ONE

KHORKOM

1895–1910

GORKY OFTEN TALKED about his childhood: the beautiful lake on whose banks his village used to stand, its poplar trees like sentinels, the distant mountains whose shoulders supported the sky. Gradually his stories built up into something not quite real, and he always chose a moment when his audience was hardly listening: pupils busy at their work, or friends talking politics in the local café. Nobody kept notes. If anyone tried, Gorky broke off. A note-taker was to him a "book-keeper." Words were free when spoken, but to write them down imprisoned them. To be held to his words made him instantly furious.

In 1936, contributing to a book about some murals painted for the Federal Art Project, he produced a rare written piece. It starts with a description of his family house back in Turkey:

> The walls of the house were made of clay blocks, deprived of all detail, with a roof of rude timber.
>
> It was here, in my childhood, that I witnessed, for the first time, that most poetic of operations—the elevation of the object. This was a structural substitute for a calendar.
>
> In this culture, the seasons manifested themselves, therefore there was no need, with the exception of the Lental period, for a formal calendar. The peo-

> ple, with the imagery of their extravagantly tender, almost innocently direct concept of Space and Time, conceived of the following:
>
> In the ceiling was a round aperture to permit the emission of smoke. Over it was placed a wooden cross from which was suspended by a string an onion into which seven feathers had been plunged. As each Sunday elapsed, a feather was removed, thus denoting the passage of Time.
>
> As I have mentioned above, through these elevated objects, floating feather and onion, was revealed to me, for the first time, the marvel of making the common—the uncommon!

The "elevation of the object" was an idea put forth by the French painter Fernand Léger: the artist casually chooses an object and "elevates" it to a higher plane. It was typical of Gorky that he saw an actual object raised on high, rather than a metaphysical transformation imposed by the artist on any found object. It was also typical that a childhood memory should take precedence over a more recent one. He carried his childhood perpetually with him, and its values were forcibly imposed upon the present. "Extravagantly tender" and "almost innocently direct" were expressions he often used, imbued with a deep emotional charge. Tenderness: the ability to make yourself ever more receptive to the outside world. Innocence: that quality which could never be contrived in a painting, but which had to be there.

Arshile Gorky was born Vostanig Adoian, the son of a poor farmer who lived in the village of Khorkom on Lake Van, in eastern Turkey. The house had been built by its owners, and was many times rebuilt after earthquakes or the attacks of Kurds or Turks. The roof was supported by poles of poplar cut from trees that grew on the shore. The ceiling consisted of interlaced branches, some with their leaves still on them, now dried and yellowed from years of smoke. On top of that, there was a thin layer of lakeside mud. In summer the women of the house used to spread apricots out to dry on this surface, shielding them with a ring of prickly bushes so that the goats wouldn't climb up and eat them. Gorky's expression for a man in a nervous state was "He has goats on his roof." An unlikely predicament in Manhattan, but in Khorkom it would have been enough to make anyone fretful.

Khorkom was built near the mouth of the Khoshab river, which flowed into the southeast corner of the lake. The buildings of mud and stones flanked paths running parallel to the river, each family separated from the next by sheep pens and enclosed orchards, wherein a few fruit trees were pruned to a certain height by the teeth of the ubiquitous goats. During the few summer months, everyone lived outside to absorb as much sunlight as possible. The fields were plowed in the autumn and sown with winter wheat. As the weather became colder, the animals were brought into the barns flanking the houses, and their warm breath filtered around the doorways in patient

Lake Van, with the island and monastery of Akhtamar in the foreground. The village of Khorkom, Gorky's birthplace, lay on the coast to the left, and the monastery of Chara-han Surp Nishan, where Gorky's mother was born, lay beneath the steep slopes of Mount Ardoz in the center of the photo.

sighs. In winter the snow weighed down the roof. The side rooms where they lived, one room for each family, were abandoned and everyone slept around the hearth at night, their feet toward the embers like spokes converging on the hub of a wheel.

