

## 1. The King

When we go up the last tower, all the children, without exception, are trapped. There is nowhere for them to run. Their teachers managed to corral them on the flat grass-covered area. Before that, the children kept catching up with us on the slopes around the castle, chattering and clamouring for attention. 'Hello!' They greeted us on the narrow mountain path by raising their hands, then, somehow they'd manage to circumvent us and move up the path in front of us again. 'Hello!' They thought I was a foreigner, not just the children but their breathless teachers too. Poor things. They were dressed up for a day out and could hardly walk on their high heels. They tried to reach those at the front by calling out in an attempt to make them wait. They may live to regret their excursion to the Khornabuji Fortress, especially given the numbers of children they have to supervise, who are running all over the top of the mountain and may fall somewhere. The teachers shout at them, cajole them, threaten them. It's all in vain. Would you be able to catch up with them? Could you possibly control them?

There's nowhere further for us to go up, so we settle down nearby at the edge of a small courtyard. I remove every item from my body in turn. Tripod, telescope, field glasses and two cameras. I have nothing of my own with me apart from a bottle of water and my Canon. The rest belongs to my old Englishman and is here for his entertainment. He has managed to climb up. I knew he would make the ascent with difficulty, resting every so often, clutching the dry grass and thorny bushes. It was a puzzle how he had any strength in the stick-like legs, dried-up like prunes, which stuck out from his shorts. I don't know, but I knew that he would have made the climb like he had with all the other climbs over the last ten days. He had to get up the hills because this is a jagged, hilly country, and if you want to see something you must climb up high.

We spread out our stuff. The children are more interested in the telescope set up on a tripod than in the story their teacher is telling them. Also, now, they have nowhere to run to.

'What kind of bird is that?' The Englishman stretches his arm up to the sky and passes me the field glasses. He's still out of breath.

'It's a booted eagle. I don't need field glasses, I can recognize it. I've seen it here many times.

'You're right ... it looks like it.' Of course I'm right! The children can't wait to find out what we are looking at with our field glasses and telescope and what we are looking for. I'm sick and tired of watching. I would rather lie down nearby and have a nap. It's sunny, it's neither cold or hot. Somewhere, not far away, there's a sound of rattling. The Alazani valley spreads out down below and there's the voice of the teacher droning on, telling the children how the land is watered by the blood of the ancestors. The Georgian nation has paid very high price for keeping its beliefs, customs and traditions. There are three teachers. One is telling a story and the two others are shushing the children. They wheeze in a peculiar way every time a wave of fidgeting or whispering passes through the pupils. King Gorgasali, King Tamar, Saakadze are well-known historical characters but also, apparently, a King Teimuraz the first imprisoned the heads of the Javakhishvilis' family in the Khornabudja Fortress. I didn't know that. I wonder what they'd done wrong. Then there were the Lekis with their kidnapping, the heroic King Erekle, the brave army at the front in Kisik, talk of an evil Kakheti Lord...

And here we are, somewhere, very close by, a falcon called. The Englishman glanced at me in such a way that I understand that he recognized the call. He's not completely stupid, but in the business of bird watching, he's nevertheless a novice, a dilettante. He is a beginner. I've had the chance to meet experts in the profession and was honoured to be their guide. It takes many years to achieve that level. The Englishman won't manage it, he doesn't have enough time. It was simply that when he retired he found a hobby for himself, equipped himself with Swarovski field glasses and a telescope and occupied his free time. He likes to talk about his past more than about birds and if he weren't such a chatterbox, I would think that he was on some kind of mission and bird watching was his cover. But no, he really enjoys bird watching and also examining the broken pieces of this country. He's spent his whole lifetime breaking places into pieces. He's even responsible for putting in one brick, or more precisely he pulled one brick off, and he's very proud of it. 'A small pawn in a big game' is how he introduced himself to me approximately ten days ago.

We are unable to find the peregrine falcon. We can hear him calling from beneath us. He must be around here somewhere on the limestone crags of the Khornabuji Fortress. Their nest is nearby too, along the mountain range, on the slopes of Eagle Gorge. In spring, when they are feeding their chicks, there's nothing better than to watch the falcons circling around their own nest.

