

## Timeless: A Love Story from the Caucasus Mountains

**Nicholas Tchkotoua**

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*Timeless*, Nicholas Tchkotoua's fine novel of the passion and fidelity that shaped the lives of a Georgian prince and the young Russian woman to whom he gave his heart, is to be welcomed as a rewarding invitation to Georgian literature, if at a remove; Tchkotoua wrote his Georgian tale in English while living in California. The book is presciently titled, if only accidentally so. A long-defunct California firm published it in 1949, and it ran to a second printing but subsequently sank from sight. Thanks to Peter Nasmyth, an author-journalist who divides his time between London and Tbilisi, a new generation of readers can enjoy a resonant and evocative work, enhanced by his introduction and photographs.

Tchkotoua's plot is straightforward but remarkably well executed. The privileged but honorable young Prince Shota meets the well-bred young Russian woman of his dreams in Paris. Her grandmother forbids marriage: she shared the not-yet-demolished conviction of the 1890s that tuberculosis (from which Shota had fully recovered) was hereditary. The saddened prince returns home to his grandfather's palace in Tbilisi and then visits his estate below Abkhazia, in mountainous, forested western Georgia. Tchkotoua distills the essence of his remembered childhood there: the generous hospitality and sparkling intellectual life of a great household in Tbilisi; the *grand-seigneur* mode on an expansive estate peopled by loyal servitors, with the role of duty and the power of faith palpable day by day. The beauty and aristocratic traditions of Old Georgia are splendidly captured.

Underlying all and woven throughout is a sense of the transience of material wealth and the permanence of faith and love—if once experienced, forever present—through which Shota comes to terms with the loss and irreplaceability of his beloved Taya. An excerpt:

*'I strained my eyes at the Georgian script written under the icon ... .*

*'If you have, give; if you need, take.'*

*'What does it mean?' Taya asked.*

*'Just what it says, Taya. The poor travellers take a few coins if they need them and the richer travelers put some in. You will find shrines like these all over the mountains.'*

It is to be hoped that this small gem of a novel will prompt greater interest in Georgia and its remarkably rich literature; translations of a wealth of material, both contemporary and from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are urgently needed.

PETER F. SKINNER (July / August 2011)

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