The hearth, a clay vessel called a *tonir* set into the ground, was the center of the house, and the Armenians retained a pre-Christian reverence for fire and for the sun. There was nothing to do in the long winter months but listen to the traveling storyteller, who earned his keep by relaying gossip from the neighboring villages and reciting long epic poems about fiery steeds, whose hooves struck sparks when they pawed the earth, and young heroes of incredible strength and carefree courage. Not many villagers of the generation preceding Gorky's could read or write, but some could recite long passages of verse by heart. A child could doze off by the *tonir* and wake up hours later, and the storyteller would still be reciting.

"It was a simple life," a cousin of Gorky's told me, and when I protested, what about the Turks, the persecutions, the massacres, she smiled and went on talking about the peaceful moments. She, too, recalled its "innocence." Remembering the Adoian front door opposite, Arax Melikian thought that the family must have made some money at some point, for on either side of the

door were two windows of real glass. The village school at Ishkhanikom had no glass in its windows, nor did the library at Akhtamar, the monastery which lay on an island a few miles due west of Khorkom. A British visitor in the 1880s noticed that the monks used oiled manuscripts in place of glass to let in the light. Akhtamar was an important see of the Armenian Gregorian Church, and its buildings are still among the most beautiful of eastern Turkey. Low reliefs of fruits and vines are carved into its warm limestone exterior, surrounded by the peaceful serenity of the lake.

The Armenians of eastern Turkey shared the lands where they lived with Kurds, who since the 1880s had been encouraged to take over their houses and fields. The displacement took place spasmodically, and many of the nomadic Kurds resented the pressure placed on them to give up their pastoral existence and become farmers. Left to themselves, the two sides often came to an agreement whereby a local Kurdish leader gave the Armenian villagers protection in return for tribute. Some villages fared better than others in this respect. Khorkom had no Kurdish inhabitants. On the other hand Vostan, the nearest agricultural center south of Khorkom, was in the process of becoming, by force, an exclusively Kurdish town during Gorky's childhood.

The Turks put more trust in the Kurds than in the Armenians for religious reasons, but the Kurdish idea of Islam involved many strange beliefs borrowed from other faiths. Outside Vostan, for instance, at the little monastery of Charahan Surp Nishan, where Gorky's mother was born, the nearby Kurds revered the Christian saints as their own. Gorky's maternal uncles Aharon and Moses, who often visited Surp Nishan, counted Kurds among their friends. In spite of their persecution at the hands of the Kurds, many Armenians of Van, including Gorky, remembered them not with hatred, but with a certain admiration.

Gorky's childhood was shaped by two disasters. The first was the massacres of 1896, during which his mother and father both lost their first spouses. Had it not been for this tragedy, they would never have met. The second was the genocide of 1915, during which the entire Armenian population was either driven out of the country or killed. Kurds took a leading part in the slaughter on both these occasions, but it was clear to both sides that their participation was dictated from above.

Over the previous century, a pattern had evolved. Whenever a Christian minority in some other part of the Turkish Empire had succeeded in winning its freedom, the authorities would decide to punish those Christians still living within the confines of Anatolia. An increase in acts of banditry by Kurds on Armenians was the first sign that matters were deteriorating. Resistance in such cases only made things worse. As the official report would subsequently put it, an "incident" had taken place, but the Turkish army had succeeded in

restoring "peace and tranquility." The reality behind these bland words was usually terrible.

In 1895, the Catholicos of Akhtamar described in a letter the grave situation building up south of the lake. "The country has been devastated; many of the villages are in ruins. Here and there you find a few half-ruined churches and many graveyards, which are often used by the Kurds as farms and gardens." They had seized a field belonging to the monastery of Charahan Surp Nishan. "There is no monastery, either ruined, deserted, or occupied which is not, directly or indirectly, under the influence of some Kurd."

The letter mentions Gorky's birthplace. "The villages of Khorkom, Kiushk, and Ishkhanikume have been so much oppressed by the Turks of Artamed, that the inhabitants are already planning to move away." Khorkom, Khiosk, and Ishkhanikom were adjacent villages along the bank of the Khoshab river; Artamid lay on the lake road to Van City. "In 1893, in Khorkom, a barn belonging to Nishan Der Simon was burned, and the year following, all the wheat of Mardiros Yaghmainyan in the same village."

