

Excerpt from the novel  
**Simeon the Liftite.**  
Novel with Angels and Moldavians

**LET US RECAPITULATE.** On Saturday afternoon, at five forty-five, Mr. Toma ascends to the sixth floor, paying a visit to Mr. Eftimie and discussing modern marketing methods, after which he descends, also by the stairs, at five past six. On Monday morning, at quarter past seven, Mrs. Pelaghia from the second floor descends on her way to work; shortly thereafter she is followed by Mr. Gheorghe from the seventh floor, but in a completely different direction. Two hours later, Mr. Elefterie will leave the house and head for the nearest branch of the National Lottery. Before or after that, a series of persons descended or ascended, women and men, children going to or coming from school, pensioners, the unemployed, private entrepreneurs etc., possibly also other persons present in the respective building on various businesses.

All these gentlemen and all these ladies have a common denominator: they reside in the same eight-storey block on Sheep (formerly Euler) Street in Bacau. They also have something else in common, something which cannot have escaped the perspicacity of the reader: none of them has reported the fact that the lift is out of order. Mrs. Pelaghia for the reason that, living on the second floor, as well as for other reasons, she prefers to ascend and descend by the stairs. Then we can take it as read that Mr. Gheorghe, leading a sporting life and in constant motion, never uses the lift. Let us allow that some of the tenants did not leave the house at an early hour that Saturday, and afterwards, when they did go out, it was already too late to complain. We shall even go as far as to accept as valid the explanation that Mr. Elefterie, absorbed in his own thoughts regarding an eventual lottery win, was able to pass by the entrance to the blocked lift impassively - he did no more than try the door, as though in a dream. But what about the others? The only explanation would be that they were used to it. Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent himself, at the exact moment when, during the course of that Saturday, he wished to descend to the ground floor, where he was going to paste up an important new announcement, had ascertained the lift was stuck... somewhere. But where? He of all people ought to have asked himself, in his capacity as stair superintendent. Perhaps he asked himself, we do not know. What is certain is only that he descended by the stairs in order to put up the notice, he ascended, also by the stairs, back to the third floor, where he resides, and... then he forgot. A single conclusion is unavoidable: it was not the first time the lift had got stuck, probably somewhere between the floors. No one was trapped in it, no one was desperately banging on the door asking to be saved, no one was cursing the maintenance company, no family had gathered on the landing to hearten the member stuck in the lift with sundry advice - all this was even able to create the impression that the lift was not stuck at all. Nevertheless, it was out of order - this was a fact upon which all those who, for one reason or another, tried to use the lift would have been in agreement. However, no one could have specified at what time the event had occurred. Moreover, not even the next day did the occurrence have any repercussions. Sunday passed almost unnoticed. In his diary, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent recorded no notable incident. A possible explanation would be that, as a rule, the tenants do not go out much on Sundays. They stay in and watch the television. There are interesting programs: football matches, motor racing, comedy, bingo, talk shows, and soap operas and, in general, all that the soul of a worker, pensioner or someone on the dole might desire on a day of rest. Only if they happened to have a guest would the latter hurriedly announce, crossing the threshold and still breathing heavily, with his last gasp, like the runner from Marathon: "Did you know the lift is out of order!" "We know," they would say, without granting the announcement any especial importance, even with a slight ironic satisfaction in their voices, well camouflaged by their hospitable smiles - since the news did not directly affect them, for the time being. It was not until Monday morning, but above all not until Monday afternoon, when they were coming home tired from work, that they took note of the

especial importance of a lift in an eight-storey block. Monday evening, in fact. Because in the morning it is easier, almost pleasant: descending the stairs is a substitute for invigorating exercise.

**For the members of the "Friendship" group,** Monday is a day without any rehearsals. Consequently, Mr. Ilie decided, from the very first hours of the morning, to repair his motorbike. This could not take place round the back of the block, because the weather forecast and, along with it, the clouds lurking in the sky, announced damp weather with scattered showers and thunderstorms. Nor could he risk it in the entrance hall of the block; various persons were always going in and out, especially kids, who could have pinched some spare part or other, just to play with it or to sell it in the flea market afterwards. That is why Mr. Ilie reckoned it would be appropriate to do the necessary repairs in his own flat, situated on the sixth floor. But surprise, surprise! The lift was not working. An unpleasant surprise for Mr. Ilie let us admit. First of all he uncoupled the sidecar, leaning it against the wall of the building, and after that the two wheels, with which he set off, like it or not, up the stairs. It was just then that Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent was taking down a new notice, inasmuch as the one composed and posted a mere two days previously no longer satisfied him. The notice composed that Saturday had gone as follows:

"Esteemed tenants, the gasworks have announced that because your association has not paid the invoice for services provided in its entirety, commencing 15 October the gas supply will be suspended."

