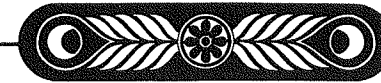


"But the excavations?" he objected. "We're getting ready for an interesting expedition in the Tsebelda area. It's not worth ruining that. We'd never find another crazy young fool to write an article in my defense!"

We laughed and parted, moved by our mutual liberalism.

Here I break off the story of the Prayer Tree, stop myself with a gesture of mercy, to return to it later when I have gathered my courage and calm; and then—do not take offense, friends, for sad will be my tale.



## BELSHAZZAR'S FEASTS

UNCLE SANDRO started living the good life after Nestor Apollonovich Lakoba brought him to the city, made him superintendent at the CEC, and got him appointed to Platon Pantsulaya's celebrated Abkhaz Song and Dance Ensemble. He quickly worked his way up to become one of the very best dancers, able to compete with Pata Pataraya himself.

Thirty rubles a month as superintendent at the CEC, and as much again as a member of the ensemble—not bad money for those times, downright decent money, by God!

As superintendent at the Central Executive Committee, Uncle Sandro kept after the maintenance staff, occasionally went to the post office to pick up Nestor Apollonovich's German hearing aids, and also saw to the garage, including Lakoba's personal Buick, which he called the "Bik," to simplify the foreign pronunciation.

Of course, Lakoba's personal Buick was at his disposal when Lakoba was away in Moscow or off some place at a conference.

At these times the people's commissars and other powerful officials used to ask Uncle Sandro for the Buick so that they could go to their village for some relative's funeral, celebrate a birth or a wedding or—if nothing else—their own arrival.

Barreling into one's native village in Lakoba's personal motorcar, which everyone knew by sight, was doubly pleasant—that is, politically pleasant and just plain pleasant. Everyone understood that if a man arrived in Nestor Apol-

lonovich's car it meant he was on his way up. Maybe Nestor Apollonovich had let him into the inner circle and was always slapping him on the back. Maybe he had even given him a bear hug and personally seated him in the car: Go on now, you son of a bitch, wherever you have to go; just don't throw up on the seat on your way back.

Of course, there were also unpleasantnesses. Thus a certain not-so-powerful but nevertheless highly placed comrade once used the Buick to go home to his village. There, at table, to someone's question about the Buick, he gave a craftily evasive answer to the effect that although he had not yet been given Lakoba's job, the matter was being decided at the very top, and one thing he could say for sure was that the car had already been transferred to him.

He never got up from that festive table, or to be more precise, he sat there so long that a party of three—Lakoba's nephews or namesakes, I think—arrived from the neighboring village. Circumspectly, so as not to alarm the other people there, they dragged him away from the table, and in the yard they pounded the stuffing out of him.

To top it all off, they strapped him across the trunk of the Buick, planning to drive him through the village. In point of fact, the plan did not succeed, because they did not know how to drive the car themselves, and the chauffeur had fled to the cornpatch.

The plain truth is that the comrade should have known better. By his stupid remarks he had insulted not only Nestor Lakoba but his entire clan. In those days an insult to a clan was something that rarely went unpunished.

After this incident, decent people were long amazed that the comrade had so openly dared to indulge in blasphemy, and mendacious blasphemy at that.

He himself said that his head had been befuddled from drink. Since the owner of the house where the feast took place swore by all his forefathers that no one had left the table, he never has figured out who went to inform the neighboring village.

Fortunately, none of this story reached the ears of Nestor Apollonovich, or everyone would have really caught it—all the nephews or namesakes, and Uncle Sandro, and, for the second time around, the victimized blasphemer.

Uncle Sandro got something, of course, in return for these minor liberties with the Buick. Nothing flagrant, really, but he might need to get a relative into a good hospital, obtain some needed document in a hurry, have a friend's case reexamined . . . (That was a friend who seemed to think that czarist times were not over. He stole some horses and then at the trial, instead of denying it, turned to the audience and proudly told them all about it.)

In this golden era Uncle Sandro did a lot for his friends, but not all of them repaid kindness with kindness; many of them subsequently proved to be ingrates.

Sometimes Uncle Sandro would go out on the balcony of the CEC headquarters and look down along the street, and there at the very end he could see the sea; and if a ship was in port, its smokestacks and masts would be visible from the balcony. It made Uncle Sandro feel good to look over at the port; it was nice

to think that he could get on a boat and sail away to Batum or Odessa. Uncle Sandro had no intention of going anywhere, because a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, but still, it was nice to think that he could get on a boat and sail away.

If he stood on the balcony and looked in the other direction, there was nothing to see but mountains and forests, so that one might have thought there was no reason to look over there.

Only once in a while, when a yearning for home crept over him, would Uncle Sandro look at the mountains and heave a furtive sigh. He sighed furtively because he considered it improper to sigh loudly when he had such honorable work—in power. Because if a man sighs when he's in power, it looks as if he doesn't like being in power, which would be ungrateful and stupid. No; Uncle Sandro liked being in power, and naturally he wanted to remain there as long as possible.

What Uncle Sandro really enjoyed, however, was to stand on the CEC balcony on a nice day and just look down at the passing crowds, among whom there were many people he knew and many beautiful women.

Those who had known Uncle Sandro before and still liked him would look up and say hello, their cordial gaze indicating that they were glad he had been moved up. Those who had known Uncle Sandro before, but now envied him, walked on by, pretending not to notice him. But Uncle Sandro did not take offense: Let them go about their business, you can't please everyone by being moved up.

Those who had not known him before, but saw him now on the CEC balcony, thought he was a powerful official who had come out on the balcony for a breath of air. Uncle Sandro replied to their greetings with a polite nod, not because he was playing along with the involuntary deception, but simply because he knew how to forgive people their small human weaknesses.

Sometimes people he knew would stop under the balcony and ask in gestures, How is Lakoba? Uncle Sandro would clench his fist and shake it slightly to show that Nestor Apollonovich was solidly in place. His acquaintances would nod gladly in reply and stride onward with a certain extra briskness.

Sometimes, knowing that Lakoba was away somewhere, these acquaintances would ask in gestures, Where did he go? In reply, Uncle Sandro would point toward the east (which meant Tbilisi) or gesture more portentously to the north (which meant Moscow).

Sometimes they would ask—again, mostly through gestures—Well, has Lakoba gotten back yet? In these cases Uncle Sandro would nod affirmatively or shake his head negatively. Either way, the acquaintances would nod with satisfaction and walk on, glad to have shared, however transiently, in the affairs of state.

The fashion plates of Mukhus would click by on their high heels, and meeting their eyes, Uncle Sandro would twirl his mustache, hinting at mischievous intentions. Many an ingenious love affair was begun from this balcony, although

he also struck up many new acquaintances from the stages of the theaters and clubs where the troupe performed.

There were a few women who snickered at his flirtatious posing on the balcony. Uncle Sandro did not take offense, he merely lost interest in them: Oh, you don't like me? Well, I don't like you either.

The ones he liked best were the women who blushed when their eyes met his, only to lower their heads and walk quickly on. Uncle Sandro believed that shame was the finest ornament a woman could wear. (Sometimes he said that shame was the most irritating ornament, but basically this meant the same thing.)

Occasionally, as he stood on the CEC balcony, Uncle Sandro would see his old buddy Kolya Zarhidis. He always greeted him heartily to show that he was not getting too big for his britches, that he still recognized and loved his old friends. From Kolya's eyes he could tell that Kolya felt neither spite nor envy over the fact that Uncle Sandro was playing host in his confiscated mansion, or that he was standing around on the balcony as he had in peaceful times.

"Try and get up there on a horse, why don't you?" Kolya would say, reminding him of the feat he had performed so long ago.

"Not any more, Kolya," Uncle Sandro would reply with a smile. "Times are quite different now."

"Mmmm," Kolya would say. As if he had received sad confirmation of the correctness of his own way of life, he would walk on toward the coffeehouse.

Uncle Sandro would look after him, somewhat sorry for him and somewhat envious, because sitting in a coffeehouse with a shot of cognac and a Turkish coffee was pleasant even under Soviet rule, maybe even pleasanter than before.

The Abkhaz Song and Dance Ensemble was already making a splash all over Transcaucasia, and later made a splash in Moscow. People say they even performed in London, although I don't know that they made a splash there.

In the era I am describing now, their fame—created mainly by Platon Pantsulaya, Pata Pataraya, and Uncle Sandro—was already on the upswing. On the anniversary of the Revolution, after the formal parts of the celebration, the ensemble would perform on the stage of the district theater. Moreover, they performed at Party conferences and at rallies for High Achievers in industry and agriculture; they were not too busy to travel to the outlying districts of the republic; and they also put on shows for the larger sanatoria and vacation hotels on the Transcaucasian coast.

After a performance for any of the more or less important organizations, the members of the ensemble would be invited to a banquet, where they did more singing and dancing in close proximity to the banquet table and the higher-ranking comrades.

Uncle Sandro, as I have already said, was virtually an equal of the best dancer in the troupe, Pata Pataraya. At any rate, he was the only person in the troupe who mastered Pata Pataraya's most celebrated trick: getting a running start backstage, falling to his knees, and sliding, sliding, all the way across the stage, his arms thrown back like the wings of a soaring bird.

Well, Uncle Sandro became so good at this celebrated *pas* that many people said they could not tell the one dancer from the other.

One member of the ensemble, a dancer and lead singer by the name of Makhaz, said one day that if the dancer performing this number were to pull his turban down over his face, there was no way you could tell who it was sliding across the stage—the celebrated Pata Pataraya or the new star, Sandro Chegemsky.

Maybe Makhaz wanted to flatter him a bit, since he was from Uncle Sandro's home district, because after all you really could tell them apart, especially if you had a dancer's experienced eye. But that is beside the point. The point is that Makhaz's chance remark gave Uncle Sandro the idea for a great improvement on an already rather elaborate number.

The very next day Uncle Sandro started training in secret. Taking advantage of his official position, he trained in the CEC conference hall, behind closed doors so that the cleaning lady could not spy.

Incidentally, this was the very hall where Uncle Sandro had once galloped around on his unforgettable skewbald charger, thereby saving his friend Kolya and bankrupting the Endursky cattle dealer.

Uncle Sandro practiced for about three months, and the day finally came that he determined to exhibit his new number. He did not feel it was sufficiently polished, but circumstances forced him to take the risk and play his secret trump on stage.

The better part of the ensemble, twenty of the members, had left for Gagra the previous day. The ensemble was to perform at one of the largest sanatoria, where a conference of the Secretaries of the District Committees of Western Georgia was currently taking place. Rumor had it that the meeting was being conducted by Stalin himself, who was vacationing in Gagra.

Apparently the idea of convening the district committee secretaries had come to him while he was here on vacation. But why he had called a conference of the secretaries of the district committees of only western Georgia, Uncle Sandro simply could not understand.

Apparently the district committee secretaries of eastern Georgia had committed some offense; or maybe he wanted to make them feel that they were not yet worthy of such a high-level conference, so that they would do better work in the future, competing with the district committee secretaries of western Georgia.

Or so thought Uncle Sandro, exerting his inquisitive mind—although strictly speaking this was not within his purview as superintendent at the CEC, or still less as a member of the ensemble.