The British vice-consul in Van wrote that in the Shadagh region south of the lake, the situation was even worse. There, the Armenians were living under "a regime of organized brigandage of the worst and most intolerable description." A captain of the Kurdish irregular cavalry was constantly provoking them. He had carved the Christian cross on the back of a dog and let it loose in a village, hoping to instigate a riot. He was known to have murdered at least six Armenians of Shadagh with his own hands.

Several months before the massacres of 1896, the Armenians who had been working in Istanbul were told to return to their villages. It was not easy to travel such great distances without being robbed, and the journey was hard. When Arax's father, Dikran Melikian, arrived back, he found that the village had just been sacked. All the men had been assembled in one place, he was told, and offered a chance to change their religion. When they had refused, they were killed. Gorky's uncle Vartan, who had arrived back from Istanbul only a few days before him, had been found dead under a heap of corpses. There was no mark on him: he had died of fright or suffocation. As night fell, Dikran looked around for a place where he could sleep. Beds were broken, blankets and pots and pans had been stolen, sheep driven away. Eventually he found an old blanket with a hole in it. As he lay down to sleep, he used his soft felt cap to plug the hole.

Dikran had arrived back just a few days after the tragedy, yet everyone was already hard at work. After repairing the damaged houses, the villagers went off to search for the stolen animals. One heard from a friend: Oh, I saw your sheep with a Kurd at such-and-such a place. And then one walked, talked.

Sometimes the Kurds gave the animals back, especially if one handed over a little money.

Everything had happened before. And it would happen again. There had been massacres in the time of grandparents, great-grandparents, as far back as anyone could remember. Over the centuries, a strategy for recovery had evolved. Across the country, the priests and village elders would arrange marriages between the survivors. At a church celebrating the name day of a saint, the visiting village priests and the elders sat in the courtyard after the ceremony and said: That man comes from a good family and has one child; and she, too, has two children. They will surely do well together. And so it would be arranged. In such circumstances, the feelings of those involved were not the prime concern. Often the bride and groom met for the first time at the altar.

One such marriage was that of Sedrak Adoian of Khorkom, a widower in his late thirties with a seven-year-old son called Hagop, to Shushan der Marderosian, a widow aged sixteen or so, with two small daughters.

Gorky's mother, Shushan, was a strong-willed woman of medium height, with clear, expressive eyes. An English cleric who visited the area described in these words the Armenians who lived to the west of the lake: "They had the frank and direct look which we are accustomed to see only in children, and were quick to detect and resent evil, even with violence, as the intruder would find to his cost." This observation fits in with what is known of Gorky's mother. Forthright, but also utterly honest, detesting any devious act, Shushan der Marderosian had a powerful character and was immovable if crossed.

Shushan's late husband had come from the mountains of Shadagh, south of the lake. Her father had been a priest, and she was born at the monastery of Surp Nishan, southwest of Khorkom. Her father had also been killed in the massacres, outside the church in Van City where he had been serving at the time. In a dark moment, Gorky told his second wife that his grandfather had been crucified on the door of his own church.

Shushan had three brothers: Moses, Aharon, and Nishan. The elder two were placed in the American orphanage in Van after their father's death, while Shushan went back to her mother at the family monastery. Her marriage to Sedrak must have been arranged a year or two later. She had no say in the matter, and there was a condition attached: she would have to leave one of her daughters behind. Thus her elder daughter Sima was sent to an orphanage in Van, where a year or two later the child died. Shushan had even less control over her children's destiny than she had over her own. Had she borne sons to her first husband, they would have stayed behind with his family in Shadagh, where they would have been brought up by their paternal grandmother until they were old enough to cultivate their father's land, inherit it, and continue the line.

Armenian peasant women from Lake Van with their different aprons. Armenian women married young, and it was not uncommon for a bride of sixteen to have two children, as did Gorky's mother.

