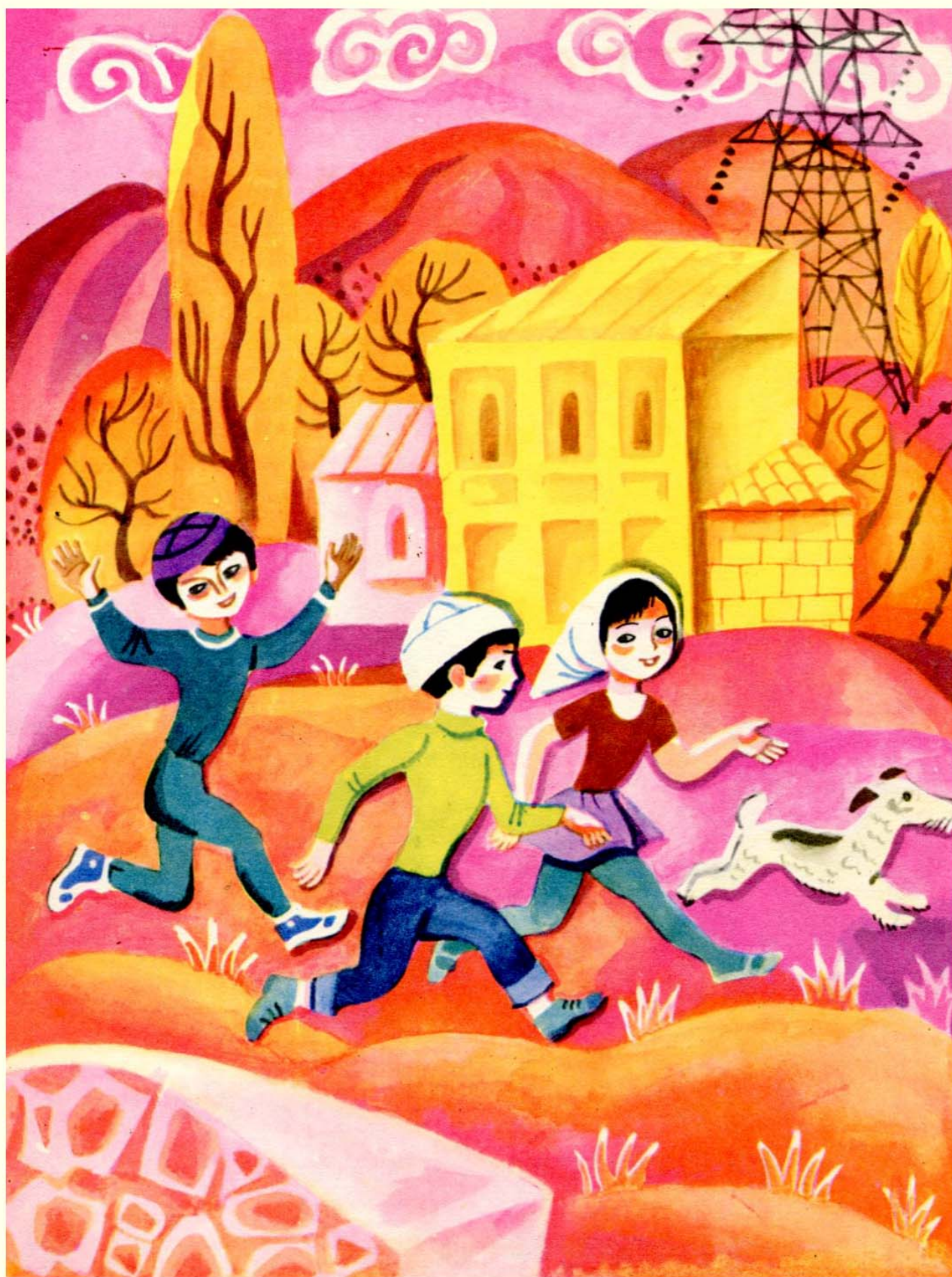


OTTIA IOSELIANI



LEFT IN CHARGE



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LEFT IN CHARGE







Left in charge

Mummy had put on her smart dress with flowers and Daddy his new suit and they had gone to town.

