died four years ago.

He had been a kind-hearted churchman, not troubling Makar too much about the tithes and fees. Makar himself settled the fees for christenings and masses. And he now recalled with a pang of shame that he had been quite close fisted and stingy, paying the smallest fee and at times nothing at all. The priest Ivan did not take offence; the one thing he insisted on was that he get his bottle of vodka. Moreover, if Makar did not have the money to buy the spirits, priest Ivan would send for it, and share the bottle with him. At such times the priest would generally become dead drunk, but he would rarely fight, and not too hard if he would. In this state, helpless and defenceless, Makar would deliver him into the tender care of his wife.

Yes, he had been a kindly little priest, but he met with a bad death. One day when everybody left the house, and he was lying alone drunk on his bed, he hankered for a smoke. And so he rose from his bed, reeled over to the fireplace to light his pipe, lost his balance, and fell into the fire. When his family returned, there was nothing left of Father Ivan but his legs.

All the parishioners mourned for the good priest Ivan, but as all that remained were his legs, there was no doctor who could help. And it was his legs that were buried; and another priest came in his place.

To think that it was the same Father Ivan who was now standing over Makar, whole, and kicking him lightly with his foot.

"Get up, Makar me lad!" he was saying. "Come along with me."

"Where to?" asked Makar sulkily.

Being lost and dead he had only to lie still, and was no longer obliged to wander through the tractless taiga.

Otherwise, what would have been the point in getting lost?

"We'll go to the Great Toyon*!" [[Master or chief in the Yakut language.](#)]

"And why should I go to him?" asked Makar.

"To be judged," said the priest sadly, and in a somewhat sentimental tone of voice.

Makar remembered that indeed after death one is supposed to appear somewhere at a judgment. He had heard it in church. The priest was right; there was no help for it, and he would have to get up.

And so he rose, grumbling that there was no rest for a body even after death.

The little priest went on ahead and Makar followed him. They kept a straight path. The larches humbly moved aside to give them way, as they went eastwards.

Makar noticed with astonishment that the priest left no footprints behind him. Looking down at his own feet, he saw that there were no traces of his footsteps either; the snow remained perfectly smooth and unfurrowed.

It occurred to him what an advantage this would be, for then he could prowl about undetected around other people's traps, when the priest, who apparently had read his thoughts, turned sharply around and said:

"Stop it! You do not know what every such thought may cost you."

"Of all things!" growled Makar. "Can't a body think what he likes? What's made you grow so strict all of a sudden? Who are you to talk?!"

The priest shook his head reprovingly and walked on.

"Have we far to go?" Makar asked.

"Very far," replied the other dolefully.

"But what shall we eat?" asked Makar worriedly.

"Have you forgotten that you are dead," retorted the priest, turning around,

"and that henceforth you need neither food nor drink."

This was not to Makar's liking at all. Needing no food would be all right if there was nothing to eat, but then why wasn't he left in peace to lie in the snow? But to walk far without eating at all seemed to him a most unreasonable thing to do. And he started to grumble again.

"Do not grumble!" said the priest.

"Very well!" Makar retorted sulkily. But he went on grumbling in his heart and finding fault with everything. "Whoever heard of such a thing? They make a body walk on and on without a morsel to eat!"

He walked on behind the priest, nursing his grudges. They had walked for what seemed a very long time. And though Makar had not seen the dawn yet, it seemed to him that they had been on the road for a whole week or more. They had passed high-peaked mountains and ravines without number, and had left behind them many woods and glades, rivers and lakes. Whenever Makar looked around, the sombre taiga seemed to be receding fast behind them, the high snow-covered mountains fading in the darkness and dipping fast beyond the horizon.

Their way seemed to lead higher and higher. The stars were shining brighter. And presently the setting moon peeped from behind the crest of the hill they were ascending. The moon seemed to be running away from them, but Makar and the priest were close behind it, until it again began to rise above the horizon. They were now walking on the top of a broad, flat plain.