So the better part of the ensemble had left, while Uncle Sandro stayed behind. The problem was that Uncle Sandro's daughter was very ill at the time. Everyone knew about it. Just before the group departed, Uncle Sandro had asked Pantsulaya to leave him behind, in view of his daughter's illness. He was sure that Pantsulaya would fly to pieces, would beg him to go with the group, and then, after being obstinate a while, Uncle Sandro would sadly accede.

This would have preserved the proprieties in relation to his family: he could

say he wasn't all that eager to dance, himself, but he was forced to. Besides, the other dancers would have been made aware that while it was possible to go on without Sandro, the dance would not have been the same.

Quite unexpectedly, the director of the ensemble agreed right away, and there was nothing for Uncle Sandro to do but turn around and leave. That same day the manager of the CEC gave him an insulting reprimand.

"In my opinion, someone is stealing firewood from us," he said, pointing to the huge pile of logs that had been cut and stacked in the CEC yard back at the start of the summer.

"It's just settling," Uncle Sandro replied carelessly, aching with the dullness of his artistic isolation.

"I never heard of a woodpile settling," the manager said, with intentional innuendo, or so it seemed to Uncle Sandro.

"I'll bet you never heard about the forest fire around Chegem, either?" Uncle Sandro asked insinuatingly.

This was the notorious Chegem sarcasm, which not everyone can handle.

"What's the Chegem forest got to do with it?" the manager asked.

"Why, I've been taking the CEC wood home to the hills," Uncle Sandro said, and he walked away from the manager. The manager just threw up his hands.

They've already gone through Eshery, Uncle Sandro thought as he went up the stairs of the mansion; they're probably getting close to Afon now. A cool draft touching his face seemed to him a breath of disgrace. The manager must know something, Lakoba must be cutting me loose, Uncle Sandro thought, correlating the manager's insulting tone and the even more insulting ease with which Platon Pantsulaya had acceded to his request.

It was particularly regrettable because everyone presumed that Comrade Stalin himself would be at the banquet. True, no one knew for sure. But one wasn't supposed to know for sure; somehow it was even sweeter that no one knew anything for sure.

The next day Uncle Sandro sat by his daughter's bedside, dully watching his wife change the wet towel on her head from time to time.

The little girl had pneumonia. She was being treated by one of the best doctors in town. He had some doubt as to a favorable outcome, although he was relying, as he said, on her strong Chegem constitution.

Four Chegemians, distant relatives of Uncle Sandro's, were also sitting in the room, their hands warily on the table. In recent years they had started coming to town more and more often, and it must be admitted that Uncle Sandro found them a bit tiresome.

The historical development of the people of Chegem had been unnaturally accelerated. They managed this with a certain patriarchal clumsiness. On the one hand, at home, in complete accord with the march of history and the decisions of higher organs of government (in point of fact, the march of history was also determined by the decisions of these higher organs), they were building so-

cialism—that is, engaging in collective farm agriculture. On the other hand, they came to town to sell things, engaging for the first time in capitalistic trade relations.

A double load like that could not pass without leaving its trace. Some of them, amazed that one could get money for such simple things as cheese, corn, and beans, went to the opposite extreme, piling on incredible prices, and they would stand in silence for days at a time beside their unbought produce. Sometimes, stung by the contempt of the customers, the Chegemians would cart their produce back: All right, then, we'll eat it ourselves. As time went on, however, there were fewer and fewer people so arrogant; the despotism of the marketplace did its work.

One thing the Chegemians could never get used to, that there was no fireplace fire in city houses. Without a real fire on the hearth, a house seemed unlivable to the Chegemians, more like an office. It was hard to have a conversation in such a house, because they did not know where to look. A Chegemian was used to staring into the fire while he talked, or at least, if he had to look at his companion, he could spread his hands to the fire and feel the heat.

That is why the four Chegemians were silent and kept their hands warily on the table, which added to Uncle Sandro's irritation.

Today, Uncle Sandro thought, our troupe may be going to dance for Stalin himself—and I have to sit here and listen to the silence of Chegemians. At the bazaar they had been offered the chance to stay in the Kolkhoz Workers' Club, but they had indignantly rejected the offer on the grounds that their Uncle Sandro lived here in town, and as a relative he might take offense. It cannot be said that Uncle Sandro was particularly moved by such loyalty to family ties. Conceivably he would not have been the least offended.

"Thank God our Sandro has gotten in with the watchers-over," one of the Chegemians said, making an effort to overcome his discomfiture at the lack of a real fire in the house.

There was a long, thoughtful pause.

"Iron knees are valued more than ever by the powers that be," the second Chegemian said, explaining the reason for Uncle Sandro's success.

"I recall as how Prince Tatyran Khan valued good dancers too," the third Chegemian said, drawing a historical parallel.

"Still, not so much," the fourth Chegemian added after a long silence. He had thought for a long time because he wanted to say something of his own, but, unable to find anything of his own, he had decided he would make a small correction in what had been said by someone else.

The Chegemians went on with their meager discussion. The wife, sitting beside the sick little girl, slowly waved a fan over her. A fly buzzed and beat against the windowpane. Uncle Sandro tried to be patient.

Suddenly the door burst open, and in came the manager. Uncle Sandro jumped up, feeling that the stalled motor of time had started up again. Something had happened or the manager would not be here.

The manager greeted everyone, went over to the sick girl's bed, and said a few sympathetic words before getting down to business. Uncle Sandro listened distractedly, waiting impatiently for him to say why he had come.

"Easy come, easy go," Uncle Sandro replied to his sympathetic words—using the Turkish proverb not altogether felicitously.

"I didn't want to bother you," the manager said, sighing, as he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, "but there's a telegram for you."

"From whom?" Uncle Sandro said, snatching the folded blank.

"From Lakoba," the manager said with respectful wonder.

"COME IF YOU CAN NESTOR," Uncle Sandro read, so happy that the words swam before his eyes.

"If you can?" Uncle Sandro cried, and kissed the telegram with a smack. "Why, is there anything I wouldn't do for Nestor? Where's the Bik?" he added, turning imperiously to the manager.

"Waiting outside," the manager replied. "Don't forget to take your passport. They're really strict about that now."

"I know," Uncle Sandro nodded, and he snapped to his wife, "Get my cherkeska ready."

Twenty minutes later, standing at the door with his professional case in his hand, Uncle Sandro turned to those who were staying behind and said with prophetic certainty, "I swear by Nestor, the girl will get better."

"How do you know?" the Chegemians said, brightening. His wife said nothing; she just watched her husband contemptuously as she continued to fan the child.

"I can feel it," Uncle Sandro said, and he closed the door behind him.

"Not everyone is allowed to swear by the name of Nestor," Uncle Sandro heard from behind the door.

"Not more than one or two people in Abkhazia," another loyal Chegemian said, making it more specific, but Uncle Sandro was heading for his car and did not hear.

Incidentally, to jump ahead of my story, I can say that Uncle Sandro's prophecy—although based on nothing but shame for his hurried departure—did come true. The next morning, for the first time since she had been sick, the little girl asked for something to eat.

. . . After three hours of wild driving, the Buick stopped in Old Gagra at the gates of a sanatorium on one of the quiet green streets.

It was getting on toward evening. Uncle Sandro was nervous, suspecting he might be late. He ran into the gatehouse and went to a little lighted window, behind which a woman was sitting.

"A pass," he said, shoving his passport through the long tunnel of the bay window.

The woman looked at his passport, checked it against some sort of list, then glanced critically at Uncle Sandro several times, trying to detect alien features in his face.

Every time she looked at him Uncle Sandro froze, trying not to let any alien features materialize, setting his face in an expression of nonchalant likeness to himself.

The woman wrote out his pass. Uncle Sandro grew more and more agitated, sensing that this strict check-in process implied the nerve-racking exhilaration of an encounter with the Leader.

With the pass and his passport in one hand and his suitcase in the other, he quickly crossed the deserted courtyard of the sanatorium and halted at the entrance, where he was met by the policeman on duty. For some reason the latter stared long and hard at his pass, checking it against his passport.

"The Abkhazian ensemble," Uncle Sandro said, by implication stressing the peaceful nature of his visit. The policeman made no reply. Keeping the passport in his hand, he shifted his gaze to the suitcase.

Uncle Sandro nodded joyfully in response, to indicate that he fully understood how crucial the moment was. He briskly opened the suitcase and took out his cherkeska, his Asiatic boots, his riding breeches, his Caucasian belt and dagger, laying them all at his feet. As he took out each article Uncle Sandro honorably shook it, thus providing an opportunity for any ill-meant object that might be there to fall out.

When he got down to the belt and dagger, Uncle Sandro smiled and slid it out of the scabbard a little way, as if distantly suggesting its utter uselessness for regicide, even if such an insane idea were to arise in some insane mind.

The policeman followed his movements attentively and nodded curtly, as if acknowledging the fact of the dagger's uselessness and cutting off all possibility of discussion on this point.

Uncle Sandro put all the things back in the suitcase, closed it, and was on the point of reaching for his passport and pass—but the policeman stopped him again.

"Are you Sandro Chegemba?" he asked.

"Yes," Uncle Sandro said. With a flash of insight he added, "But on the posters I'm Sandro Chegemsky!"

"Posters don't interest me," the policeman said. Without inviting Uncle Sandro to pass, he took a shiny new telephone from the wall and started calling someone.

Uncle Sandro felt desperate. He remembered the telegram—the document was his last salvation—and started rummaging through his pockets.

"Bik, CEC, Lakoba . . ." In his nervousness he muttered the words like a magic spell, rummaging through his pockets with no success.

Suddenly Uncle Sandro spotted Makhaz, his fellow ensemble member, coming down the broad carpeted staircase. Uncle Sandro felt that fate itself had sent him this countryman and neighbor. He gesticulated desperately, beckoning him over, even though Makhaz was coming down toward them anyway, slightly outdistancing the flaring hems of his cherkeska.

"Ask him," Uncle Sandro said when Makhaz came to a stop beside them,

puffing out his chest and swelling with involuntary pride. Paying no attention to Makhaz, the policeman went on listening to the receiver. Makhaz's neck started to turn red.

If Uncle Sandro had been listening to the telephone conversation, however, he would not have had to worry so much, and Makhaz would not have had to tire his chest muscles, which were essential for the singing to come.

The problem was that the woman at the gatehouse had first mistakenly written "Chegen" instead of "Chegem" and then corrected the letter. This correction of the letter—apparently outside the rules for such a place—was what aroused the policeman's suspicion. Now, straightening out the misunderstanding over the phone, he convinced himself that she and she alone had corrected it.

Although the telephone was new, perhaps installed only that day, it did not work very well, and the policeman had to keep repeating his questions.

When he finally hung up, Makhaz thrust his puffed-up chest forward and announced, "Member of the ensemble, the well-known Sandro Chegemsky."

"I know," the policeman said simply. "You may pass."

Uncle Sandro and Makhaz went up the red-carpeted stairs. It turned out that the director of the ensemble had already sent Makhaz out to meet him several times.

Uncle Sandro felt no enmity toward the policeman now. On the contrary, he felt that the strict precautions surrounding his passage into the sanatorium were a guarantee of the grandeur of the encounter that lay ahead. Uncle Sandro would probably have agreed to face even more obstacles, so long as he knew he would overcome them in the end.

"Will he be here?" Uncle Sandro asked quietly when they reached the third floor and started down the corridor.