Granny did not have a smart dress with flowers or a suit, so she stayed at home.

Gocha had a new shirt and new shorts; you might have thought that he could have gone to town too, but Daddy had said:

"Gocha will stay with Gran and pick grass for the calf. We mustn't let the calf starve."

"Or the kid either," said Mummy.

"The birds will try and steal the grapes from the vineyard," Daddy reminded him. "Gocha will chase them away and at the same time he can feed the cock and the ducks."

Then Mummy said:

"Gocha and I saw a toad in the vegetable patch. Gocha will keep an eye on it and see it doesn't run away."

Then Daddy and Mummy went away.

Granny lay down on the divan and went to sleep.

Gocha was left in charge.



"Mo-oo-oo!" the calf lowed from the farm-yard outside. "Ah-ha, you want some grass?" Gocha guessed, "Mummy and Daddy have gone away. I'll go and get some grass for you."

Gocha slung a basket over his shoulder and set out across the yard. But the kid, who was tied to the fence, pulled at its rope and set up an insistent bleat:

"Ba-a-a! Wha-a-a-t abou-ou-out me-ee-ee?"

"Ah-ha, you want fresh leaves!" Gocha dumped his basket, went back to the house, took another, flat basket and set out to look for leaves. On the wall the cock crowed.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

"You're feeling peckish!" Gocha thought and put the flat basket down. "I'll bring you lots and lots of corn."

"Hoo-hoo-hoo-rah!" The cock's eyes were popping with expectation. Gocha ran home and fetched a bowl of corn.

The geese opened their flat yellow bills pitifully:

"Gaggle-gaggle! Gaggle-gaggle!"

"I expect you're too hot," Gocha decided. "I'll go and get water from the well straight away. Just wait a moment!"

Gocha trotted off and came back with a bucket on a long length of rope.

At that moment the ducks suddenly came quacking out and hissed:

"Sh-sh-sh!"

Gocha listened.

From the vineyard he could hear the robbers' whistling of birds.

"The birds are eating all the grapes. I must go and chase them away!" And Gocha rushed off to the vineyard. To get there he had to cross the vegetable patch. He did not look in but he heard the toad croaking.

"You're probably thinking of running away," thought Gocha, "but I've got my eye on you."

Gocha clambered through the fence into the vegetable patch. On the vegetable patch grew cabbage, salad, spring onions, celery, parsley and dill. All this was very green and nowhere could Gocha find the toad, who was green too....

After this he went back to the house and lay down on the divan next to Granny.

"Oh, what a lot there is to do about the house!"

The dog in the yard barked hoarsely.

"What's the matter?" Granny opened her eyes.

Gocha ran out onto the veranda. The next door pig, grunting busily, was pushing the basket, Gocha had left, all around their yard.

Its spotted piglet had turned the bowl with the corn upside down and was now trying to put it right way round again. The other piglets had pushed the bucket for clean water into the mud and got the rope all covered with dung. The most lively and cunning of them had got right inside the bucket and was making a great clatter.

Granny came out onto the veranda and saw what had happened.

In the evening, as the hot sun was setting behind the mountains, Mummy and Daddy came home. They saw that the birds had been pecking at the grapes. But that was only the beginning of it. Mummy noticed that the toad had disappeared from the vegetable patch and that the well-bucket was dirty and dented. Gocha was thoroughly ashamed. But no one blamed him. Even the calf, even the impatient little kid and the noisy cock kept quiet.

Only the stately ducks waddled out across the yard and, just as though they were imploring everyone not to give Gocha away, they whispered:

"Sh-sh-sh ... keep quiet."





THE OATH

Gia loved his mother very much and all the children round about knew this. So when Gia swore "by Mummy", Nana believed him. She even believed the pointless story that he had jumped into the water from a cliff eighteen metres high.