The new notice made an absolutely necessary addition. It went as follows:

"Esteemed tenants, the gasworks have announced that because your association has not paid the invoice for services provided in its entirety, commencing 15 October the gas supply will be suspended.

We request that you take appropriate measures."

"Good morning, neighbour," Mr. Ilie proffered the first greeting.

"Good morning, neighbour!" replied Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent. "What's that you're up to?"

"Well, I've decided to repair my motorbike."

"Very well, very well," muttered Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent, although he was not entirely in agreement.

However, in the *Regulations for Discipline and Civilized Cohabitation*, which he had drawn up but a month before, immediately bringing them to the knowledge of all the tenants, he had not foreseen the fact that the latter are not allowed to carry out mechanical repairs in their flats. This was an aspect that would have to be noted for use in the next draft. Before then, at the next block meeting the question would be subject to debate on the part of the tenants, in order for the decision to be taken within a democratic framework.

"But what's wrong with the lift?" Mr. Ilie asked out of mere curiosity.

"Ah, yes, the lift... Well, what else could have happened? They've broken it!"

Had he been more vigilant, Mr. Ilie would have detected a slight imprecision in the answer of Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent, as well as his haste to relegate the problem to the background of their brief exchange. The truth is, as we have shown above, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent had quite simply forgotten about the lift, overwhelmed as he was by a host of other administrative problems, with which he would have to cope on his own, as usual. The others never got involved.

"The repairmen ought to be called out," Mr. Ilie opined.

"And if I call them out, are they going to come?"

The answer-question of the stair superintendent was left dangling from the walls of the

first-floor landing, attempting to solve the enigma of its own logical loop, inasmuch as the two interlocutors had each moved off in different directions: Mr. Ilie towards his sixth-floor flat, whither he would ultimately take the entire motorbike, part by part, and Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent towards the notice board at the entrance to the block, where he would paste the new version of the announcement concerning the gas bill, in place of the old one which no longer satisfied him.

However, having reached the notice board, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent was overwhelmed by certain pangs of conscience. A few children who were playing on the steps in front of the block saw him hesitate for a while before unlocking the glass pane of the panel, with its built-in lock to prevent ne'er-do-wells from tearing down the various notices and announcements displayed there. But they did not accord the proper attention to this fact, since they were children from another block. During those moments, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent was reflecting on whether he ought firstly to telephone the tenants' association, to call the lift servicing company, or better still to verify in advance the state of affairs in the field, at the scene. The latter option bore the greatest burden of initiative and responsibility. Moreover, it would allow him to exercise his entire authority in an unequivocal manner, to turn his perspicacity to good account, and to adopt certain urgent measures, if the situation demanded, although for the time being it remained unclear both in what way the situation might demand measures and what the concrete conditions for applying them might be.

With a certain pang in his heart, with conflicting feelings, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent folded up the sheet of paper he had been about to paste up and thrust it into the inside pocket of his coat. It contained the results of a mental and physical effort exerted for more than an hour that morning. Beyond its concise and imperative formulation, what none of the eventual readers of the notice had any way of knowing were the difficulties that Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent had had to overcome in typing up the text in question. Not having the dexterity and practice required for such an occupation, he had had to solve as he went along both the problem of finding the letters on the typewriter, not an easy task at his age, and that of unblocking the typebars when, for some inexplicable reason, Mr. Jon's index finger pressed two keys simultaneously, though it had been set the task of pressing only one. And let us not even mention the repeated corrections caused by unwanted letters cropping up in the middle of a word, such as a fin the word *tenants*, which thereby became *tentants* (to give just a single example, but there were others), providing an occasion for malicious irony, and which, when observed too late, necessitated the retyping of the entire text.

The twelve-volt bulbs, which in new lifts, or in lifts in blocks inhabited by disciplined people, indicate the floor, were dead. That did not mean much. In the final instance, it did not mean anything. They used to be dead even when the lift was working within normal parameters, not because of the tenants and not even due to the fault of the maintenance company. Whenever they were replaced, after a few hours of use they would definitively go out. That was why the first observation that Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent was able to make was a negative one: it was not possible to establish with any precision at what floor the lift had got stuck. In order to convince himself one final time, he loudly banged the door of the lift with the palm of his hand...

No one replied.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ilie had taken the wheels of his motorbike up to his flat; he now paused behind Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent, holding the cylinder with aluminium flanges, the most important part of the motorbike, and a pedal. For the smaller parts, he was intending, on his next trip, to come down with two plastic bags. The idea, valid in itself, was to prove disastrous in practice, due to the poor quality of the material from which the said bags were made.

"Well, anything moving?" he asked.