The children and teachers are already leaving the area. The teachers try to avoid repeating their earlier mistake and line the children up in a row in order to lead them down in an orderly manner. The first teacher, the story-teller goes down first with the assistance of a huge boy and warns everybody not to go ahead of him. The girls pass us with a total lack of interest, while the boys' eyes are glued to the field glasses and the telescope set on the tripod. When I was a child, the large pair of field glasses kept in the table drawer was a magical object for me. The table itself was magic as it held the whole world, at that stage unknown to me, in its drawers. I have the feeling that I began to understand the world through gravitational forces, because the first magical object I remember was a magnet. I found the horseshoe-shaped magnet in a drawer which I pulled open with difficulty and it attracted clusters of nails that were hard to pull off. When it was attracted to the fridge door it made a dull thud. But on the other hand it would not stick to the aluminium handle of the same fridge. My interest in gravitational forces was followed by a fascination with electricity. I would secretly switch on a silver torch, extracted from another drawer, under the blankets at night. Finally, there was that 'shortening of distance' with an old pair of field glasses in a leather case and watching sparrows on the neighbour's window sill and washing line. All this was accompanied by the smell, the smell which nestled in the massive drawer of the table which enabled me to perceive the perceivable world.

The table is still in its old place, I don't know where the magnet and torch ended up. The smell too was lost long ago too, but my field glasses, not presentable here alongside the Swarovski ones, are here, in the glove department of my Land Rover, parked at the foot of Khornabudja Mountain. My genuine field glasses live in the same leather case. Yes, they are genuine because the world of the Swarovski fake is more colourful and beautiful than real life. And mine are truly real, old and never to be exchanged for anything.

'Will you tell me something about this fortress?'

Since there isn't a single bird to be seen in the clear sky, I have to tell the story of the fortress, at least for medicinal reasons. The Englishman isn't an ordinary customer. Birdwatchers are different people. They want nothing but birds, if worse comes to worse, they don't mind looking at animals. They climb Vardzia Mountain only in the hope of seeing wall creepers and blue cliff thrushes. At the Gareji Monastery, they won't ask anything about the age of the ancient icons or their origin, all they want is to watch cliff sparrows, or griffins and vultures bobbing in the sky. But my Englishman is different and it is better that I tell him a story rather than him to start talking.

'On the way here we saw some caves. One of them still had an iron door. According to the legend, the local King kept prisoners there.'

'And in which century did all this happen?'

'The twentieth...'

I've managed to surprise him; he takes the field glasses away from his eyes and stares at me. He wants to know whether or not I'm joking.

'I can't remember the exact dates but all this happened during the nineties in the twentieth century. In the first half of the nineties. Do you remember the man we met in the early morning hours in the Dedoplistskaro market?'

The Englishman nods. 'It was morning and yet he looked drunk.'

'Yes, he was drunk and even invited us to drink with him. He's an alcoholic. I think he must be a very unhappy man. Do you know what his nickname is? The King. This man once was a king. He wanted to be a king. The Man Who Would Be King.'

Let me quote Kipling, the Englishman likes that sort of thing. He was the first to mention the Great Game, in which he, himself, participated. At the time, I pretended not to notice or understand. But of course I noticed everything! 'Pony is already well trained to participate in the game!' How could I forget? It's just that that I don't think anyone ever has taught my Englishman the art of hypnosis or the art of reincarnation, and no one's ever put a small nickel-covered revolver into his hand.

The Great Game was something else in his era. It was no longer the time of an Irish Hindhu boy and Lawrence of Arabia. There was a war which was not a war at all, that's why it was called the Cold War and there were dull warriors in that war and, yes, I'm entitled to make one of them raise his eyebrow in surprise. Indeed, I love Kipling; I think of him and feel sorry for him just as I feel sorry for everyone I love. I think imperialism never gave birth to anything as good as him.

'It would be a funny story if it hadn't ended so tragically. The thing is, one winter this man really did stay in this fortress, he was called a king, and like a true monarch, he was surrounded by a crowd of sycophants and jesters. He even had a queen sitting next to him. That was a strange story, fitting for those strange times. It's very hard to describe what was going on back then, but I know for sure that he would never have become a king under any other circumstances, or at different time. Now, he's only got his nickname left, as a reminder of that crazy period, when criminality was unleashed in both villages and the cities. Only, the way it was unleashed locally was something else, it was even more grotesque.

He had a father who was rich and powerful, different, a man of great potential. He was far too big a personality for this area and certainly for his son, who probably felt oppressed by him. In those years, that man had lots of affairs to deal with. He expropriated everything within reach. At that time, anyone who was a risk-taker and had the energy could produce documents to prove legal possession of anything left unattended such as land, equipment, real estate or any other objects. That man was like that. He fought and he won and eliminated any opponents, sometimes literally too. He moved between Tbilisi and other big towns. In other words he had to keep on the move, and I don't know for sure where and why he had to when his son discovered where he kept his money. In Georgian, we say 'moneys' in the plural. The kind of money that man had we call 'moneys'.

This story is about money that was easily come by. It's also a story about boredom, and I think fear too. There was something fatalistic about all the things the King did.