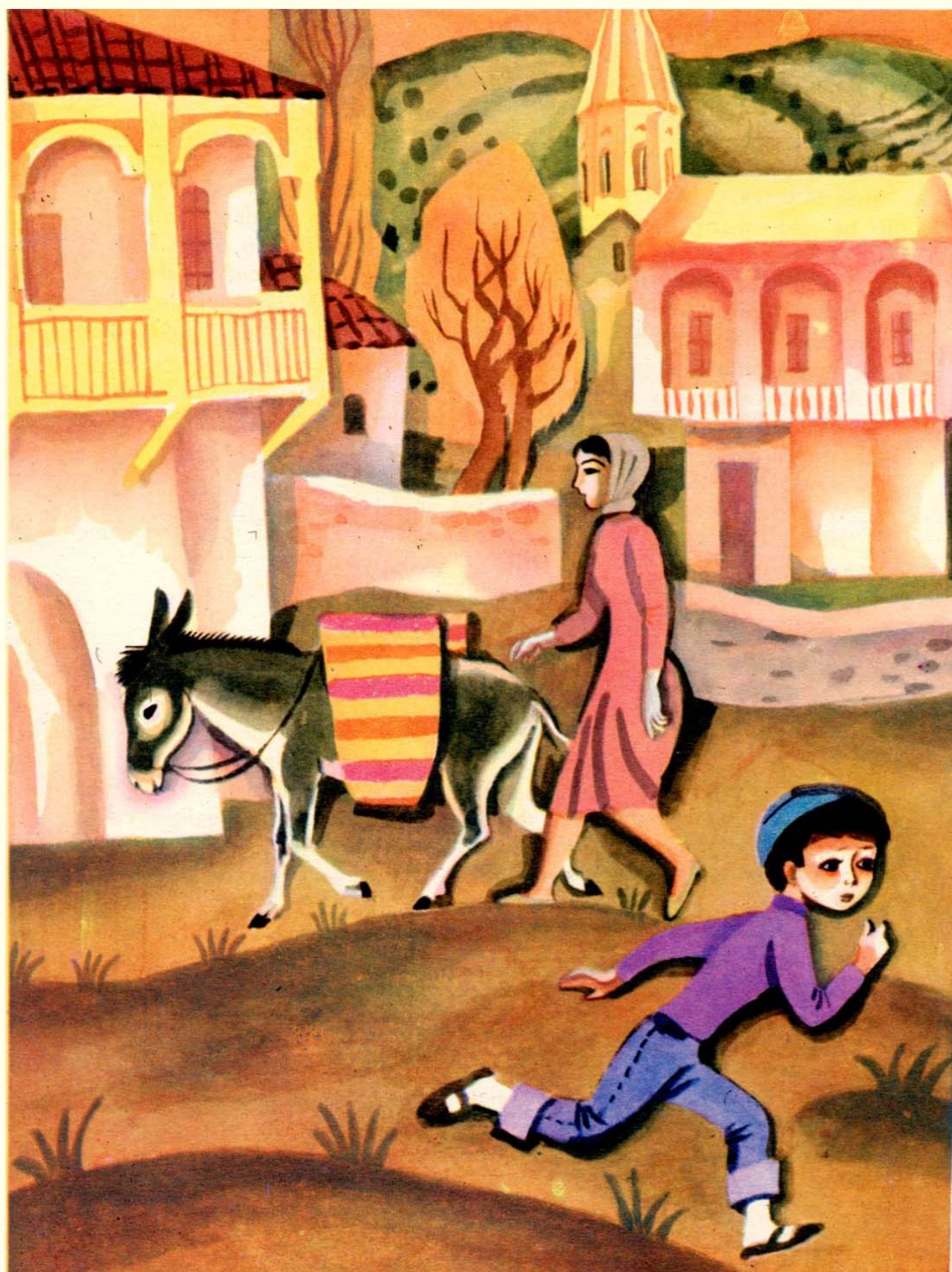
It was not as if Gia were one of those chatterboxes who swear by their mother every other minute, but what could he do when Nana simply would not believe him otherwise. "You can't even swim," she insisted. This happened to be true and so, to convince Nana, he had had to swear.

Nana had believed him, but....

But, when he came home, Gia saw that his mother was unwell.

Yes, indeed! Gia's mother had a high temperature, her head ached and she had a pain in her side.

"Mama," Gia ran up to hug her. "What's wrong with you?"



"Don't come too close, sonny. I've got a temperature."

"I mustn't come close?"

"No. I've taken a chill. I was caught in the rain and got wet through."