It grew much lighter than it had been during the early part of the night. The reason for this, of course, was that they were much closer to the stars. The stars were as big as apples, and of dazzling brilliance, while the moon was the size of the bottom of a golden cask, and shone like the sun, illuminating the whole plain from end to end.

Each snowflake on the plain was visible. Many roads ran across the plain and all converged towards a singly spot in the east. People of every description, dressed in all kinds of garb, were walking and riding along these roads.

After peering for some time at a man on horseback, Makar suddenly turned off the road and ran after him. "Stop! Stop!" shouted the priest, but Makar did not heed him. He had recognised in the rider a Tatar who had stolen his horse six years back, and had been dead for five years. There he was riding the selfsame skewbald horse, which galloped friskily, raising a cloud of snow, sparkling and scintillating with colour in the starlight. Makar was astonished to see how easily and quickly he had overtaken on foot the fast riding Tatar. The other had stopped his horse at once, when he saw Makar come up with him. Makar flew at him in a rage.

"Come with me to the Elder!" he shouted. "The horse is mine! I know it by the slit in its right ear.... Smart, aren't you? You ride another man's horse while its master walks like a beggar!"

"Wait a minute!" the Tatar responded. "There is no need to go to the Elder. It's your horse, you say? Take it back by all means. The confounded brute! This is the fifth year I've been riding it and I have not moved an inch.... People who go on foot keep leaving me behind—which is a shame for an honest Tatar!"

He had raised his leg to get down from the saddle, when the priest came running up panting for breath and dragged Makar away.

"You wretch! What are you doing? Can't you see that the Tatar wants to cheat you?"

"To be sure, he's cheating me!" Makar cried gesticulating angrily. "The horse was as good as any, real fine horse. They offered me forty roubles for it when it was three years old.... No, fellow, you won't get away with this, if you've spoiled the horse, I shall kill it for the meat, and you will pay me cash down. D'you think you are going to be let off just because you are a Tatar?"

Makar had been working himself up into a fury and shouting on purpose; he was trying to attract a crowd as he had a fear of Tatars. At this point the priest intervened.

"Hush, Makar, hush!" he said. "Have you forgotten that you are dead? What good will the horse do you now? Can't you see you are moving far quicker on foot than the Tatar on horseback? How would you like it, if you had to ride for a thousand years?"

Makar now guessed why the Tatar had been so eager to return, the horse.

"They are shrewd folk!" he thought and turned to the Tatar.

"Very well," he said. "Go ahead and ride, but I intend to go to law about this business, my fellow."

The Tatar pulled down his cap angrily over his eyes, and whipped the horse. The animal pranced up; snow flew up from its hoofs, but it advanced not a step until Makar and the priest started to move.

He spat out angrily and, turning to Makar, said: "Look here, *dogor* (friend), have you a little tobacco to spare? I am dying for a smoke, and I ran out of my own tobacco four years back."

"A dog is your friend, not I!" Makar retorted angrily. "See here, he's stolen my horse and now he asks for my tobacco. I don't care if the deuce takes you, not a bit."

With these words Makar walked off on his own way.

"You were wrong to deny him a small leaf of tobacco," said Father Ivan. "If you had been kinder, the *Toyon* would have forgiven you no less than a hundred sins."

"Why hadn't you told that to me before?" Makar snapped.

"It's too late to teach you now what you ought to have learned from your priests in your lifetime."

He was enraged. What was the use of having priests? You pay your tithes, and they cannot even instruct you when to let a Tatar have a leaf of tobacco in order to receive forgiveness for your sins. It was no joke ... one hundred sins ... all for one leaf! To be sure, that was a good bargain!

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "One leaf will do for us, and I will give four to the Tatar. That will make four hundred sins!"

"Look behind you!" the priest said.

Makar obeyed. Behind them stretched the boundless snowy plain. The Tatar now looked like a mere speck, Makar thought he saw the white dust rise from under the hoofs of his skewbald horse, but presently even that little speck vanished from view.

"Oh, well," Makar remarked, "he'll manage without my tobacco. Look at the way he's ruined the horse, the accursed man!"