"Why will be, when he already is?" Makhaz said confidently. He already felt at home here. Makhaz opened one of the doors off the corridor and stopped to let Uncle Sandro go ahead of him. Uncle Sandro heard the familiar backstage hubbub, and with his excitement at fever pitch, he entered a large, brightly lit room.

The members of the troupe, already dressed in their costumes, were walking around the room limbering up. A few sprawled limply in soft chairs, their long legs stretched in front of them.

"Sandro's here!" cried several joyful voices.

Uncle Sandro embraced and kissed his comrades and showed them the telegram from Lakoba, which he had finally found.

"The manager brought it," he said, waving the telegram.

"Hurry up and change!" Pantsulaya shouted.

Uncle Sandro went to a corner where the troupe's clothes were hanging over chairs, and started to change, listening to the director's final instructions.

"The main thing is," Pantsulaya said, "when you're invited, don't jump at the food and wine. Behave modestly, but you don't have to play hard to get either. If one of the leaders invites you to have a drink, drink it, and then go

back to your comrades. Do *not*—especially if you're chewing—stand beside the Leader as if you'd stormed the Winter Palace with him."

As they listened to Pantsulaya, the dancers kept walking around the room, limbering up, bending at the waist. From time to time one of them would rise up on his toes, lift one leg buttoned into a glove-soft Asiatic boot, and suddenly—hop, hop, hop!—take several giant leaps, all the while listening to the even, soothing voice of the director.

Pata Pataraya took several trial runs, practicing for his famous number. He did not fall to his knees, merely slid, in order to get a good feel for the floor. After each slide he would stop, turn around carefully, and measure how far he had gone by putting the heel of one foot to the toe of the other.

Uncle Sandro did the same thing. By now he could regulate the force of his running start and the distance of his slide with an accuracy of the length of his foot. True, Pata Pataraya did it with an accuracy of the width of his hand, but Uncle Sandro had his secret number in reserve, and now his soul was seared with nervous exultation: Would it work?

"Remember, there isn't going to be any stage," Pantsulaya was saying, pacing back and forth among his charges in his white cherkeska. "You'll be dancing right on the floor, the floor in there is the same as here. The main thing is, don't get nervous! The leaders are people just like us, only much better—"

Just then the door opened and a middle-aged man wearing a tussah tunic appeared. It was the manager of the sanatorium. Ominously, and at the same time fearfully, as if anticipating some failure, he nodded to Pantsulaya.

"Follow me, one at a time," Pantsulaya said quietly. He slipped softly to the door behind the tussah tunic.

Pata Pataraya went next; after Pata, Uncle Sandro; and then the others, who reflexly made way for the best.

With the noiseless steps of court conspirators they went through the corridor and started into a room where a man in plainclothes stood at the door.

The sanatorium manager nodded to him. He nodded in reply and began letting them through, looking carefully at each one and counting with his eyes. The room turned out to be absolutely empty except for two men sitting at the far end by the window, wearing plainclothes like the one at the door. They were smoking, talking comfortably back and forth. On noticing the troupe members, one of them, without getting up, nodded to let them know they could pass.

The manager opened the next door and there was a roar of voices at table. Without going inside, he stopped at the doorway and silently, with a desperate gesture of his arm—Come on! come on! come on!—swept them all into the banquet hall.

Within a few seconds the troupe members had fited into the hall and lined up in two rows, blinded by the bright lights, the plenteous table, and the vastness of the crowd.

The banquet was at its height. Everything had happened so fast that not everyone noticed they were in the hall. At first isolated claps, then a joyous

squall of applause greeted the twenty cypresslike knights who had sprung up from nowhere, led by Platon Pantsulaya.

It was manifest that those who were applauding had eaten and drunk well and were now pleased to have their merriment prolonged by dint of art, in order that they might later return to fresh merriment at the table.

Regaining their wits, the troupe members tried to spot Comrade Stalin, but did not immediately locate him, because they were looking into the depths of the hall, whereas Comrade Stalin was sitting quite close to them, right at the end of the table. He was facing slightly away, toward his neighbor, who turned out to be the All-Union head man, Kalinin.

The applause continued, and Pantsulaya, his head bowed, stood before the cypress line like a marble image of gratitude. Then, sensing that the applause was not waning and that further silence from the troupe would therefore be immodest, he lifted his head, glanced sideways at the troupe members, and clapped his hands. In the same way, a horseman, after raising his quirt, looks back at his charger's croup before giving it a crack.

The troupe members began to applaud, the roar of their love forcing its way through to the very source of love, through the countering roar of governmental affection. Stalin suddenly got to his feet, and the whole hall rumbly followed suit, everyone trying to catch up with him before he could straighten up.

It lasted for about a minute, this bloodless battle of mutual affection, like the friendly uproar of chums slapping each other on the back, a silly lovers' skirmish where the conquered thanked the conqueror and then lovingly conquered him, toppling his wave of roars with a new wave of roars.

The dancers continued to applaud while talking back and forth, as they were accustomed to do, without turning to each other.

"There's Comrade Stalin!"

"Where, where?"

"Talking to Kalinin!"

"Look, Voroshilov's short too!"

"And who's that?"

"Beria's wife!"

"The leaders are all short—Stalin, Voroshilov, Beria, Lakoba . . ."

"I wonder why?"

"Lenin was short—that's how it got started."

"They may be short, but they're pretty solid."

"Sandro, you should be the tamada at a table like that."

"Our Nestor's the tamada!"

"Or maybe Beria?"

"No, see, Nestor's sitting at the head of the table."

"Stalin always picks him. He's his favorite."

Gradually the mutual applause melted together and evened out, finding a common epicenter of love, its reason for being. And the fulcrum on which its being turned was Comrade Stalin. Now even the secretaries of the district com-

mittees, as if unable to resist the fascination exerted by the epicenter of love, turned their applause to Stalin. Gazing at him and raising their arms, they all clapped as if trying to throw their own personal sound wave to him. And he, understanding this, smiled a fatherly smile and applauded as if faintly apologetic for the treachery of his cohorts, who were applauding not with him but for him, which was why he was powerless by himself to answer their wave of applause with equal might.

He was gladdened by the sight of these well-built dancers, tightly buttoned into their black cherkeskas. At moments like this, he loved anything whose value was both obvious and irrelevant to politics, which sometimes wearied him. *Seemingly* irrelevant, that is, because subliminally he associated this obvious value and perfection with the cumbersome, crawly thing that metamorphosed from his every political act, and he interpreted it as a material, if small, proof of the thing's innocence.

Thus the twenty well-built dancers metamorphosed into flourishing delegates for his ethnic policy, just as the children who ran to the Mausoleum where he stood on holidays metamorphosed into the heralds of the future, its rosy kisses. And he could appreciate these things as no one else could, stunning those who surrounded him by his unparalleled range—from demonic mercilessness down to tenderness over what were, in point of fact, very small joys. Noticing that those who surrounded him were stunned by his unparalleled range, he more keenly appreciated his own ability to appreciate the small joys of life that lay outside history.

As it happened, one of the rejoicing delegates for his ethnic policy—Uncle Sandro, to be precise—had finished feasting his eyes on the leaders. Still applauding, he shifted his gaze to the table.

The table, or rather tables, traversed the banquet hall and at the end forked into two fruit-laden branches. The platters of food stood out in pleasant contrast to the cool whiteness of white tablecloths.

Gibbous turkeys lay in rich brown nut sauce, roast chickens presented their bare rumps with a certain appetizing indecency. Vases bloomed with fruit, candy, cookies, pastries. Split pomegranates, as if cracked by inner fire, opened a glimpse of their sinful caverns crammed with precious stones.

Beds of salad greens glistened as if they had just been rained on. Young lambs, cooked in milk in the ancient Abkhazian manner, mildly evoked a lost innocence, while the roast suckling pigs, by contrast, clenched the crimson radishes in their bared teeth with a sort of devilish glee.

Alongside every bottle of wine, like vigilant hospital orderlies, stood bottles of Borzhom mineral water. The wine bottles were without labels, obviously from local cellars. By the smell Uncle Sandro determined that the wine was an Isabella from the village of Lykhny.

Most of the food was still untouched. Some had long since gone cold—the roast quails had congealed in their own fat. Stalin did not like to have waiters and other superfluous people flitting around at the table. Everything was served

at once, in a heap, although the kitchen was kept ready in case of any sudden desires.

At the table everyone ate what he pleased and as he pleased, but God forbid he should cheat and omit the required glass. That the Leader did not like. The democracy of food at his table was balanced by the despotism of drink.

At the head of the table sat Nestor Lakoba. A large, dark horn with a slight scorch mark lay beside him—the scepter of power at table.

To his right sat Stalin, then Kalinin. To Lakoba's left sat his wife, the dusky Sarya; beside her the beautiful Nina, Beria's wife; and then Nina's husband, with his pince-nez flashing energetically. Beyond Beria sat Voroshilov, who stood out because of his snow-white service jacket, his sword belt, and the revolver at his waist. Beyond Voroshilov and Kalinin, on either side of the table, sat secondary leaders, ones who were not known to Uncle Sandro by their portraits.

The rest of the room was taken up by the secretaries of the district committees of western Georgia, with their eyebrows raised as if frozen in surprise. Scattered among them here and there were comrades from the local secret service. Uncle Sandro recognized them immediately, because unlike the district committee secretaries they were not surprised by anything and did not have their eyebrows raised.

Nestor Lakoba, sitting at the head of the table, now turned abruptly to look at the ensemble. As the host, observing the proprieties, he applauded with much more reserve than the others.

When Stalin lowered his hands and sat down, the applause ceased. But not all at once, because the people sitting farthest off could not see him. It ceased the way the wind drops, rustling in the foliage of a large tree.

"Our beloved Leader and dear guests!" Pantsulaya began. "Our humble Abkhazian ensemble, organized at the personal initiative of Nestor Apollonovich Lakoba . . ."

Uncle Sandro observed that at this moment Stalin looked at Lakoba and smiled roguishly in his mustache, to which Lakoba replied with a bashful shrug.

". . . will perform for you several Abkhazian songs and dances, as well as songs and dances of the friendly family of Caucasian peoples."

Pantsulaya bowed his head low, as if apologizing in advance that he must now turn his back on his lofty guests. Without raising his head—in one smooth movement, striving to avoid any offensive suddenness in the pose he was about to take (since the pose itself was now inevitable), all the while wearing an expression of grief at having to turn his back—he completed his polysemantic turn, raised his head, waved his arms in the winged sleeves of the white cherkeska, and froze in mid-wave.

"*O-rayda, siua-rayda, hey,*" Makhaz intoned, as if from deep in a narrow ravine.

And then, at a wave of the winged sleeves, the chorus took up the ancient song. Not everyone will return from the raid, the song says in sparing words.

Not everyone is fated to see again the flame on his family hearth. And when the youth lying dead across his saddle rides into the yard of his father's house, the steed shudders, and the corpse moves, at the mother's scream.

But the father does not cry out and the brother does not weep, because only when he has taken revenge does a man gain the right to tears.

*Such is the will of fate and the fate of man.*

*Woman ripens to give birth to a man.*

*Man ripens to give birth to courage.*

*The grape ripens to give birth to wine.*

*Wine ripens to summon up courage.*

*And the song ripens into dance to summon up the raid.*

Gradually the energy shifts from the melody into the rhythm. The song tightens up, throws off excess clothes, as a warrior throws off his before entering the fray.