Shushan's eldest daughter by Sedrak was called Saten, or Satenig. Then came Gorky, who was christened Vostanig after the city of Vostan, where his mother's family church was situated. Finally her youngest daughter, christened Vartoosh, meaning rose. Behind the back door of the Adoian house, where Shushan lingered before walking down the path to the fountain to collect water every morning, grew a rose of which she was particularly fond.

Shushan was the youngest married woman of the Adoian house, and traditionally this figure occupied a subordinate position in the family hierarchy. She was expected to rise at dawn and pour water for the men to wash themselves, before they went out to work in the fields, then scrub and clean the main room before tackling the needs of her own family. If Shushan ever cooked, it would have been under the watchful eye of her sister-in-law, Yeghus, who was in charge of the house.

In the 1940s Gorky described to his dealer Julien Levy the kind of thoughts that occurred to him as he drew. He said that as he worked, he watched the line travel over the paper and told stories to himself, like a child who explains as he draws: This is the sun, here is a path, this is "a cow in the sunlight."

As he spoke to Levy, a second idea occurred to Gorky: that the thoughtless

narrative without beginning and without end had something to do with the stories his mother had told him as a child, "while I pressed my face into her long apron with my eyes closed." She had possessed two aprons, he said: a plain one and an embroidered one. As she talked, her stories and her embroidery became confused in his head. All his life, said Gorky, her stories and her embroidery were intertwined in his memory.

Shushan's everyday apron had a design of flowers printed on it. The embroidered one was textured, with raised stitches. A child with his eyes closed and his face hidden could have traced the embroidery with his hand. Though the story does not contain any overt act of violence, there is an unsettling aspect to the memory: the child running to his mother in order to bury his face in her apron, the mother speaking words intended to comfort and distract. Vartoosh remembered that her uncle Krikor was a short-tempered man. Once, he hit Shushan so hard that she fell to the ground and cut her head on one of the flagstones outside the front door. Being a woman of strong character, Shushan probably did not accept the humble role the other members of the household imposed on her. If she made her obstinacy too apparent, it would have been considered perfectly normal to teach her a lesson.

With so many responsibilities and three children of her own, Shushan delegated the care of Gorky to Akabi, her daughter by her first husband. Even in later life, Akabi was always his champion and protector within the family. Like many Armenian girls, she went from taking care of younger siblings to becoming a mother herself, with no pause in between. A rich confusion of roles took place in Armenian households. Sisters were like mothers, uncles were like fathers. The father figure for the children was often an uncle, an elder brother, or a grandfather. It was a way of coping with the absence of real fathers who had left to work abroad, or who had been killed.

Not much is known about Gorky's grandfather Manuk, who was the head of the family until Gorky was about four years old. When he died, Gorky was given the name Manuk in his honor, and this was the name used by old friends from Van, even in America. The violence which Shushan occasionally received from her uncle Krikor probably took place after old Manuk's death, when there was a struggle as to which of his two sons was to become head of the family. Krikor, Gorky's uncle and the elder of the two brothers, was the winner. Sedrak, Gorky's father, subsequently kept clear of the house if he possibly could. He used to sail a boat across the lake to sell wood on the northern shore, and often he was absent for weeks at a time.