"No," said the priest, "he had not ruined the horse but he stole it. Do you not remember the old men saying that you cannot ride far on a stolen horse?"

Makar indeed remembered the old men say so, but as he had frequently seen during his life that the Tatars rode to town on stolen horses he had not put much

faith in their words. Now, however, he had realised that the old men could speak the truth.

He passed many riders in the plain. They all rode as fast as the first. The horses galloped with birdlike speed, the riders strained and sweated. And yet Makar kept overtaking them and leaving them far behind.

Most of the riders were Tatars, but quite a few were native of Chalgan. Some of the latter were riding oxen which they had most likely stolen and urged them on with goads.

Makar cast looks of hate at the Tatars and each time he passed one, it was with the remark that it served him right. But with the men from Chalgan he stopped to chat good-humouredly; for them he felt a kinship though they were thieves. He went even so far as to assist them to drive the animals with a switch he picked up on the way, but the men who were riding always fell behind, and soon faded away into mere specks.

The plain seemed boundless. Despite the many persons on horseback and on foot that they kept leaving behind, the plain appeared to be deserted. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of versts seemed to lie between every one or two travellers.

Among other persons, Makar met an old man he could not recognise, although his face, garb and even his gait seemed to indicate that he was a native of Chalgan. But Makar could not remember ever having met him before. The old fellow wore a threadbare coat, old leather breeches and torn top-boots made of calfskin. He seemed very old, and what was stranger still, he carried on his back an even more ancient old woman whose feet dragged on the ground. The poor old fellow gasped for breath, stumbled under his burden, and leaned heavily on his staff. Makar felt sorry for him. He halted, and so did the old man.

"*Kapse* (speak)," said Makar cordially.

"I've nothing to say," returned the old man.

"What have you heard?"

"Nothing."

"What have you seen?"

"I've seen nothing."

Makar held his tongue for a while, after which he deemed it right to ask the old man who he was and whither he was bound.

After giving his name, the old man told him that many years ago, how many he did not know himself, he had abandoned the village of Chalgan and gone to live on the mountain to save his soul. There he never did a stitch of work, lived on berries and roots, neither ploughed nor sowed, nor ground the corn, nor did he pay any taxes. When he died and appeared before the *Toyon* for judgment, the latter asked him who he was, and what he had been doing. He replied that he lived on the mountain to gain his salvation. "Very well," said the *Toyon*, "but where is your old woman? Go and fetch her." Off he went to fetch her only to find that his old woman had turned into a beggar. There had been no one to provide for her. She had neither house, nor cows, nor bread, and had grown so weak that her legs wouldn't keep her. And so he was obliged to drag her on his back to the *Toyon*.

The old man started to weep, but the old woman kicked him as if he had been a beast of burden, and said in a feeble, cross voice:

"Go on!"

This made Makar feel even sorer for the old man, and he was glad that he had never gone up on that mountain. Had he gone he would have fared even worse,

because his own wife, a hefty and tall woman, was hard to carry. And were she to kick him, as if he were an ox, she would soon drive him to a second death.

Out of pity for him, Makar tried to help the old man by holding up the woman's legs, but he was compelled to let go of them after a few steps for fear of tearing her feet off. And then in the twinkling of an eye the old man vanished with his burden.

As they went on, Makar met no other persons worthy of his attention. They passed thieves, loaded with stolen goods like beasts of burden, and crawling along at a snail's pace; fat Yakut *toyons*, sat rocking on their high saddles, their tall hats reaching into the clouds like spires and by their side trotted and hopped poor workmen, lean and light-footed like hares. A sullen, gory murderer slunk past them with roving eyes. In vain he thrust himself into the snow to wash off the blood stains! The snow immediately turned dark red, while the stains on the slayer stood out more distinctly; there was now wild despair and horror in his look. But he pressed on avoiding the terrified glances of other wayfarers.