Uncle Sandro feels the approaching intoxication, feels the song pouring into his blood, and now he wants to become the dance, a fulfillment of the oath embedded in it.

The members of the ensemble are already clapping their hands, though all are still humming the tune, which is compressed to a minimum. Now all of the energy is in the rhythm of the clapping hands, but the dance must ripen, build to the right point, and therefore they go on warming it at the tiny fire of melody.

"*O-rayda, siua-rayda!*" the chorus repeats.

Tash-tush! Tash-tush!—clap the hands, continuing the process of drawing the dance out of the song.

Some of the spectators cannot resist, and they too start clapping their hands, trying to hasten the onset of the dance. Everyone in the hall, along with Comrade Stalin, is clapping his hands.

Tash-tush! Tash-tush! And at this point Pata Pataraya breaks forward. The mad dash of a steed breaking loose from its tether, and suddenly—he stops dead! He reaches high, up on his toes, arched taut, illustrating his readiness to fly like an arrow, to slice into enemy ranks, but at the last moment he changes his decision, and in a mad spin he quenches the insatiable thirst of the warrior to break through somewhere and slice into something.

Sandro Chegemsky throws himself into the circle! And now all the dancers soar in the black whirlwinds of their cherkeskas, illustrating man's ancient readiness to become a warrior, and the warrior's to slice, to fly, to break through . . . But at the last second it turns out that the order to slice, to fly, to break through has not yet been given.

"Oh, so it's like that?" the dancers seem to say, and ominously stamping their feet, they begin to whirl around. A moment later they stop spinning, only to learn that the order is again late in coming.

"Oh, so it's like that?" And again, stamping their feet, they whirl around.



"Like that? Oh, not yet?" And again.

"Like that? Like that? Like that?"

Circling and whirling they become thin, stratified, and finally semitransparent, like a propellor. It seems that by spinning around they can quench the insatiable thirst for battle.

"*O-rayda, siua-rayda!*" Tash-tush! Tash-tush!

Skillfully, and with perfect timing, the dancers replace one another, flying into the circle, and now it seems that the carousel of the dance is moving of its own accord, by some ancient plan whose essence is the desire to stupefy the invisible enemy (in olden days, when the princes invited one another to feasts, the enemy was visible), stupefy him with the inexhaustibility of their fierce energy.

With brief intervals for songs, the ensemble dances Abkhazian, Georgian, Mingrelian, and Adzharian dances.

And now, the climax—a wedding dance. The long-awaited moment has come. With an abrupt shout, Pata Pataraya takes a flying start, tucks up his legs in mid-leap, thuds to his knees, and with arms outflung slides to a halt near the feet of Comrade Stalin.

This was so unexpected that some of the guests, especially those sitting farthest away, jumped to their feet, not understanding what had happened. Beria was the first one up. The lenses of his pince-nez flashing, he froze in a warlike posture over the table.

But there was no malicious intent, and Comrade Stalin smiled. A storm of applause broke, and Pata Pataraya, as if blown away by the storm, straightened up and flew back into the moving circle of dancers.

Now it was Uncle Sandro's turn. Catching just the right point in the music, he leaped whooping out from behind the backs of the clapping dancers and repeated Pata Pataraya's celebrated number, but stopped much closer, right at Comrade Stalin's feet. Uncle Sandro slid his eyes up from the Leader's well-cleaned and polished boots to his face, and was struck by the similarity between the oily glitter of his boots and the resplendent, oily glitter of his dark eyes.

Again applause.

"They're competing!" Lakoba shouted to Stalin, trying to shout over the roar and his own deafness. Stalin nodded and smiled his approval.

Again Pata Pataraya, crying out as if he had been stung, plopped to his knees, slid, and froze with arms outflung in a posture of audacious devotion, at Comrade Stalin's very toes.

Beria shook his head. "Out of bounds."

"Well, I think it's great!" Kalinin exclaimed, peering over Comrade Stalin's shoulder.

A storm of applause, and Pata Pataraya fell back into the whirlwind of dancers. The fact that he had succeeded in stopping a mere handbreadth from the Leader's feet had virtually assured his victory.

But a man from Chegem is not one to surrender without a fight! Now the fate

of the best dancer was to be decided, and Uncle Sandro had something saved up for this occasion. Keeping a sharp eye on the distance from Comrade Stalin's feet to the spot where he was standing, he tried to intuit a moment when Stalin and Lakoba would not change their position. With the gesture of a knight covering his face with his visor, he jammed his turban down over his eyes, whooped a Chegem whoop, and charged straight for Comrade Stalin.

Even the other dancers did not expect anything like this. The chorus suddenly stopped clapping and all the dancers halted, with the exception of one who had been dancing at the opposite end of the room. A few more futile stomps and the dancer's feet fell quiet in terror.

In the silence, his face concealed by the turban, his arms thrown wide, Uncle Sandro flew crackling across the dance floor on his knees and came to a halt at Comrade Stalin's feet.

Stalin frowned in surprise. The pipe he gripped in one hand jerked slightly. But Uncle Sandro's pose, which expressed an audacious devotion—the poignant defenselessness of the outflung arms, the blindness of the proudly thrown-back head, and, paradoxically, a mysterious urgent stubbornness about the whole figure, as if to tell the Leader, "I won't get up until you give me your blessing"—made him smile.

Still smiling, indeed, he laid his pipe on the table, and with the expression of curiosity that one has at a masquerade, he started to untie the turban on Uncle Sandro's head.

When the tie-end of the turban slipped from Uncle Sandro's face and everyone saw it illumined with the blessing of the Leader, a hurricane of unprecedented applause broke out, and the secretaries of the district committees of western Georgia raised their eyebrows even higher in surprise, although it had seemed that their eyebrows were already raised as high as they could go.

Still holding Uncle Sandro's turban in one hand, Stalin displayed it to everyone with a smile, as if to let them see for themselves that the number had been done honestly, without any tricks. With a gesture he invited Uncle Sandro to stand up. Uncle Sandro stood up, and Kalinin took the turban from Stalin's hands and started examining it. All of a sudden Voroshilov leaned across the table and deftly snatched the turban out of Kalinin's hands. To the laughter of those around him, he held the turban to his eyes, showing that he really could not see through it.

Stalin looked at Uncle Sandro with his radiant eyes and asked, "Who are you, abrek?"

"I am Sandro of Chegem," Uncle Sandro replied, lowering his eyes. The leader's gaze was too resplendent. But that was not the only reason. An uneasy shadow had flitted through those eyes, and an alarm echoed in Uncle Sandro's soul.

"Chegem," the Leader repeated pensively. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"Come here," Lakoba said in Abkhazian. He thrust Uncle Sandro's turban into his hands. Uncle Sandro walked away.

"What precision," he heard Kalinin say. Stroking his beard, Kalinin looked affectionately in Uncle Sandro's direction.

"You can see the sun even through a turban," Voroshilov observed pompously as he cut off the ear of a suckling pig. While he was working on the ear, the pig released the radish that had been stuffed in its mouth, and it rolled across the table, much to Voroshilov's surprise. He was so startled that he left his fork in the half-severed ear of the pig and started hunting down the radish in among the dishes and bottles.

Only now did Uncle Sandro turn his attention to the fact that those sitting at the table had had a great deal to drink. Now he trained his experienced eye on them and determined that they had already consumed twelve to thirteen glasses apiece.

Uncle Sandro used to say that from the appearance of men at table he could determine to within one glass how much they had drunk. He explained that the more people there were at the table, and the more they had drunk, the more precisely he could determine their consumption. But that was not all. It seemed that the precision of the estimate did not increase indefinitely with the amount of wine drunk. After three liters, Uncle Sandro said, the precision of the estimate decreased again.

. . . Platon Pantsulaya stood before the doubled cypress ranks of his charges. Now they were to sing "*Keraz*," a song about the Red Partisan guerrillas. Everything was going as well as possible, and so Pantsulaya took his time, giving the dancers a chance to catch their breath.

"Good going," said Makhaz, the one from Uncle Sandro's home district. "Now you're set for life."

"Oh, come on, Makhaz." Uncle Sandro tried to be modest.

"And why not?" Makhaz said hotly, without looking at him. "Sliding right up to Stalin himself, and with your turban over your face, too! Even the Germans couldn't think up anything like that!"

Yes, Uncle Sandro understood perfectly well that this brilliant trick not only made him number one in the ensemble, but permanently established his authority at headquarters. Now, of course, the manager wouldn't dare bother him with stupid questions about the firewood.

When they started singing the Partisan song "*Keraz*," Uncle Sandro just pretended to sing, opening and closing his mouth slightly in time with the melody. This was a first small reward for his feat.

While they were singing, Lakoba leaned over to tell Stalin something, and from the fact that he and Stalin glanced in his direction several times, Uncle Sandro sensed, with sweetly fluttering stomach, that they were talking about him.

When Nestor Apollonovich clenched his fist and swung his arm to illustrate something, Uncle Sandro surmised that he was telling Stalin about the Prayer Tree: his gesture meant that one had to strike the tree with something to make

it sing "*Kum-khoz* . . ." In any case Stalin leaned back and burst out laughing at this point in the story, and Kalinin nudged him to indicate that he was interfering with the singers. Stalin stopped laughing, leaned over to Kalinin, and, as Uncle Sandro surmised, began retelling the same story. When he reached the point where he had to illustrate how the tree was struck, he made several energetic gestures with the hand that clutched his pipe. At this, Kalinin could not restrain himself, and his little beard bounced as he went off in a fit of laughter, whereupon Stalin shook a finger at him, indicating that his laughter was interfering with the singers.

Taking the horn in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other, Stalin stood up and walked over to the dancers.

Nestor Apollonovich whispered something to his wife, and she seized a chicken platter from the table and hurried after Stalin. Before Stalin could reach the dancers, the sanatorium manager appeared and tried to assist him. Stalin shouldered him aside and himself poured a full horn of wine and served it to Makhaz.

Makhaz put one hand on his heart, accepted the horn with the other, and carefully raised it to his lips. As he applied himself to the horn and drank, Stalin watched him with satisfaction.

"Drink, drink, drink," he said methodically, chopping the air with his small puffy hand.

It was a one-liter horn. Taking the empty bottle from Stalin, the manager put it on the table and ran for a fresh one. He took the platter from Sarya and held it for her to cut up the chicken. Either from embarrassment or because the platter shook in the manager's hands, Sarya was clumsy with the knife and fork. A blush appeared on her dark cheeks, and the manager began to gasp for breath.

Meanwhile Makhaz drained the horn, turned it upside down to show his honesty, and handed it to Uncle Sandro. Stalin, noticing that the food was late in coming, gave up on Sarya. Decisively, using both hands, he took the chicken by the legs and—with enjoyment, Uncle Sandro noted—ripped it in half. Then he ripped each half again. The fat dripped down his fingers, but he paid no attention to it.

It struck Uncle Sandro that the Leader's left hand was not entirely dextrous in its movements. Wonder if he has a withered arm, Uncle Sandro thought. Discreetly examining it, he decided yes, a little bit. I should get him together with Bad Hand, he thought for no apparent reason. Uncle Sandro felt that on the whole this slight impairment somehow diminished the leader's image. Just a bit, but still . . .

Taking a chicken leg with his wet hand, Stalin gave it to Makhaz. The latter bowed again, accepted the leg, and took a decorous bite.