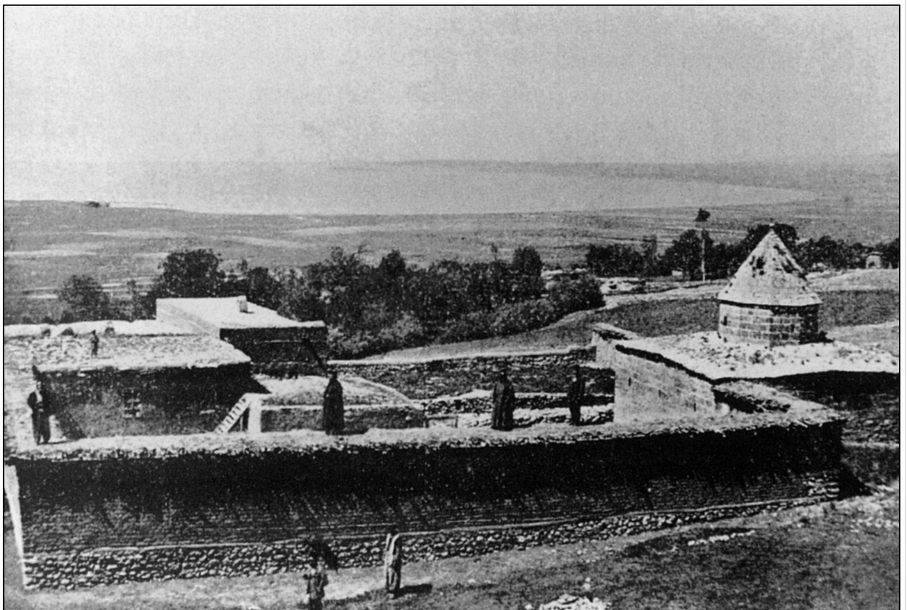
It does not sound as though Gorky's mother and father ever developed a liking for each other.

▪ ▪ ▪

ESCAPING FROM the chores of the Adoian house, Shushan went to church as often as she could. She used to walk along the path which led from the Adoian house to Khorkom's little schoolhouse, past the village church of St. Vartan, whose bell was a plank of walnut wood. Sometimes she went to the church at Khiosk, the next village along the Khoshab river. In August there was the big festival for the Assumption of the Virgin at Akhtamar, and she took the boat over to the island. The feast was a favorite of the people of Shadagh, so it was a chance to catch up with news of her first husband's family.

Whenever she could, she visited her family church of Charahan Surp Nishan. The town of Vostan emerged as a few scattered houses surrounded by trees as she walked, some two hours away across the river, up a long strip of arable land, through orchards of apricot and almond trees. The path skirted the lower slope of Mount Ardoz on the south side of the big main road. The monastery stood a mile or so up the mountainside. A stone wall surrounded the exterior sleeping quarters, making an enclosure in which to pen the sheep.

Charahan Surp Nishan was not much larger than a chapel. Two heavy columns in the middle supported a cupola pierced by four small windows. The walls were bare, unfrescoed. Within, there was a dark room about twenty square feet, unadorned and perhaps blackened by fire. Outside in the court-



Charahan Surp Nishan, the little monastery which for centuries had been connected with Gorky's mother's family

yard stood a stone with a hole in it, associated with a martyred saint whose headless body had been found on the hillside eight centuries previously. The suppliant whispered prayers through the hole, and the saint, hopefully, intervened. Behind the buildings there was nothing but a hillside covered with rocks and herbs, with a few weathered beehives and neglected fruit trees. The rooms surrounding the courtyard were half abandoned, and during Gorky's childhood the entire property was rented for a small sum to a priest who was not a member of the family.

Shushan was passionately attached to this place, so intimately associated with memories of her father and her ancestors. When her brother Moses married, his wife Markrit wanted to take over the task of caring for the church. She was the wife of the eldest male and the head of the family, and the job was rightfully hers. But Shushan would have none of it. Sweeping the church was her job and hers alone. Her brothers used to say, admiringly, that Shushan had a fearful temper.

South of Charahan Surp Nishan were the slopes of Mount Ardoz, and behind these, a slithering goat path wound in and out of the mountains to the district where Shushan had lived during her first marriage. Shadagh was a country of tall peaks and deep ravines, where the houses clung to the sides of cliffs like swallow's nests, the roof of one acting as the terrace of the house above. The villagers looked out onto a landscape of rock, with just a hint of cool green deep down in clefts eroded by winding tributaries of the Tigris river. Bears plundered their flocks in spring. Wild boar rooted in their gardens. The farmers had to hack out the fields from the surrounding wastes and ring them with stones to prevent them from being washed away. Not even donkeys could reach the more remote wheat fields, whence the harvest had to be brought out on the villagers' shoulders. In the summer, they came down the mountainside bearing huge stoops, like haystacks on legs.