The souls of little children hovered in the air like tiny birdies. There were big flocks of them, and no wonder! The coarse food, squalor, the open hearths, and the icy draughts of the yurtas took a toll of them by the hundreds in Chalgan alone. When they caught up with the murderer, they shied away in a whole flock, quite panic-stricken, and long afterwards the rustling of their little wings could be heard in the air.

Makar could not help noting that he moved with considerable speed compared with other travellers, and he lost no time in ascribing this fact to his own goodness.

"Look here, *agabyt* (father)," he said to the priest. "I may have been a little too fond of the bottle in my time, but after all I was a good man.... What do you think? I believe God loves me...."

He eyed the priest closely, wondering whether he could draw him out concerning certain things. But the priest merely said:

"Do not be proud. We'll soon be there, where you will learn for yourself."

Just then Makar noticed that it was less dark in the plain and that it must be dawning. A few rays rose from behind the horizon and they drifted across the sky, extinguishing the bright stars. The moon, too, was blotted out like the stars. The snowbound plain lay wrapped in shadow.

Mists now rose on all sides of the plain, arrayed like a guard of honour.

At one point, in the east, the mists grew lighter and were clad in gold, like warriors.

Then the mists swayed, and the golden warriors bent low.

From behind them the sun rose, settled upon the gilt mountain ridges, and beamed upon the plain flooding it with its dazzling brilliance. And soared the mists now triumphantly in a glorious ring, broke up in the west and, fluttering, drifted off into the heights above.

Makar thought that he heard a marvellous song. It was the very hymn with which the earth greeted the rising sun every day. Only Makar had not paid attention to it before, and this was the first time in all his life that he realised how beautiful the song was.

He stood still listening to it, and refused to go any farther. He could stand there forever listening to it....

Father Ivan touched his arm.

"Let us go in," he said. "We have arrived!"

Only then did Makar behold a great big door which had been concealed by the mists.

He was extremely loath to enter through the door, but there was no backing out—and he obeyed the summons.

VI

They entered a well-appointed, roomy house, and only when he was indoors did Makar realise how frosty it was outside. In the middle of the house was a beautifully adorned hearth. It was made of pure silver, and in it burned a few golden logs which gave off a pleasant warmth that went right through your whole body. The eyes did not smart from the flame of this marvellous hearth, nor did it scorch the skin. It merely made one feel so agreeably warm that Makar would have liked to stand there warming himself for ever. Father Ivan walked up to the hearth and held his hands, numb with cold, towards the fire.

The house had four doors, one was the front door through which they had entered, and the three others seemed to lead to inner rooms. Young men in long white shirts were going in and out of these doors. Makar thought they might be persons working for the *Toyon*. Vaguely he remembered having seen them somewhere, but he could not remember precisely where. Wonderingly he noted that each of them had two large white wings attached to his back, and it occurred to Makar that the *Toyon* must have other workmen besides these, for it was impossible to pass into the thick woods to fell wood with such a pair of wings.

One of the men walked up to the hearth, and turning his back to the fire, struck up a conversation with Father Ivan.

"Speak!"

"I have nothing to say," replied the priest.

"What news is there in the world?"

"I have heard nothing."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing."

After both were silent for a short while, the priest remarked:

"I have brought a man with me."

"From Chalgan?"

"Yes, he comes from Chalgan."

"In that case I must fetch the big scales."

He walked out of one door, while Makar asked the priest what the scales were needed for and why they must be big ones.

"You see," the priest began, a little embarrassed, "the scales are needed to weigh the good and the evil you have done in your life. Where most persons are concerned the good and bad actions weigh about the same, but the inhabitants of Chalgan are so sinful that the *Toyon* ordered special scales to be made for them with a huge balance for weighing their sins."

These words made Makar's heart quail. And his courage faltered.

The serving men reappeared carrying a huge balance. One scale was of gold and very small, the other was of wood and extremely large. Under the latter

yawned a great big hole.

Makar went up to see if the scales were in order, examining them closely. There appeared to be nothing tricky about them. Both scales were on a level, neither outbalancing the other.

He did not quite understand just how the balance was arranged, and would have preferred the familiar *bezmen* he had used all his life and knew when selling or buying how to turn it in his favour.