The manager was about to try and fill the horn, but Stalin again took the bottle away from him. Grasping it in fingers slippery with chicken fat, he filled the horn and gave the empty bottle to the manager. The latter ran for another.

"Drink, drink, drink," Uncle Sandro heard, as soon as he raised the horn.

Uncle Sandro drank, smoothly tilting the horn with the nonchalant artistry of the true tamada—not drinking, but pouring the precious liquid from one vessel into another.

“You drink the way you dance,” Stalin said. Proffering him a chicken leg, he looked into his eyes with his resplendent feminine gaze. “Have I seen you somewhere before, abrek?”

Stalin’s hand, proffering the chicken leg, suddenly stopped motionless, and an expression of menacing alertness appeared in his eyes. Uncle Sandro had a sensation of mortal danger, although he could not imagine why. He knew that Stalin was wrong, that he, Sandro, would remember it if he had ever seen Stalin anywhere.

The ensemble, which was silent anyway, turned to stone. Uncle Sandro heard Makhaz’s jaws stop chewing the chicken. He had to answer. He could not deny that Stalin had seen him, and at the same time it was still more terrifying to agree that he had, not only because Uncle Sandro did not remember it, but mainly because Stalin was inviting him to be part of some disagreeable memory. He sensed this immediately.

A mighty engine of self-preservation, developed through many dangers, turned over all the possible answers in a second or two and cast up to the surface the least dangerous one.

“They made a movie about us,” Uncle Sandro said, to his own surprise. “You might have seen me in it, Comrade Stalin.”

“Ah-h, a movie,” the Leader said slowly, and the light in his eyes went out. He handed him the chicken leg. “Here, you deserve it.”

Again came the gurgle of wine being poured into the horn.

“Drink, drink, drink,” echoed beside him.

Uncle Sandro took a bite of the chicken leg and made a slight movement with his neck, feeling that it had gone numb, and recognizing by the numbness what a weight had fallen from him. Well, well, Uncle Sandro thought, how did I remember that we had been in a movie? Hi-ho, Sandro, thought Uncle Sandro, intoxicated with joy and pride. No sir, it’s not so easy to nip a Chegemian! Can we really have met somewhere? He must have confused me with someone else. I wouldn’t want to be in the shoes of the man he confused me with, Uncle Sandro thought, glad that he was Sandro of Chegem and not the man the Leader had confused him with.

Stalin was already giving the horn to the last dancer in the front row when Nestor Apollonovich came over to him.

“Maybe we should invite them to the table?” he asked.

“Whatever you say, my dear Nestor; I’m only a guest,” Stalin replied. Accepting a napkin from Sarya, he began wiping his hands, slowly and significantly, like a mechanic who has finished a job. Throwing the napkin on the ravaged platter, he walked to the table beside Lakoba, at a springy gait that carried his strength easily.

The members of the ensemble were seated around the banquet table, the best

performers among the leaders, the more ordinary ones among the secretaries of the district committees of western Georgia. A rather considerable amount of noise now rose over the banquet table. Heterogeneous islets of conversation began to take on independent life.

Suddenly Comrade Stalin stood up with his wineglass raised. A thundering silence fell, and in an instant the air was cleansed of the rubbish of noise.

“I raise this glass,” he began in a quietly impressive voice, “to this medal-bearing republic and its permanent leader . . .”

He stood motionless for a long moment, as if for the last time attempting to weigh this leader’s lofty qualities, for which he himself had rewarded him by making his position permanent. Although everyone understood that he could now name no one but Lakoba, still, the lengthy pause engendered a fever of anxious curiosity: What if—?

“. . . my best friend, Nestor Lakoba,” Stalin concluded, and his hand made an affirmative gesture, somewhat abbreviated by the weight of the wineglass.

“‘Best,’ he said the ‘best,’” buzzed the district committee secretaries, pondering how this remark would hit Party leadership in Tbilisi, and whether from there it might ricochet to hit each and every one of them. The eyebrows of every one of them were still fixedly raised in surprise.

“. . . In this republic you know how to work and how to make merry . . .”

“Long live Comrade Stalin!” one of the district committee secretaries shouted suddenly, jumping to his feet. Stalin swiftly turned toward him with an expression of menacing contempt, whereupon the secretary, a tall and mountainous man, slowly started to sag. As though satisfied of the certainty that the man would complete his slump, Stalin looked away from him.

“Some comrades . . .” he continued slowly, and in his voice one could hear distant rumbles of irritation. Everyone realized that he was angry at the district committee secretary for his inappropriate glorification of Stalin.

Beria fidgeted in his seat. Removing his pince-nez for a moment, he threw the man one of his notorious murky green glances. The district committee secretary recoiled as from a blow.

The district committee secretaries sitting beside him imperceptibly moved away, forming between themselves and him a gap that had an ideological nuance. All the district committee secretaries looked at him with their eyebrows raised in surprise, as if trying to see who he was and where the devil he’d come from.

Bracing his hands on the table, staring at Beria, he continued to sag slowly, trying to ease his way into the company at the table unnoticed, and at the same time holding himself back in case he should be ordered to leave.

“. . . some scholars, there in Moscow . . .” Stalin continued, after an even longer pause, and the note of menace and irritation sounded still more distinctly in his voice. It was immediately clear to everyone that he was deciding something very important in his mind and had long since forgotten the clumsy district committee secretary.

Beria removed his gaze from the man, and he seemed to collapse beneath his own broken backbone, tumble joyously down—it had passed!

“Bukharin.” Uncle Sandro heard the whisper from one of the secondary leaders not known to him by their portraits.

“Bukharin, Bukharin, Bukharin.” The whispers buzzed through the ranks of the district committee secretaries.

It was known in Party circles that Stalin did in fact call Bukharin that. In the days of their friendship, “our scholar.” Now, “that scholar.”

“. . . think that governing by Lenin’s way,” Stalin continued, “means holding endless discussions, timorously avoiding decisive measures . . .”

Stalin again lapsed into a reverie. He seemed to be listening to the buzz with the estranged interest of an outsider, and enjoying it. He loved this kind of vague innuendo. His listeners’ imaginations inevitably widened the meaning of it, owing to the ill-defined margins of the contaminated area. They would all retreat farther than necessary, and later he could make political hay by accusing those who had retreated too far of vacillation.

“. . . but governing by Lenin’s way means, first, not fearing decisive measures, and second, finding specialized personnel and adeptly placing them where they belong. A little example.”

Suddenly Stalin looked at Uncle Sandro, and the latter felt his heart plunge straight down while he returned the Leader’s gaze unblinkingly.

“. . . Nestor found this abrek in a remote mountain village, and made his talent universally accessible,” Stalin continued. “Before, he danced for a narrow circle of friends, but now he dances for the enjoyment of the whole republic and for your enjoyment and mine, comrades.

“. . . So let us drink to my dear friend, the host of this table, Nestor Lakoba,” Comrade Stalin concluded. Still standing, he drained his glass and added, “*Al-laverdy, Lavrenty.*”

He knew perfectly well that Beria and Lakoba did not like each other, and he was amusing himself by making Beria be the first to drink to Lakoba.

With the tip of his knife, Stalin took a dollop of *ajika* from the relish dish and transferred it to his plate. Slathering a chunk of lamb with the purple condiment, he put it in his mouth and crunched the milky gristle.

“Not too hot?” Kalinin asked warily, watching Stalin smear the meat with *ajika*.

“No,” Stalin said, shaking his head, “I think this Abkhazian *ajika* has a great future.”

Many of those who heard Stalin’s remark reached for the *ajika*. Subsequently this prediction of the Leader’s, unlike many of his others, did in fact come true: *ajika* spread far beyond the borders of Abkhazia.

Meanwhile, in no way betraying his feelings, Beria offered a toast and drank to Lakoba. Lakoba, who had listened to the Leader’s toast on his hearing aid, now took it off and listened to Beria with his hand cupped to his ear. In no way

did he betray his feelings, either; from time to time he nodded to show his gratitude and that he had heard the words.

After Beria, Kalinin took the floor and drank to Lakoba, saying a few words about scholars who had long been out of touch with the common people. Stalin liked his toast and reached over to kiss him. Kalinin unexpectedly ducked the kiss.

Stalin frowned. Uncle Sandro was again amazed at how quickly his mood changed. His eyes had just been shining resplendently at Kalinin, and suddenly they were opaque, withdrawn. Beria’s pince-nez flashed animatedly, and the district committee secretaries stared at Kalinin, eyebrows raised in surprise.

That means he’s with them, not with me, Stalin thought in fright, how could I have missed it? He was frightened not by Kalinin’s betrayal itself—it would take nothing to crush him—but by the fact that his own sensitivity to danger, a sensitivity he trusted, had betrayed him. This was terrifying.

“Who wants to kiss a pockmarked fellow like you?” Kalinin said, looking at Stalin with an impertinent grin. “Now if you were a sixteen-year-old girl [he carefully cupped his right hand and gave it a slight shake, as if hearkening to the sweet bell of youth], that would be another matter.”

Stalin’s face lit up, and a sigh of relief whispered through the hall. No, my sensitivity didn’t betray me, Stalin thought.

“Oh, you—my All-Union goat,” he said, hugging and kissing Kalinin, in reality hugging and kissing his own sensitivity.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” laughed the district committee secretaries, rejoicing in the leaders’ mutual joke. Lakoba joined in a little belatedly, after Uncle Sandro, who was now sitting beside him, explained the joke, which he had not quite heard. Lakoba’s belated laughter sounded rather strange, and Beria, unable to restrain himself, guffawed ambiguously, although his guffaw might have been taken for an echo of Lakoba’s laugh.

But Stalin perceived the mockery in Beria’s laughter. Just now he found it disagreeable. He looked over at Beria and said, “Lavrenty, ask your wife to dance for us.”

“Of course, Comrade Stalin,” Beria said, looking at his wife.

“But I can’t, Comrade Stalin,” she said, flushing.

Stalin knew she could not dance.

“The Leader wants you,” Beria whispered threateningly.

“Why ‘the Leader’—we all do,” Stalin said. Encompassing the members of the ensemble in his gaze, he added, “Come on, fellows.”

Clapping and humming as they went, the members of the ensemble formed a semicircle, the open side toward the head of the table.

“I’m not being coy, I really don’t know how,” Beria’s wife said, trying to make herself heard over the clapping. But now everyone was calling for her. Urged on by her husband, balking timidly, she walked into the circle. At a moment when Beria turned his back to the table, Uncle Sandro noticed that his

distorted lips were whispering obscenities to his wife. Spreading her arms, she took a couple of awkward turns and stopped, not knowing what to do next. It was clear that she really did not know how to dance.

"Good girl," Stalin said, smiling and applauding her. Everyone applauded Beria's wife.

"Sarya, we want Sarya," called some voices. Sarya was sitting between Uncle Sandro and Lakoba. Her dark eyes flashed and she looked at her husband.

"Go on," Lakoba said in Abkhazian. She glanced at Stalin. He smiled back affectionately. Everything was going the way he wanted.

Sarya entered the circle. Her head somewhat tilted back by her heavy knot of hair, the dusky beauty took a few smooth turns and suddenly stopped beside Pata Pataraya, inviting him to dance. Smiling modestly, Pata glided alongside her.