The men of Shadagh were "wide-awake industrious mountaineers," according to one of the American missionaries who later taught Gorky in Van. Both men and women participated in producing *shal,* a cloth woven from a mixture of wools from sheep and Angora goat. The men sheared the wool, which they washed and carded on the roofs of their houses. The women spun it into thread, dangling the spindles over the edge of the houses to take advantage of the height. The men gathered natural substances to use as dyes for flatweaves: lichens for orange, insects for red, the root of a plant for yellow. Men wove the *shal,* while women wove flatweave rugs, called kilims.

Enclosed gardens, the tree of life, flowing water—these were themes the village women wove into their kilims. Each weaver varied her composition using signs whose meanings had been eroded by legends. There was a "dragon" theme, the *vichap,* which may originally have been copied from Chi-

nese silks. Centuries ago, the themes had once possessed recognizable features, but by constant repetition the dragon on the carpet became no more than an evocation. In a similar way, Gorky often used the same sign again and again in his paintings, until it lost its recognizable features and became merely an unexplained symbol within the storytelling atmosphere of the canvas.

Thoughts about places and beasts occupied the minds of the weavers as they worked. If the summer had been arid, the colors tended toward the red and the brown. If it had rained and the pastures had kept their green, then the color green found its way into that year's rug. Like the weavers of Shadagh, Gorky transmitted the light he had absorbed in the open air into his work. His paintings may not be accurate to the day, but they are usually faithful to the season in which they were painted.

IF NOSTALGIA FOR a lost paradise is one of the qualities which sustained Gorky in America, then perhaps he acquired this emotion from his mother's own nostalgia, long before his own fragile world came to an end. Unhappy in her second marriage, Shushan idealized her life with her first husband. She often told her children about the courage of the mountaineers of Shadagh and their passion for dancing, and about the Kurds of Shadagh, who sang when they rested at a fountain, sang in certain valleys to make the echoes respond, sang in celebration and in mourning, head held back, beginning on a high note and descending gradually through slides and quarter tones down to a mumble of half-sung assent among the listeners. There were songs of winged horses leaping the mountains at a single bound, and of maidens kidnapped and revenge dutifully wreaked, down to the last appropriately severed limb.

When Gorky was tall enough, Shushan sent him back into these same mountains of Shadagh to work as a shepherd boy for the local Kurds. "The shepherds there live in the mountains with their sheep and Gorky often remained with them overnight. From them he learned their language which is Kerdman, their folk songs and dances. They are like gypsies." In that part of the world everyone danced and sang.

Tomas Prudian, Shushan's first husband, was one of those who, before the massacres of 1896, had taken up a gun. Probably he belonged to a revolutionary group of some kind, although in Shadagh a man needed a gun merely to protect his flocks from wolves and bandits. A photograph which once belonged to Akabi, Shushan's elder daughter, shows five mountaineer "revolutionists." One of these may be Tomas.

Though they resisted the attacks of the Kurds as best they could, when the time came the Armenians of Shadagh found that there was nothing to be done against the Turkish army. Seizing the villages, the troops held the women and

Five Armenian revolutionaries from the Shadagh area, c. 1896. Among them is perhaps Tomas Prudian, Shushan's first husband. Under Turkish rule it was illegal for Armenians to carry weapons, so this photograph suggests an element of bravado.

children hostage until the "revolutionists" came down from the hills and laid down their weapons. In November 1895 Tomas Prudian was lined up with the other men of his family in front of their house in Shadagh. After they refused to change their faith, they were all killed.

SHUSHAN'S DEVOTION TO the monastery of Surp Nishan involved another memory on which she dwelled. Her younger brother Nishan, who had stayed behind with their mother at the family church, was murdered there, around the time of Gorky's birth. When he was about fifteen or sixteen years old, Nishan began courting a Kurdish girl. The girl's brothers felt insulted, and Nishan was killed and his body left at the door of the monastery.