[A balance consisting of an arm with a hook on which the object to be weighed is attached.— *Tr.*]

"The *Toyon* comes!" said Father Ivan, smoothing his robe.

The middle door opened and the *Toyon* entered. He was a very ancient man, with a flowing silvery beard that reached to his waist. He was clad in rich furs and fabrics such as Makar had never seen, and wore warm boots trimmed with plush, which Makar remembered having seen an old icon-painter wear.

His very first glance at the old *Toyon* told Makar that he was the same old man Makar had seen painted on the church walls. Only he was now without his son, who was most likely away on some household business of his own. A dove flew into the room and, after fluttering for some time, perched on his knee. The old *Toyon* took to stroking the bird as he seated himself on a chair which had been prepared for him.

The old *Toyon* had a kind face, and when Makar felt his heart grow heavy, he looked at that face and drew comfort from it.

His heart had grown heavy because he had suddenly remembered his whole life down to the smallest details, remembering each step of it, each stroke of the axe, each tree he had felled, each deception he had practised, and each glass of vodka he had drunk.

He felt ashamed and frightened. But one glance at the old *Toyon* face gave him new courage. And once he felt this new courage, he hoped to be able to conceal some of his bad deeds.

The old *Toyon* now eyed him and asked who he was, whence he came, what his name and age were.

After Makar had answered the questions, the old *Toyon* asked:

"For what deeds can you account in your life?"

"You know them yourself," retorted Makar. "I dare say, you've got them all recorded."

These words were only a trick Makar used to find out from the *Toyon* if everything was indeed written down.

"Speak up yourself," replied the old *Toyon*.

Makar brightened up again.

He started off by enumerating every kind of work he had done, and though he remembered well every blow of the axe he had struck, every branch he had cut down, and each furrow he had made with the plough, he added on thousands of faggots, hundreds of cartloads of wood, and hundreds of poods of corn sowed.

When he had completed his account, the old *Toyon* told the priest Ivan to fetch the book.

It then dawned on Makar that the priest was the old *Toyon*'s secretary. This angered him greatly because the priest had dropped no hint about this to him.

Father Ivan now brought an enormous book, opened it and began to read.

"Look up the number of faggots," said the old *Toyon*.

The priest looked them up and said sadly:

"He has added as many as thirteen thousand faggots."

"He's lying," Makar shouted truculently. "He can't count right for he's been a drunkard and died an ugly death."

"You had better hold your tongue!" said the old *Toyon*. "Did he charge you unfairly for your weddings or your christenings? Did he extort tithes from you?"

"I won't say he did," replied Makar.

"There you see!" said the old *Toyon*. "As to his fondness for drink, I know of it."

The old *Toyon* was truly angry.

"Read his sins as they are put down in the book," he said. "I no longer trust him, for he is a liar."

Meanwhile the underlings had dropped onto the golden scale the faggots, and the wood, the ploughing—in short all the jobs he had done. There was such a big amount that the golden scale went down, while the wooden one rose so very high that God's young serving men could not reach up to it with their hands and were obliged to fly up and no less than a hundred of them were pulling it down by the rope.

The jobs of this man from Chalgan were heavy indeed!

Father Ivan began reading. He started with the cheating of which there were 21,933 instances. Next the priest proceeded to count the bottles of brandy Makar had drunk—they amounted to four hundred. And as the priest read, Makar saw the wooden scale go down and down reaching to the pit below it.

Aware of how bad things were for him, Makar thought he might improve them, and drawing near scale he tried furtively to keep it up with his foot. But one of the servants caught him doing it and raised quite a row.

"What's happening there?" asked the old *Toyon*.

"He was going to support the scale with his foot," replied the servant.

The *Toyon* turned crossly to Makar.

"I see that you are a cheat, a lazybones and a drunkard! There are debts you have not paid, you owe the priest his tithes, and you have made the *ispravnik* sin by swearing at you!"

It was now to Father Ivan that the *Toyon* addressed himself.