"It's stuck!" replied Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent, without turning around, carefully listening to the silence behind the metal door, a solemn silence that dominated the entire eight-floor lift shaft, plus the pulley cabin.

"Maybe someone has deliberately left the lift door open on one of the floors?" suggested

Mr. Ilie.

"I don't think so," replied Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent.

He contradicted him groundlessly, for the simple reason that he could not, at that moment, accept that anyone else could be right instead of him.

In fact, he had not contradicted him properly speaking, but rather he had said what he would have wished to believe. However, in spite of this wish, the hypothesis launched by Mr. Ilie - who, in the meantime, somewhat offended by the lack of consideration he had been shown, had set off up the stairs determined never again to enquire about the state of the lift - dominated with ever greater authority Mr. Jon-the-stair--superintendent's other idea, so that in the end he found himself forced to admit what was obvious from the very start: before ruling out a hypothesis, you have to check it. Had he found out about this, it is not known how Mr. Ilie would have reacted.

Before proceeding to take action properly speaking, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent reckoned it necessary to restore a little order in front of the block.

"Children, what block are you from?" he asked the lads and lasses who were playing on the step right in front of the door to the block, so that, in order to enter the hall, you had to find space for your feet between their small, frail bodies, so soft that you felt sorry to touch them.

"From Block 44," answered a little girl.

"And why don't you go and play outside your own block?"

"Cyprian beats us up."

Always the same answer. Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent had been determined a number of times to find out who this Cyprian was, who his parents were, where they worked etc., but he had put off doing so because of other more important or pressing activities, such as the present case. He left the group of children without having taken any organizational measure, but took a note in his mental agenda, as a separate point, that he should subsequently return to the matter of "Cyprian" when time and other communal duties allowed. For the time being, the children were not causing any real damage; as usual, they were playing Red Riding Hood.

In the very instant that he set his foot on the first step of the stair that led to the first floor, he was struck by a wholly new and unexpected idea: a series of illustrative texts assembled under the title of *Guide for the Good Neighbour*, with quotations from ancient Greek philosophy, which he would extract from *A Dictionary of Wisdom*, by Theodor Simenschy. He had received the book as a present from his workmates when he retired, and had very much appreciated the gesture, without observing at first that it was some five years old and had been purchased from the bargain bin. Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent had retired at the age of fifty-five, due to the nature of the work he performed, but he had obtained his position as stair superintendent much later, two years after the Revolution, after the former superintendent, Mrs. Fevronia the engineer, died as a result of a botched operation. So they say. In reality, it seems to have been a case of an induced miscarriage. Since then, her husband had stayed shut up in the house for most of the time, not participating at any staircase meetings or in any communal actions, although he always paid his upkeep charge and other monetary dues on time, so that the neighbours groundlessly nicknamed him: the Strange'un.

On the landing of the first floor, he meets Mr. Ilie once more. However, the latter goes on his way with two empty plastic bags in his hand, as though he has not recognized him. Maybe he did not have any more suggestions to make. Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent approaches the door of the lift on tiptoes and listens carefully. Nothing. Somewhere below can be heard the voice of the older girl explaining to the others:

"Pay attention, I'm Red Riding Hood, you're Grandma, you're Mother, and you're the Wolf."

"Why am I the Wolf," protested a little boy's voice, "I'm the littlest, how can I eat such a big Red Riding Hood? Better let me be Riding Hood, so even the littlest Wolf can eat me..."

Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent did not bother to listen to what followed. With his crooked middle finger, he tapped lightly, as though he were asking permission to enter.

"Hello?" he asked. "Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?"  
No one replied. (...)

**On the seventh floor** he proceeded in exactly the same way as on all the other floors. With his crooked middle finger, he tapped lightly, as though he were asking permission to enter.

"Hello?" he asked. "Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?"

In exactly the same way as on all the other floors, no one replied. He tugged the door handle, thereby to convince himself. In a certain sense, things were beginning to become clear. The lift was stuck somewhere between floors. But what remained inexplicable was how it had got stuck while empty. Nevertheless, in order to conclude what he had begun, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent climbed to the top floor. He mechanically repeated the same words, only changing the order of the operations slightly, that is, firstly tapping on the door, then pulling the handle and finally putting the two questions.

"Hello?" he asked. "Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?"

"Yes, there is!" replied a muffled voice somewhere higher up, from towards the pulley cabin.

Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent jumped startled to one side, because he had not been expecting any reply. His heart began to thump violently, right in his stomach, as though it had dropped there, threatening him with high blood pressure, something most dangerous at his age. Of course, his breathing went on the blink too. It was lucky he did not suffer from asthma, like Mrs. Gudelia. In such a situation, she would have stretched out on the floor with her mouth open, going purple in the face. Mustering all his strength, leaning against the wall with his shoulder, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent managed to ask, only with his voice slightly hoarse, while at the same time attempting to maintain an impression of authority:

"And who is there, may I ask?"