Gia slipped quietly out of Mama's room, stopped in the doorway and burst into tears. Gia did not like crying, but just then he could not help it: he had sworn, had said something untrue, and suddenly....

No, really, eighteen metres—that was too much. To begin with he had meant to make it a good round figure and say twenty, but he had refrained. Perhaps he should make it seventeen?... Or perhaps, if he said the cliff had only been about fifteen metres high, maybe then Mummy would feel better.

As fast as his legs would carry him, Gia ran down the stairs, kicked the dog who happened to get underfoot, almost turned a somersault on the stile and tore across the road to Nana's garden.

"Nana! Nana!"

"What's happened?" Nana sounded surprised.

"Nana, I've remembered.... It had quite gone out of my head somehow, but now I've remembered...."

"What are you talking about, Gia?"

"About how I jumped into the river...."

"Well, what about it?"

"It wasn't eighteen metres, it was fourteen."

When Gia got back home he saw his father, standing by his mother and the doctor in a white overall. Gia quietly shut the door.

What if the doctor had found out all about it? Had found out why Mummy was ill? How would Gia ever look her in the eyes again? What would his father say?... And the doctor?... The doctor might even tell other people why Gia's mother had got ill.

Of course, the doctor was bound to guess everything. That's why he was a doctor.

If only Gia had said that the cliff was twelve metres high or even seven. Seven was really quite possible.... How had it slipped out.... But what could he do about it now?

Gia went back to the door on tip-toe and peeped into the room:

The doctor was listening to Mummy's breathing and frowning anxiously.

Gia turned round and made helter-skelter for the stairs, slid down the banister, leapt off onto the ground, and ran.



If only he had time to tell Nana that the cliff had really been quite small, no more than seven metres, while the doctor was still making his examination, then perhaps everything would be all right.

"Nana! Nana!"

"Come in, Gia!" Nana called from the kitchen.

"I can't. Come here! Quickly, Nana! I must tell you something...."

Nana hurried to meet him but, without waiting for her, Gia shouted:

"Nana, it was only seven metres! Don't think it was any more than seven."

"No more?"

"No, Nana! No! Well, perhaps just a little teeny-weeny bit...."

"And you said—fourteen."

"No, Nana, seven. Seven metres!" And Gia turned for home.

"Wait, Gia!"

"Can't...."

His father had gone to the chemist, walking with the doctor. Mama was either asleep or in a doze: she did not notice the return of Gia. Perhaps she was worse or perhaps the doctor had asked her: "What is your son's name?"

"Gia."

"Hmm ... well, you see, your son Gia swore by you something that wasn't true. He said he'd jumped into the water from a seven-metre cliff."

"He couldn't have told a lie."

"No really, doctor! Our little boy never tells lies," his father would have said in her support.

"Well he did this time."

And now Mummy was ill, really ill. How would it all end?

This time Gia jumped down the whole flight of steps and, running into Nana's yard, yelled at the top of his voice so, that everyone all round could hear him.

"Na-na! Na-na!"

Nana was on the balcony.

"Nana! It was all a fib! I never did jump off a cliff."

When he got back home, Gia went boldly into the room where Mummy was and stood by her bed. Mummy opened her eyes and smiled at her son.

No, it was better not to tell lies, then there was no need to swear.

Once, for instance, Gia had told Nana that their retriever had had eight puppies. Eight is quite a lot but Nana had believed him without any swearing, because there really had been eight puppies.

Nana believed also that Gia had planted three pear trees. His father had brought them and Gia had planted them. Nana believed that Gia's silk-worms had made cocoons and one of the cocoons had got stuck to the ceiling and butterfly had come out. The butterfly looked like any other butterfly, but it had not been able to fly. Nana had not seen any of all this with her own eyes, but she had believed Gia when he told her about them.

Evidently, if you tell the truth, you simply don't need to swear by anything. Yes ... he understood now, that's the way things are....





In the shady green village

Somewhere in the world there is a village where, even in summer, the broad shadows of the trees spread quiet and freshness. In this village there lived a kind-hearted boy Manuchar, a sweet little girl Irina, merry, freckled Vazha and tiny Teona.