"What man in all Chalgan," he asked, "lays the heaviest load on his horses and drives them the hardest?"

"The Elder of the church," replied Father Ivan. "He carries the mail, and drives the *ispravnik*, too."

The old *Toyon* then said:

"Send this lazy fellow to the Elder. He shall be one of his horses and draw the *ispravnik* till he can work no more.... After that we shall see...."

The old *Toyon* had hardly finished talking when the door opened to let in his son who now seated himself at his right.

"I have heard your verdict," the son said. "I have lived long in the world and know the affairs of the world well. It will be hard on the unfortunate man to be harnessed to drive the *ispravnik*! But ... be it so! Yet perhaps he has something to say for himself. Speak, my poor fellow!"

A very astonishing thing now happened. The very Makar, who in all his life could not utter as many as ten words in a row, suddenly waxed eloquent. He

himself marvelled at the change in him. There now seemed to be two persons: a Makar who spoke, and a Makar who listened to his own words in amazement. He could not believe his ears. His speech flowed smoothly, and he spoke with ardour, one word followed another and then all the words filed up in long neat rows. He was not a bit shy. And if he happened to stumble, he at once regained his confidence and spoke twice as loud. And most important—he felt that his words carried conviction.

The old *Toyon*, who had been cross with him at first, now listened with growing attention, as though assured that Makar was not at all the fool he had appeared to be. At the beginning Father Ivan was aghast and tried to stop Makar by pulling him by the coat-tails, but Makar shook him off and went on speaking. Presently the priest was reassured and listened beamingly to his parishioner setting forth the truth. And he saw that the old *Toyon* was pleased, too, to hear the truth. Even the young serving men in their long shirts and with white wings who worked for the *Toyon* came from their quarters to the doors and listened wonderingly to Makar's speech, nudging one another as they drank in his words.

He began by saying that he had no desire to become a horse of the church Elder. And not because he feared the hard work but because the verdict was unfair. And since it was a wrong verdict, he was not going to obey it—not for anything in the world. Let them do with him what they please—he did not even care if he were given up to the devils. It was unfair to make him drive the *ispravnik*! Nor let them imagine that he feared to be a horse; for if the Elder overworked his horses he fed them with oats. And he who had been overworked all his life, had never been fed oats.

"Who overworked you?" asked the old *Toyon*.

Who? Why, everybody, and all his life long. The village Elders, the foremen, the justices and the *ispravniks* were always after him to pay his taxes and the priests to pay the tithes. Hunger and misery drove him hard; he had suffered from the drought in summer and the bitter frosts in winter; the taiga and the frozen soil yielded him nothing! His life had been like that of cattle which are being driven on and do not know where they are going. Did he know what the priest's sermons in church meant and why he had to pay the tithes? Did he know what had become of his eldest son, who had been taken as a soldier? He did not know where he died, nor in what place his poor bones lay!

They said that he drank much vodka. That was true enough; his heart had ached for the vodka.

"How many bottles did you say?" Makar asked.

"Four hundred," replied the priest after consulting the book.

Very well! But was it real vodka? Three quarters of it was water, and one quarter was vodka in which tobacco had been infused to make it stronger. Therefore three hundred bottles may well be struck off his account.

"Is this true?" asked the old *Toyon* of the priest, and you could see the anger still smouldering in him.

"It is the truth indeed," Father Ivan replied hurriedly.

And Makar continued. He had added thirteen thousand faggots. That may be so! He had made only sixteen thousand. Was that not enough? And mind you, he had made two thousand when his first wife was lying ill ... his heart ached, he longed to sit by his sick wife, but he was obliged to go to work in the taiga.... And there he had wept, his tears freezing to his eyelashes, and the cold and the grief

going to his very heart ... but he went on working.

Soon afterwards his wife died. And he had no money to give her proper burial. He hired himself out to cut wood so that he could pay for his wife's abode in the hereafter. Knowing what dire need he had of the money, the merchant who hired him paid only ten kopecks for each load.... And his dead wife was lying alone in the cold house, while he went on cutting wood and weeping bitterly. Surely these loads of wood were worth five times and even more of their value!