"Simeon, from the ground floor," came the reply.

On hearing this name, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent felt his heart move back in place. He took one deep breath, like one who has just gone through great peril and nevertheless managed to escape unscathed.

"The cobbler?"

"The very same."

"Ah, Mr. Simeon, it was you? I got a fright, I didn't know what to think..." he said overjoyed and at the same time disappointed, as he had probably been expecting something far worse. "What are you doing there, Mr. Simeon?"

The last question had a slight note of reproach, otherwise quite justified.

"I'm saying my morning prayers. I'm praying to God for all the tenants of this block, of this town, of all the villages and towns of this land, and for all mankind in general."

"Wouldn't it be better if you prayed in your own bed-sit?"

"I can't, because there is always someone slamming the door of the lift. I can't concentrate. And apart from that, there are too many mosquitoes."

Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent pondered for a few moments. In a way, Simeon was right. The manner in which many tenants used the lift was totally at odds with its instructions for use. It was Simeon's misfortune that his bed-sit was on the ground floor, right next to the door of the lift. On the other hand, the standing water in the basement represented a genuine hotbed of infection and, needless to say, an ideal place for mosquitoes to breed. Even if you kept the windows shut all day, they came up through the ventilation shaft and infiltrated wherever they wanted. Weighing up matters with all his wisdom, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent reckoned it more judicious to resolve the case amicably.

"Very well, but at least after you finish praying could you release the lift, so that the other citizens can use it," he recommended, as though, having made this recommendation, the problem had already been solved.

"After that I'll be starting my midday prayers," announced Simeon curtly. "Then my

evening prayers and then my night-time prayers."

Given this inconsiderate reply, the problem at once grew complicated, and risked leading to a tense situation and creating subsequent conflicts between the two tenants. Nonetheless, displaying much tact, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent once more avoided proceeding to more drastic measures.

"When will you eat, when will you sleep, when will you go to the toilet?" he asked, as though his concern for Simeon's nourishment and other necessities prevailed in relation to the need to unblock the lift.

"I have discovered a method," said Simeon mysteriously.

"Look here, Mr. Simeon!" A wee bit irritated, Mr. Jon-the-stair--superintendent at the last moment avoided the harsh words he had been preparing. "People need the lift. You have to understand that we can't play lifts, we're not children any more. If you want to become a saint, go to a monastery. The tenants have a right to use this lift because they pay for it."

"In the ten years since this block was built, I have never used the lift, but nonetheless, as far as paying goes, I've paid the same upkeep as everyone else," Simeon replied calmly.

"Well, you live on the ground floor, it's natural, but think about those who have to climb to the seventh or eighth floor, they come home from work tired, perhaps some of them are ill, others are getting on in years, or else some are pregnant women with babes in arms..."

But not even the sentimental and humanitarian note that Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent had struck met with any success.

"There are no pregnant women in this block," replied Simeon with the utmost certainty. "As for the others, you should try the stairs for a change. You'll meet each other more often, exchange a word or two. Haven't you noticed that, because of this box, you have isolated yourselves from one another? Each one climbs in, presses the button and then goes straight into the house."

"Mr. Simeon, out with it: have you got something against us? Are you trying to punish us? Maybe one of your neighbours has caused you grief and you want to take revenge..."

"Not at all. I don't have anything against anybody. On the contrary, I love you all as my brothers."

"Then release the lift!"

"Well, that's not possible, because the lift is stuck, my dear fellow."

"Well, get it unstuck then!"

"That's not possible either. I wouldn't have anywhere to say my prayers after that."

"Why don't you go and pray in church?"

"Oh dear, oh dear, you talk as if you didn't know how crowded it is in church and how everyone tramples on each other's feet! As if you didn't know that most people go to church just because they need another Ceausescu - for them, God is a replacement for him. Take it from me, Jon: if Ceausescu hadn't died, they would never have felt the need to go to church."

The last words rather set Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent to thinking, because he too had not started going to church until after the events of December 1989. It was becoming more and more clear that whatever arguments he might have advanced, Simeon would have found a reply to every single one. Nonetheless, even though negotiations up to then had not led to any positive result, Mr. Jon-the-stair-superintendent was satisfied that at least they were talking. As long as they kept talking, the chances of finding a solution were not entirely lost. But, at a given moment, Simeon fell silent. Worried, Mr. Jon-the-stair--superintendent, kept asking:

"Mr. Simeon, are you there? Has anything happened to you? Mr. Simeon?"

After a while, Simeon replied somewhat hurriedly:

"That's all, I have to go. The angel is calling me."

And after that he did not utter so much as a single word!