Nishan was Gorky's grandmother's favorite. In her grief, she raised her hands to heaven and cursed God. Her son Moses, still only a young man but now the head of the family, urged her to keep silent. He had been warned in a recurring dream, he said, that if she did not keep quiet, her family would be accursed. Unable to control her grief, she then tried to burn down Surp Nishan. Appalled, the villagers of Vostan rejected her. Behind her back they called her "God-killer," and no one would speak to her. Moses and Aharon had to take her

away, to a part of the country where her sacrilege was not common knowledge.

Gorky's grandmother died when he was still a small child. It must have been one of his earliest memories. At the funeral, he was offered some special delicacy, for a funeral was a feast as well as a sacrament. Politely, he refused. Again food was offered to him, and again he refused. He knew that it was good manners to accept food only when it was offered for the third time. In their confusion, however, his elders failed to offer the plate to him again. The chance to eat well in this part of the world did not occur often, and Gorky often mentioned the fact that he had gone away from his grandmother's funeral still hungry.

He turned the experience into a funny story, though its black humor was not always apparent to his listeners in New York. It was not his uncle Nishan's murder, nor his grandmother's insanity and early death, that was the high point of the story, but his own hungry cravings. The only other event from his grandmother's life which he ever mentioned—and with admiration—was her attempt to burn down Surp Nishan. He thought this was one of those magnificent, carefree gestures which took life right out of its normal cautious round, and he could never make a fire in a hearth himself without creating a tremendous whoosh of flames and sudden heat.

GORKY DID NOT UTTER a word before he was about five years old. He had no disability as far as any of his family could tell: he was merely slow. One story has it that his uncle Krikor forced him into speech by taking him up onto the roof and telling him to jump off. His first words, then, were "No, I won't." Another story has it that a thirteen-year-old cousin tried to frighten him into speaking. Little Manuk took up a stick to defend himself. His cousin pretended to be wounded. He cried out, "*An gu la,*" "He is crying." Bewildered, Gorky ran to his mother Shushan, repeating the words.

In the 1940s Gorky named a painting *Argula*. After this work was sold and given to the Museum of Modern Art, Gorky received a letter asking him what the title meant. He replied, "No specific scene but many incidents—The first word I spoke was Argula—it has no meaning. I was then five years old. thus I call this painting Argula as I was entering a new period closer to my instincts." There was no need to tell the world that "Argula" was a child's garbled version of "he is crying." It would only require a still longer explanation, and one easily misunderstood by those who had no experience of life in that part of the world.

Gorky told friends in New York that his mother used to call him "the black one, the unlucky one who will come to no good end." Sometimes he talked as if his mother's reproaches weighed heavily on his head, and even at an early age, Gorky resisted the stark world of angels and devils at the core of his mother's religion. Her equivalent for "naughty boy" was the formidable "Oh, you child without God."

Once, at a dinner party in 1942, Gorky resurrected a certain incident from his childhood.

> I remember myself when I was five years old. The year I first began to speak. Mother and I are going to church. We are there. For a while she left me standing before a painting. It was a painting of infernal regions. There were angels in the painting. White angels. And black angels. All the black angels were going to Hades. I looked at myself. I am black, too. It means there is no Heaven for me. A child's heart could not accept it. And I decided there and then to prove to the world that a black angel can be good, too, must be good and wants to give his inner goodness to the whole world, black and white world.

Apart from the church of Akhtamar, there were no frescoes of the Last Judgment in any church which Gorky visited as a child. But the image was a common one in the family Bibles of the Van school, and Shushan possessed one of these, inherited from her father, the priest of Surp Nishan. Being illiterate, she showed this Bible to her son for their illustrations alone. The line which he described to Julien Levy as traveling over the paper, making a sun, a path, a cow in the sunlight, would in this case have traced the image of Mary, Mother of God, and the angel bringing the Good News. And as Shushan told him the story, there would have been no difference to her between the thing drawn and the angel itself.

The Last Judgment in a manuscript Bible from Van. The work of the local Van school of illumination is less ornate than that of the Cilician school, which kept in contact with monastic illuminators of Greece and Italy.