Beria sat at the table without looking at the dancers, his head resting heavily in his hand. His wife, distraught, stood beside the ensemble, apparently unable to decide whether to resume her place.

"Lavrenty," Stalin said softly. Beria straightened up and looked at the Leader. "It looks like specialized personnel aren't the only thing the Deaf One knows best."

Beria shrugged his shoulders as if to say, There's nothing to be done about it—it's fate. This made Uncle Sandro uncomfortable, he sensed danger lurking here for Lakoba. Oh no, the Leader shouldn't provoke him that way, Uncle Sandro thought.

At this point Sarya ran out of the circle, embraced Beria's wife, and kissed her on the eyes. Everyone felt a secret nobility in this impulse of hers, a desire to soften Nina's failure, to turn it all into a joke. Everyone clapped joyfully, and the women, their arms around each other, returned to the table.

"Tell me later what they said," Lakoba whispered to Uncle Sandro during the final burst of applause, while everyone was watching Sarya embrace Beria's wife. Lakoba had noticed Stalin saying something to Beria, and the latter shrugging his shoulders. He must have sensed that they were talking about him.

Almost as Lakoba spoke, three pistol shots rang out. Uncle Sandro leaped to his feet. Voroshilov returned a smoking pistol to his holster. Stirred by Sarya's dance, and especially by her noble impulse, he could not restrain himself from making this little salute. Everyone buzzed gleefully and started looking at the ceiling, where beside the chandelier there were three little black holes joined by a jagged crack.

The plaster that rained down after the shots had covered a cooling turkey with a white deposit. Stalin looked at the powdered turkey, looked up at the black holes in the ceiling, and then shifted his gaze to Voroshilov and said, "You missed."

Voroshilov flushed darkly and hung his head.

"We have among us," Stalin said, "a genuine first-class sniper. Let's get him up here."

He looked at Lakoba, laid his pipe on the table, and began to applaud. Everyone amiably took up the applause, joining the Leader, although almost nobody actually knew what was going on.

Lakoba understood what was being asked of him. He ducked his head and shrugged in embarrassment.

"Maybe it's not worth the bother?" he said, glancing at Stalin. The latter held a match to his pipe.

"No, it is, it is!" voices cried all around. Stalin stopped in the middle of lighting up and nodded at the cries as if to say, The voice of the people—what can you do.

Embarrassed at the pleasure that lay ahead, Nestor Apollonovich gestured helplessly. He started looking around for the sanatorium manager, but the manager was already trotting toward him.

"Call him," Lakoba said as the manager bent down to him.

"Should he change his clothes?" the manager asked, still bending down.

"Why?" Lakoba frowned. "Let's keep it simple."

Nestor Apollonovich poured himself a glass of wine and gestured to indicate that everyone should follow suit. Everyone filled his glass.

"I want to raise this glass," he began in his splintery voice, "not to the Leader, but to the Leader's modesty."

Apropos, Nestor Apollonovich told the following anecdote. It seemed that last year he had received a note from Comrade Stalin in which the latter had asked him to send him some mandarin oranges, giving strict orders for the parcel to be accompanied by a bill, which the Leader would pay out of his very next paycheck.

Stalin pensively puffed on his pipe as he listened to Nestor's story. This is all true, he was thinking, the Deaf One is not flattering me. And I did send the money out of my next paycheck. A good lesson to all these secretaries, who don't know how to do anything but crane their eyebrows all evening long.

It pleased him that everything Nestor was saying was true, but, looking deeper within himself, he found another source of a more secret but also a more subtle joy. The source of this joy, he remembered, was that even as he was writing that note, he knew that sooner or later it would crop up and play its little historical role, just this way. So, who knew how to look into the future—he or those "scholars"?

"... One might wonder, would it really impoverish our republic to send this miserable bunch of mandarins to Comrade Stalin?" Nestor Lakoba continued.

"It wasn't you and I who put the mandarins in, my dear Nestor." Stalin jabbed his pipe in his direction. "The people put them in."

"The people put them in," buzzed through the ranks.

The people put them in, Stalin repeated to himself, still dimly groping after the explosive play on words imprisoned in this innocent expression. Later on, when his magnificent formula "Enemy of the People" was worked out and issued, there were those who tried to attribute its origin to the French Revolution. Maybe

the French did have something of the sort, but *he* knew that he had nursed it to life himself, right here in Russia.

(Like a poet, for whom a sudden combination of words is a flare illuminating the contours of a future poem, he found in these chance words the embryo of a future formula.

It is terrifying to think that the mechanism for crystallizing an idea is the same for a hangman and a poet, just as the stomachs of a cannibal and a normal man accept food with the same good conscience. But if we think about it, what seems to be the indifference of human nature may be a result of the highest wisdom of man's moral nature.

Man is given the choice of becoming a hangman, just as he is given the choice of not becoming one. In the final analysis, the choice is ours.

And if the cannibal's stomach simply would not accept human flesh, this would be an oversimplified and dangerous way of humanizing the cannibal. No one knows where his proclivity might lead him next.

There is no humanity without triumph over baseness and there is no baseness without triumph over humanity. Every time, the choice is ours, and the responsibility for that choice as well. If we say that we have no choice, it means the choice has already been made. We talk about having no choice only because we are burdened by guilt for the choice we have made. If there were in fact no choice, we would feel no burden of guilt.)

. . . To the thunder of applause, Lakoba drained his glass. Before this thundering glorification of the Leader's modesty had stopped, the cook came through the door in his white apron, and behind him the sanatorium manager carrying a plate.

On hearing the applause, the cook tried to back out, but the manager gave him a little shove and drew him away from the door.

He was a plumpish, middle-aged man of average height, with the pasty complexion that cooks often have and a head of thick curly hair.

Gesturing for him to wait there, the manager, trying to hold the plate motionless, went over to Lakoba.

"Nestor Apollonovich, the cook is here," he said, bending down to show him what was on the plate. On the plate, rolling around a little, lay a half-dozen eggs.

"Good," Lakoba said. He looked frowningly at the plate.

Only at this point did Uncle Sandro guess that Nestor Apollonovich was going to shoot at the eggs. He had never seen this.

"Turkey eggs?" Beria asked suddenly. He reached over and took an egg from the plate.

"Chicken, Lavrenty Pavlovich," the manager supplied, holding the plate closer to him.

"Then why so big?" Beria asked, examining an egg curiously. The eggs really were quite large.

"I chose them myself," the manager giggled, nodding in the direction of the

cook, trying to direct Beria's attention to the latent humor of the situation. But, paying no attention to the latent humor of the situation, Beria continued to examine the egg. The manager grew anxious.

"Maybe I should change them, Lavrenty Pavlovich?" he asked.

Beria collected himself and hastily put the egg back on the plate. "No, it was just a comment."

"He's jealous of the Deaf One," Stalin whispered to Kalinin, and laughed soundlessly into his mustache. Kalinin's little beard bounced in reply.

"I think that corner would be better," Lakoba said, examining the chandelier and nodding toward the corner opposite to where the cook stood. In the same way, a photographer tries to choose the best lighting effect before he starts shooting.

"Quite right," the manager agreed.

"Is he nervous?" Lakoba asked, indicating the cook.

"A little," the manager said, bending low over Lakoba's ear.

"Calm him down," Nestor Apollonovich said, pulling away from the manager, whose posture somewhat too insistently called attention to his deafness.

The cook was still standing in the doorway with the apathetic expression of a test subject. Only now did Uncle Sandro notice that he was gripping his tall white cap in one hand. The fingers of that hand were in constant motion.

The manager went over and whispered something to the cook, and they started for the opposite corner. The manager solemnly carried the plate of eggs in front of him.

It grew quiet. By now everyone clearly saw the meaning of all this. His starched apron creaking, the cook stopped in the corner and turned to face the hall.

"If you only knew how I hate this," Sarya whispered, turning to Nina. Nina did not respond: she was staring wide-eyed at the corner. From then on Sarya did not once look in the direction that everyone else was looking.

The cook stood tightly pressed against the wall. The manager was talking to him nonstop, and he was nodding. His face had turned the color of flour. The manager selected an egg from the plate and the cook watched his gesture—no longer moving his head, just his white eyes, which seemed to be floating detached from his face. The manager started trying to set the egg on his head, but either he was nervous himself or the egg was not a steady one, because it simply did not want to stay put.

Nestor Apollonovich frowned. Suddenly, still standing motionless, the cook raised his hand, felt for the egg, squinted his white, floating, detached eyes, found the balance point, and smoothly lowered his arm.

The egg perched on his head. Now he stood erect and immobile in the corner, and had it not been for the expression in his eyes, he would have looked like a draftee having his height measured.

The manager quickly glanced around, without finding anywhere to put the plate of eggs. Suddenly, as if afraid that the shooting would start before he could

get away, he shoved the plate into the cook's hands and rapidly moved away toward the door.

Lakoba pulled his revolver from its holster and cocked it, taking care to point the barrel down. He looked back at Stalin and Kalinin, trying to stand in such a way that they could see everything. Uncle Sandro had to leave his place. He stood behind Sarya's chair, gripping the back with his hands. Uncle Sandro was very agitated.

Lakoba extended his arm with the pistol raised and started slowly lowering his hand. The arm remained steady, and suddenly Uncle Sandro saw Lakoba's pale face turn to a slab of stone.

All of a sudden the cook went white, and in the dead silence one could clearly hear the eggs rattling on the plate he held in one hand. Suddenly Uncle Sandro saw something yellow splatter on the cook's face, and only afterward did he hear the shot.

"Bravo, Nestor!" Stalin cried. He began to clap. Applause thundered like an electric discharge of relief. The manager ran to the cook, grabbed the cap from his hand, wiped off his yolk-covered cheek, and stuck the cap in his apron pocket.

He looked back at Lakoba, the way a firing-range attendant looks back to tell the marksman where his shot hit or to inquire whether the target is to be readied for the next shot.

"Go ahead," Lakoba nodded. This time the manager quickly stood the egg on the cook's head and went back to the doorway, crunching the shell of the broken egg underfoot. Again Lakoba's face turned to a slab of stone, the outstretched arm went rigid, and only the wrist moved, slowly and mechanically lowering the gun barrel like a blunt clock hand.

And again this time Uncle Sandro saw the yellow fountain of egg splash up first, and only afterward heard the shot.

"Bravo!" Explosions of applause shook the banquet hall. Smiling a pale happy smile, Lakoba put away the pistol. The cook still stood in the corner, slowly coming back to life.

"Seat him at the table," Lakoba snapped to his wife in Abkhazian.

Sarya picked up a napkin and ran over to the cook. The manager followed her, and the cook angrily pushed the plate of eggs at him. Sarya stood in front of him, wiping off his face with the napkin, and said something to him. The cook nodded with dignity. The manager squatted down, set the plate of eggs on the floor, and picked up the shells of the broken ones.

Sarya started to lead the cook away, but he suddenly stopped to take off his apron and fling it to the manager. Evidently, what had happened gave him such rights for a little while, and he was showing the audience that he was not one to risk his life just for nothing, but had quite a bit to gain by it.

While the manager was hastily walking to the door with the apron slung over his shoulder and the plate in his hand, Uncle Sandro thought with amazement that the cook and the manager might well have traded places, because much in this life is decided by chance.

Sarya seated the cook between the last of the secondary leaders whom Uncle Sandro did not know from portraits and the first of the district committee secretaries.