Usually Manuchar was busy carving bows and arrows; Irina sewed clothes for her dolls from bright-coloured rags, Vazha sat and smiled and tiny Teona laughed and cooed.

Near the garden where they played there flowed a stream. Instead of a bridge a round log was laid across the stream. And along the bank of the stream snow-white geese used to waddle....

Once, when the green, cool summer had come, a boy in a sailor-hat called Koté came to the village from the big town.

Manuchar was pleased, Irina was pleased, and so were Vazha and little Teona.

The new boy kept putting his hat straight and rising on his toes to make his new brown shoes squeak. The toes of the shoes, they noticed, were not the tiniest bit scratched.

On the first day he fired a shot from a toy gun, then slung it over his shoulder and asked:



"Well? How was that? Good?"
 "Splendid!" said kind-hearted Manuchar.
 "I nearly got a fright!" said Irina.
 Vazha smiled and Teona laughed.
 "Some time I'll teach you how to shoot...."
 Then Koté threw up a ball in a net.
 "And do you like my ball?"
 "Very much," said Manuchar.
 "It's a fine ball," Irina agreed.
 "Pretty," smiled Vazha.
 "A big ball," laughed Teona.
 "Some time I'll let you have a turn with it...."
 Then the boy in the sailor-hat quietly wound up a car and put it on the floor. Roaring, it traversed the veranda.
 "Like a real car!" said Manuchar.
 "Yes, yes! Just like a real one!" agreed Irina....
 "Look! It's even got a steering wheel!" smiled Vazha.
 "The wheels go round!" laughed Teona.
 Koté straightened his hat, pocketed the car and said:
 "Some time I'll teach you how to drive that car...."
 For several days Koté kept shooting with his gun, and playing with his ball, and the clockwork car.
 Then one day he came out into the garden and said:
 "Now let's play!"
 "Let's!" Manuchar agreed.
 "Let's play tip-cat," smiled Vazha.
 Manuchar quickly carved a big stick to hit with. Vazha found a stick from a kizil bush and cut an excellent "cat". Irina and little Teona were right there, but Koté had disappeared. They waited and waited and suddenly heard the sound of an axe. They ran to the sound and saw that Koté had laid a dry branch over an old twisted root and was whacking at it with an axe, but was quite unable to chop it in two.
 Manuchar was surprised, Irina was astonished, Vazha smiled and Teona laughed: why ever did he need so many "cats"?
 But Koté threw away the axe and said:
 "Let's play tip-cat some other time. Let's go down to the stream."
 "All right!" the children agreed.
 The stream was noisy, washing over stones and gurgling between moss-covered boulders. The snow-white geese waddled along the bank.
 Behind the gully was a wide meadow. In the meadow a herd of cows were grazing.
 The only way across the stream was by the log. And the log was round with no rails.

Manuchar took Teona by the hand. Teona took Irina, Irina took Vazha. Manuchar went on ahead and while he was clambering over onto the other side, Vazha stood on the bank and supported them all. When Manuchar was safely across, Vazha stepped onto the log and smiled at Koté.

"Give me your hand...."

Koté straightened his sailor-hat.

"I don't need a hand."

"Take off your shoes," Manuchar advised him.

"You'll slip," said Irina.

But Koté, his yellow shoes squeaking, was already moving towards them.

From the other end Manuchar stepped out onto the log; holding Irina's hand he stretched out to help the guest. Koté shook his head as though to say: I don't need any help from you. But just at that moment his shoes with their unscratched toes slipped on the log. Koté bent first this way, then that, but there were no railings, so he fell. Happily there were no stones just under the bridge, so Koté fell with a soft splash into the water weed.

Kind-hearted Manuchar felt very sorry for him, sweet Irina raised her hands to her cheeks, Vazha did not smile and even Teona did not laugh.

Manuchar, and Vazha after him, jumped down into the gully.

Irina took Vazha's hand, Teona seized Irina round the waste and they pulled out muddy Koté like the huge turnip in the story.

And the geese, the snow-white geese wandered along the bank and every now and again let out a loud gaggle. Sometimes they would whisper in one another's ear, flap their wings and gaggle again....

All this happened in the village where all summer long it is green and cool in the shade of the huge trees.





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