There were tears on the eyes of the old *Toyon*, and Makar now saw the scales waver: the wooden one went up while the golden sank.

Makar went on speaking. They had everything down in their books, they said. Would they then see if he had ever known affection, kindness and joy. Where were his children? If they died young, he mourned and bewailed them, but those who grew up left him to struggle alone against need and poverty. He had grown old alone with his second wife, and had felt the strength failing him, and miserable old age creep upon him. They were alone, as alone as two lonely fir-trees in the steppe, mercilessly exposed to the cruel snowstorms.

"Is that true?" the old *Toyon* asked once again.

And the priest answered:

"It is perfectly true!"

The scales wavered again ... and the old *Toyon* lapsed into thought.

"How is this?" he said. "After all there are pure and just men living on the earth. Their eyes are clear, their faces are radiant, and their garments spotless.... Their hearts are as tender as bounteous soil; they receive the good seed, and bring forth the beautiful, fragrant fruit and flowers, the perfume of which is sweet to me. And you? Look at yourself!"

All eyes were turned on Makar, and he felt ashamed. He knew that his eyes were dim, and his face was dark, his hair and beard were matted, and his clothes torn. He had been thinking of buying a pair of boots before his death, in order to appear at the judgment seat as behooves an upright peasant. But he had always spent the money on drink, and now he stood before the *Toyon* in ragged boots, like the worst of the Yakuts.... He felt utterly wretched.

"Your face is dark," went on the *Toyon*. "Your eyes are dim and your clothes are ragged. And your heart is overgrown with weeds and thorns, and wormwood. That is why I love my own that are just and good, and turn my face away from heathens such as you."

Makar's heart stood still. He felt the disgrace of his own existence. He hung his head, but then suddenly lifted it and was moved to speak again.

Who were these just and good men the *Toyon* spoke of? Were they those who lived in fine palaces on the earth at the same time as Makar had? If so, Makar knew them. Their eyes were bright because they had not shed as many tears as he had, and their faces were radiant because they were bathed in fragrance, and their clean garments had been made by the hands of others.

Makar's head drooped but then he very quickly raised it again.

Did the *Toyon* not see that he, too, had been born like the others—with bright, open eyes, in which heaven and earth were reflected, and with a pure heart which was ready to hearken to all that was beautiful in the world. And if he longed now to hide his miserable and shameful self underground, it was no fault of his ... nor did he know whose fault it was.... The one thing he knew was that there was no patience left in his heart.

VII

Had Makar seen the effect his speech had produced on the old *Toyon*, had he seen that every word he said fell on the golden scale like a weight of lead, he would have restrained the anger of his heart. But he could see nothing of this, for his heart welled with a blind despair.

He looked back on his past life, which had been so wretched. How had he been able to bear that terrible burden? He had borne it because through the darkness flickered a tiny star of hope. Once he had been alive he thought that perhaps a better lot might still be in store for him. But now that he had advanced towards the end, hope, too, was dead....

Darkness now settled upon his soul, and a fury raged in it, like a storm raging in the steppe in the dead of night. He forgot where he was, before whom he stood—forgot everything save the rage in him....

.....
.....

But the old *Toyon* said to him:

"Wait, poor man! You are not on earth.... There is justice for you here."

And Makar was startled out of his despair. He realised that he was being pitied and his heart softened; his miserable life looming before his gaze, from the first to the last day, he was overcome by compassion for himself. He burst into tears....

The old *Toyon* wept, too ... and so did Father Ivan. Tears flowed from the eyes of the young serving men, and they dried them with their white flowing sleeves.

The scales started to swing, with the wooden scale now rising higher and higher!

MAKAR'S DREAM

This story was written in the village of Amga in Yakutia, with the subtitle "A Christmas Tale". It was the writer's first work to appear after his return from exile in 1885. An Amga peasant, Zakhar Tsykunov, in whose house the writer had lodged, served as the prototype for this story's main character