Sarya poured the cook a glass of cognac, pulled over a plate for him, and put a splash of walnut sauce and a piece of turkey on it. The cook immediately drank off the cognac. Now, looking around the table, he was nodding importantly to whatever it was Sarya was saying to him.

Poor Sarya, Uncle Sandro thought. She was trying to atone for the sin of this shooting, which she so disliked and which, incidentally, had once ended in trouble.

It happened in an Abkhazian village. After a long session at table, the guests had turned to target practice. For some reason—perhaps precisely because they were shooting at targets and Lakoba was not being very careful—he wounded a villager who had been running back and forth looking at the targets. The wound was not serious, and the man was immediately shipped off to the district hospital in Lakoba's Buick.

Lakoba rode back with the other members of the government in a second car. And on the way one of the members of the government had a real quarrel with Lakoba and even made him get out of the car in the middle of the road.

"I'm sick of your guerrilla games," he is said to have told him. It is difficult now to determine why Lakoba agreed to get out of the car. He himself may have been so crushed by what had happened that he found it impossible to resist this insulting measure. I think the man who cussed him out was most likely older than he was. If the man said something like, "Either you're getting out or I am," then Lakoba, as a true Abkhazian, could not allow it and probably decided to get out of the car himself.

. . . When Nestor Apollonovich put away his pistol and turned toward the table, Stalin was on his feet with open arms. Smiling shyly, Nestor Apollonovich went over to him. Stalin embraced him and kissed his forehead.

"My William Tell," he said. Suddenly remembering, he turned to Voroshilov: "And who are you?"

"I am Voroshilov," Voroshilov said, quite firmly.

"I ask you, which of you is a Voroshilov Medalist in marksmanship?" Stalin asked, and Uncle Sandro again felt uncomfortable. Oh no, he thought, he shouldn't provoke Voroshilov against our Lakoba.

"He's the better shot, of course," Voroshilov said in a conciliatory manner.

"Then why do you go showing off like a Voroshilov Marksman?" Stalin asked. He sat down, anticipating the pleasure of a long string of casuistical taunts.

The district committee secretaries, with difficulty raising their now-heavy eyebrows, began listening in surprise. Lakoba stole away and sat down at his place.

"Now, that's enough, Iosif," Voroshilov said, breaking out in crimson blotches and looking pleadingly at Stalin.

"That's enough, Iosif," Stalin said, gazing reproachfully at Voroshilov. "Opportunists all over the world say that. Are you going to start in too?"

Voroshilov, hanging his head, flushed red and began to sulk.

"Tell them to start his favorite song," Nestor whispered to his wife. Sarya quietly got up and went to the middle of the table, where Makhaz was sitting. Lakoba knew that this was one way to abort the Leader's sudden gloomy caprices.

Makhaz struck up the ancient Georgian drinking song, "*Gaprindi shavo merts-khalo*"—"Fly, Black Swallow." Voroshilov looked up and tried to say something to Stalin. But the latter suddenly raised his hand in an imploring gesture, as if to say, Leave me alone, let me listen to the song.

Stalin sat with his head resting heavily on one hand. In the other hand he clutched his extinguished pipe.

Nothing else—neither power, nor the blood of an enemy, nor wine—gave him such enjoyment. With an all-dissolving tenderness, with an all-submissive courage that he had never in his life experienced, this song, as always, liberated his soul from the burden of being eternally on his guard. It did not liberate him in the same way that the excitement of passion or struggle did, because as soon as the excitement of passion ended in the death of his enemy, a hangover set in: victory started a putrid toxin flowing from the corpse of the vanquished.

No, the song liberated his soul in a different way. It colored his whole life with the fantastical light of fate, in which his personal concerns became the concern of Fate, where there were neither hangmen nor victims, there was only the movement of Fate, History, and the funereal necessity for him to take his place in this procession. And what did it matter that he was destined to occupy in this procession the most terrible and therefore the most magnificent place?

*Fly, black swallow, fly . . .*

But Fate's funereal procession gradually moves on, becomes the distant backdrop for a fairy-tale scene . . .

He sees a warm fall day, the day of the grape harvest. He is driving out of the vineyard on a cart laden with baskets of grapes. He is taking the grapes home, to the winepress. The cart creaks, the sun is bright. From back in the vineyard he can hear the voices of his family, the shouts and laughter of children.

On the village street a horseman has stopped by a wattle fence. He has never seen the man before but for some reason recognizes him as a visitor from Kakheta. The horseman is drinking water from a mug that a local peasant has offered him over the fence. The well is right by the fence, that is why the horseman has stopped here.

As he passes the horseman and his fellow villager, he nods cordially to them, smiles fleetingly at the horseman, who peers at him. Although he looks like a modest winegrower, the horseman correctly guesses his essential greatness. His fleeting smile is a response to the horseman's guess, to show the horseman that he himself does not attach much significance to his own essential greatness.

He rides on by and senses that the horseman from Kakheta is still looking after him. He even hears the conversation between his neighbor and the visitor from Kakheta.

"Listen, who's that man?" the horseman says, splashing the last of the water out of the mug and handing it back to its owner.

"That's Dzhugashvili himself," the owner says happily.

"Not *the* Dzhugashvili?" the visitor from Kakheta says in amazement. "I thought it looked like him, but it can't be."

"One and the same," the owner confirms. "The very Dzhugashvili who did not want to become the sovereign of Russia under the name of Stalin."

"I wonder why not?" the visitor from Kakheta says in amazement.

"Too much trouble, he says," the owner explains, "and he says he'd have to spill a lot of blood."

"Tch, tch," clucks the visitor from Kakheta. "I can't pass up a single grapevine root, but he passed up Russia."

"Why does he need Russia?" the owner comments. "He has a fine farm, a fine family, fine children."

The visitor from Kakheta continues to cluck. "What a man!" he says, looking after the cart, which is now turning off toward a house. "He passed up a whole country . . ."

"Yes, passed it up," the owner confirms, "because he's sorry for the peasants, he says. He'd have had to unite them all. Let them all live for themselves, he says, let each one have his bit of bread and his glass of wine."

"God grant him health!" the horseman exclaims. "But how does he know what would happen to the peasants?"

"He's that kind of man, foresees everything," the owner says.

"God grant him health!" the visitor from Kakheta clucks. "God grant . . ."

Iosif Dzhugashvili, who did not want to become Stalin, just sits on his cart, hums a little song about a black swallow. The sun warms his face, the cart creaks, he listens with a quiet smile to his neighbor's naive but essentially true story.

And now he drives through the open gate of his yard, where a peasant has been waiting for him in the shade of the apple tree. The peasant, who has evidently come to him for advice, stands up and bows to him respectfully. Well, he'll have to take the time to chat with him, give him some sensible advice. A lot of them come to him. Maybe it would have been better after all, to take power into his own hands, so as to help all of them at once with his advice?

Chickens drunk on grape pressings wander around the yard hearkening to their odd condition; the peasant bows respectfully as he waits for him; his mother, on hearing the creak of the cart, glances out of the kitchen and smiles at her son. His kind old mother with her wrinkled face. Only in old age have respect and plenty come to her at last . . . His kind old . . . Damn her to hell!

Here, as always, the vision broke off. He could never carry it further, always got stuck at this point, because the blood of an old insult rushed to his head.



There was no forgiving her, none. How stricken he had been that time, how stricken, when, playing with the other boys on the village green, he had suddenly heard (tear up the green!) two grown men start to talk about her, chortling obscenely.

They sat within ten paces of him in the shade of a cherry-plum tree (ax the cherry-plum, may it wither!) and talked about her. And then one of them suddenly stopped and nodded in his direction, told the other to lower his voice, because he thought it was her boy playing over there.

They lowered their voices and went on talking. Crushed with humiliation, he had to carry on with his game so that his comrades would notice nothing and guess nothing. How he had hated them, how he dreamed of taking revenge on them, especially, for some reason, the second one, who had told the first to lower his voice. There was no forgiving her for her extreme shameful poverty, or for anything else . . .

*Fly, black swallow, fly . . .*

He raised his head, and as he looked around now at the singing district committee secretaries, he gradually regained his calm. With every wave of melody, the song was washing from their faces those pathetic raised-eyebrow masks of surprise, and under the masks, ever more distinctly, more independently, were revealed (never mind, it's all right so long as they're singing) the faces of winegrowers, hunters, shepherds.

*Fly, black swallow, fly . . .*

They think power is honey, Stalin reflected. No; power is the impossibility of loving anyone, that's what power is. A man can live his whole life without loving anyone, but he becomes an unhappy prisoner if he knows that he *must* not love.

Here I've grown fond of the Deaf One, and I know Beria's going to gobble him up, but there's no way I can help him, because I like him. Power is when you must not love anyone. Because the minute you love a man you begin to trust him, but once you begin to trust, sooner or later you get a knife in the back. Yes; yes, he knew this. And they loved him, and they got the knife for it, sooner or later. Damn life, damn human nature! If only you could love and not trust at the same time. But that is impossible.

But if you have to kill the ones you love, fairness demands that you make short work of the ones you don't love, the enemies of the cause.

Yes, the Cause, he thought. Of course, the Cause. Everything is done for the sake of the Cause, he thought, listening with attentive surprise to the hollow, empty sound of the idea. That's because of the song, he thought. I ought to prohibit that song altogether, it's dangerous, because I love it too much. Non-

sense, he thought, it would be dangerous if others could feel it as deeply as I. But no one can feel it so deeply . . .

Continuing to listen to the song, he poured himself a glass of wine and silently drank it off without looking at anyone. After setting down the glass, he took his long-since extinguished pipe from the table and made several unsuccessful attempts to pull on it. Noticing that the pipe had gone out, he now pulled on it purposely, as if he were still deep in his reverie. The matches lay beside him on the table but he waited: Would someone think to give him a light, or not?

So there—you could be dying and they wouldn't give you a drink of water, he thought, pitying himself, but at this point Kalinin lit a match and held it to the pipe. Deep in his reverie, he waited until the match flame burned down to Kalinin's fingers, and only then bent for a light. As he lit up, he watched the bright flame touch Kalinin's trembling fingers. Never mind, he thought, I don't have to suffer alone.

He inhaled with pleasure and leaned back in his chair. His glance fell on Voroshilov. He was still sitting at the table hanging his head and knitting his brows, with the hurt expression of a child. Stalin was suddenly stabbed with pity for him. He too has a burden on his conscience, Stalin thought.

"Klim," he said, his voice thick with emotion, "where's Tsaritsyn, where are we, Klim?"

Voroshilov raised his head and gazed at Stalin with bitter, devoted eyes. "Why did you hurt me, Iosif?"

"Forgive me, Klim, if I hurt you," Stalin said, repenting and admiring his own repentance, "but they're hurting you and me even worse."

"Never mind, Iosif!" Voroshilov exclaimed, electrified by the fact that the Leader not only understood his hurt feelings but placed them on a level with his own. "You'll show them a thing or two."

"I think I will," Stalin said modestly. He puffed on his pipe. The song ended, and the swarm of dim, unsteady thoughts cleared from his sobered mind.

How could I be angry at him, Voroshilov thought, cheering up and looking discreetly around at the leaders to be sure they had heard Stalin elevate him just now. And how precisely he understood, Voroshilov thought triumphantly, that my enemies among the top brass of the army are a continuation of the anti-Stalinist line within the top echelons of the government.