The idea that lines on paper could become as real as facts was something Gorky learned from Shushan. In the old Byzantine tradition, a father gave to his daughter when she married a book which he himself had copied. She was then to pass on the cultural heritage to her children. In Armenian households, it was the mother who transmitted the mystical side of things, whereas the father taught the practicalities of tending the fields. In both cases the transmission of knowledge was physical. Culture was to be touched, was to be shaped by hand.

The illuminated manuscripts of the Van school are simple, "inno-

cent" works, as if the monks who drew them were content to represent the attributes by which the actors of the story could be recognized, without worrying themselves unduly over the composition. St. John the Baptist had to have a hairy coat; otherwise who could recognize who he was? The Magi always carried gifts, and the entry into Jerusalem was recognizable because the picture always included a man perching in a tree. In Van, the gold used in the background of grander volumes produced by the Cilician school was replaced with a yellow color boiled from the root of a plant, and the brown was made from a certain clay, ground between two stones. The miniatures of the Van school are close in spirit to Gorky's description of narrative drawing.

GORKY'S SECOND WORDS WERE more mundane. Walking with his family by the shore of the lake, he turned to Krikor and said, "Money! All you ever talk about is money." They were amazed, not so much by the meaning of his words as by the complicated phrase which unexpectedly had come from his mouth.

Passing near Khorkom along the coast road early in 1908, the British vice-consul thought that the Armenians he saw there were "no better than a set of cringing beggars, ragged and filthy," an observation which is borne out by a photograph of children in a village near the monastery of Narek, some thirty miles from Khorkom. Gorky as a child must have looked very much like one of these boys.

Armenian children from a village near Narek, at about the time when Gorky and his family moved to Van City

It was hardly surprising if Krikor talked obsessively of money. The village had almost nothing in the way of cash. It survived on barter. All cash went to the government, and the farmers were forced to take out loans at exorbitant interest rates in order to pay their taxes. Grain seed was loaned to poor farmers by Kurdish Aghas and redeemed immediately after the harvest. Armed tribesmen stood over the threshing floor and rode off with their percentage as soon as the wheat had been winnowed. If there was any wheat to spare, it was taken into Van to be exchanged for cloth, for there were no looms in Khorkom. Sometimes salesmen used to ride out from the city to sell women needles and thread in exchange for chickens, leaving with the chickens slung across the backs of their mules.

The massacres of 1896 instilled into the Christian minority of Turkey a sense of terrible urgency, and the twenty years preceding the final disaster of 1915 was a period of ferment. The Armenians were engaged in a race against time, to become better educated, better organized, better informed about the outside world than the Turks and Kurds who surrounded them. Two options were open to them, and both were pursued simultaneously. The first was to prepare for an armed uprising as quickly as possible. The second was to make themselves indispensable to those who ruled them. It goes without saying that the two strategies were incompatible, but the state of confusion imposed on them from above was so great that it was impossible to establish a unified front.

In 1904 the local wing of the Dashnak party—the Armenian Revolutionary Federation—took over the island of Akhtamar, where it opened a political school. Their ideology was socialist and initially anticlerical, and there was talk of selling the manuscripts and silver belonging to the monastery in order to dedicate the proceeds to the revolutionary cause. Khorkom was their base, being the closest exclusively Armenian village on the mainland. The villagers had to take sides. Shushan, with her strong attachment to the church, was against the Dashnaks, but her brother Aharon, now teaching in the carpentry department of the American Mission School in Van, used to travel across the water to the island to study there whenever he could.

The American missionaries thought that the "revolutionists," as they called them, were atheists, and they disliked them intensely. The archives of the mission are full of the difficulties they were encountering with Dashnak teachers in their schools, disseminating "atheistical" propaganda. Ironically, whereas the Americans called these freedom fighters "infidels," the Turks called them "Fedayee," meaning those who were prepared to die for their faith. The missionaries began to make their presence felt in the villages outside Van, especially in Khorkom, which "has suffered perhaps more than any other from the baleful influence of Tashnagist infidelity."