"Comrade Stalin, what should we do with this Tsulukidze?" asked Beria, who had been listening attentively to Stalin's remarks. He had been wanting to ask about this for a long time and had decided that this was an opportune moment.

The problem was that this old Bolshevik, who was still respected as one of Lenin's cohorts although he had long since been relieved of any practical responsibility, continued to heckle and grumble at every opportunity. In his time he had dropped a remark, since picked up by the Georgian Communists, that Beria was trying to break into the Party leadership in Transcaucasia with a Mauser in his hand. ("You swine, how was I supposed to break into the leadership—

with the Erfurt Program? Wouldn't you have ended up in the shitpile along with it?")

Any other man he would long since have strung up by the tongue for such a remark (now that he had broken into the leadership), but this one he was afraid to touch. The issue was not clear-cut. Stalin himself had annihilated many old Bolsheviks, but certain ones, for some reason, he supported and honored with decorations.

"What has he done?" Stalin asked. He looked point-blank at Beria.

"He blabs too much, he's gotten senile," Beria said, trying to guess what Stalin thought of this before he could express an opinion.

"Lavrenty," Stalin said, his face clouding because he could not hit on the right answer, "I came here to take my rightful vacation. Why must you hand me a question like that?"

"No, Comrade Stalin, I merely wanted some advice," Beria replied hastily, fleeing ahead of Stalin's gathering gloom. His tone indicated that he was apologizing and did not himself attach any great importance to the question. Good thing I didn't liquidate him, he thought with a flash of joy and fright.

". . . Lenin hated blabbermouths, too," Stalin said pensively.

"Maybe we should throw him out of the Party?" Beria asked, reviving. Maybe Stalin was not averse to punishing the son of a bitch somehow after all.

"Can't oust him from the Party," Stalin said, and he added impressively, "We didn't admit him, Lenin did."

"What should we do?" Beria asked, utterly bewildered.

"He had a brother, I believe," Stalin said. "I wonder where he is now?"

"He's alive, Comrade Stalin," Beria said, breaking out in a cold sweat. "He manages a soft-drink factory in Batum."

Stalin lapsed into reverie. Beria was in a cold sweat because he had not known of the existence of Tsulukidze's brother until just this past year, when he was gathering evidence against the formerly prominent Bolshevik and happened to learn about the brother. The dossier on the brother, requisitioned from Batum, contained nothing useful; he hadn't even been caught embezzling at his soft-drink factory. But the fact that Beria knew of the man's existence, knew what he was doing and how he was getting along, now worked to his advantage. Stalin liked it.

"How is his work?" Stalin asked severely.

"Good," Beria said firmly, showing that his enmity for the blabbermouth in no way extended to his relatives, and that his knowledge of the soft-drink factory manager's business qualifications was the simple consequence of his being a Party-minded leader who knew his specialized personnel.

"Let this blabbermouth"—Stalin jabbed his pipe at the unseen blabbermouth—"regret all his life that he destroyed his brother."

"Brilliant!" Beria exclaimed.

"You people in the Caucasus are too strong on family ties," Stalin said, to

explain his train of thought. "Let this be a lesson to other blabbermouths on the dialectics of punishment."

Realizing that by this remark Stalin had set himself apart from the Caucasus, several district committee secretaries began looking at him with melancholy reproach, as if to ask, Why have you abandoned us?

"Live and learn," Beria said, spreading his hands.

"But not at the expense of my vacation, Lavrenty," Stalin admonished severely, a joke that gladdened Lakoba. He considered it tactless of Beria, here at a festive table in Abkhazia, to get Stalin to sanction reprisals against his own enemies. This Beria's always trying to worm his way up, and I have only myself to blame for introducing him to Stalin, thought Lakoba. This was the right time to raise a toast to elder brother, to the great Russian People. Not without reason had Stalin said, "You people in the Caucasus . . ." It meant he already thought of himself as a Russian.

He signaled to the other end of the table for everyone to pour another drink.

"I want to raise this toast," he said, getting up from his seat, pale, stubbornly fighting off an early-morning drunkenness, "to our elder brother."

The festive night caught second wind. Again they drank, ate, danced, and by now even Uncle Sandro, the greatest tamada of all times and nations, found his head spinning. It was a little too much even for him, to see in one night so many ominous and wonderful things.

Lakoba, as tamada, relaxed the reins a little, sensing that the strict ritual of the Caucasian table was beginning to weary the Leader.

"We want Sarya, beautiful Sarya!" Kalinin shouted, clapping his hands and tilting his bearded chin affectionately.

"*'Mravaldzhamie, we want 'Mravaldzhamie!'*" called some people at the other end of the table. They struck up the song.

"*'Many Summers!'*" shouted others. They struck up the Abkhazian drinking song.

"Now you're off and away," Makhaz shouted from the other end of the table, his eyes meeting Uncle Sandro's. "Bliss has descended on you—bliss!"

"My hair is curly, like a fern," the cook was telling one of the district committee secretaries, letting him feel his hair. "The egg lies there like it's in a little nest."

"All the same it's a risk," the secretary said, dourly feeling the cook's hair.

"Some men's wives," Beria muttered, resting his head heavily on his hands.

"But, Lavrik, try to understand . . . I was ashamed to, and he didn't even get angry."

"We'll talk when we get home—"

"But, Lavrik—"

"I'm not Lavrik to you any more—"

"But, Lavrik—"

"Some men's wives . . ."

"Where's the risk, my dear fellow? My hair is three fingers deep," the cook said enthusiastically, trying to outargue the district committee secretary, who was touching his head mistrustfully.

"He didn't hit your head?"

"Of course not," the cook said, gleeful at his naiveté. "There's a lot of fear, but little risk."

The district committee secretary dourly held to his own interpretation. "All the same, it's a risk, the man is drunk."

"'You people in the Caucasus,' he says," another secretary was saying, shaking his head. "What have we done to him?"

"Shota, I ask you as a brother, don't take offense at the Leader—"

"I'd lay down my life for him, but my heart aches," Shota replied, casting a bereaved glance at the far end of the table.

"Shota, I ask you as a brother, don't take offense at the Leader . . ."

"Lucky stiff! Lucky stiff!" Makhaz shouted drunkenly, meeting Uncle Sandro's eyes. "Now you've got all Abkhazia in your pocket!"

Uncle Sandro shook his head reproachfully, intimating that such shouts were indecent, especially when aimed into the thick of the government. But Makhaz did not understand his signal.

"Don't pretend it's not in your pocket!" he shouted. "Don't pretend, you lucky stiff!"

"What's he shouting?" Even Lakoba had noticed Makhaz.

"Just nonsense," Uncle Sandro said, and he thought to himself, It's a good thing he's shouting in Abkhazian, not Russian.

"Now here's something!" The cook was trying to amuse the dour secretary. "I started out as an apprentice cook here in Gagra back in Prince Oldenburgsky's time. The prince used to carry a cane, like Peter. He sampled the workers' dinner himself. Sometimes he used to beat the cooks with his cane, but always for cause."

"All the same, it's a risk." The secretary shook his head dourly. He felt overwhelmed and could not get the egg-shooting out of his mind.

"Here's something!" the cook went on, trying to distract him with his remarkable memories. "His Majesty the Emperor came here—"

"Why make things up," the secretary said, distracted against his will.

"I swear by the cross—on a cruiser! The cruiser dropped anchor out at the roadstead. His Majesty came in on a motor launch; but Her Majesty didn't want to come ashore, which offended the prince," the cook said.

"Court intrigues," the secretary interrupted dourly.

. . . Early in the morning, when at Lakoba's order the sanatorium manager opened the heavy curtains and a soft pink August dawn peeped into the banquet hall, it (the soft pink dawn) saw many district committee secretaries asleep at the tables—some sprawled back in their chairs, and some with their faces right on the table.

One of the ones sprawled back in his chair held a radish in his mouth, stuck

there by his friends. This could only have perplexed the soft pink dawn, because the suckling pigs, each holding a radish in its bared teeth, were no longer on the table, and the humorous analogy was intelligible only to the initiated.

The troupe members approached Stalin one by one. Stalin shoveled up candy, cookies, chunks of meat, roast chickens, *khachapuri*, and other eatables from the table. Holding up the hem of their cherkeskas or holding out their turbans, they accepted the gifts, said thank you, and walked away from the Leader.

"Off you go!" Stalin said as he threw a batch of presents to each dancer in turn. He tried to give everyone equal shares, looked closely at the chunks of meat, at the roast chickens, and if he gave less of one thing he tried to pile on more of another. In the same way, a village patriarch, the Eldest in the House, hands out shares for his neighbors and for guests who will be traveling home after a great feast.

"All the same they'll chalk it up to Stalin," the Leader joked, piling eatables into the widespread skirt of a cherkeska. "All the same they'll say Stalin ate it all."

That being the case, several troupe members exchanged winks and grabbed bottles of wine to take with them.

The ensemble returned to Mukhus in three overcrowded motorcars. When they were getting into the cars, a curious mix-up occurred. Platon Pantsulaya, the director of the ensemble, got in next to the chauffeur of the first car, of course. Pata Pataraya, as usual, was supposed to sit next to the chauffeur of the second car. He was about to stick his head in the open door but then pulled it out and offered his place to Uncle Sandro, who happened (let us suppose) to be right beside him.

Uncle Sandro tried to refuse, but after some polite wrangling he was forced to yield to Pata Pataraya's urging and sit next to the chauffeur in the second car.

It had been decided to drive as far as the Gumista River and find a picturesque spot to have a picnic. They sang boisterously as they rode. Frequently they encountered children on the road and threw candy and cookies to them out of the car. The children rushed to gather this manna from heaven.

The dancers smiled wearily. "If they knew where it came from!"

Beyond Eshery, at a point where the road passed among thickets of ferns, blackberries, and hazelnuts, their way was suddenly blocked by a small flock of goats. The cars braked, and the goats proceeded across the road, tossing their beards and snorting. The goatherd was nowhere to be seen, but his voice carried from the thicket; he was in there driving out a goat that had lagged behind.

"*Khey! Khey!*" the boyish voice shouted, awakening a strange alarm in Uncle Sandro. From time to time the boy threw stones, and they crashed through the tightly woven branches to land dully, at intervals, on the ground. When one stone hit the unseen goat, Uncle Sandro had a sudden feeling that he had known, the moment before, that this was the one that would hit her. And when the goat ran grunting out of the bushes, and after her the youth, who halted shyly when

he saw the cars, Uncle Sandro went cold from agitation and remembered everything.

Yes; it had happened almost the same way back then. The boy had been herding the goats into Sabid's Hollow. And one goat had gotten stuck this same way in the bushes, and the boy had thrown rocks the same way and shouted. Just this same way, the goat grunted and jumped out of the bushes when the rock hit her, and the boy jumped out after her and halted in surprise.

A few steps away, a man was walking along the path, driving ahead of him some heavily laden pack horses. Hearing the branches snap, the man started and looked at the blue-eyed youth. Never in his life had anyone looked at him with such malice.

At the first instant the boy thought the man's fury was due to the unexpectedness of the encounter, but after he perceived that it was only a boy and a goat, the man threw him another look, as if he were considering for a fraction of a second what to do with him: kill him or leave him. He went on without bothering to decide, merely jerked an elbow to hitch up the carbine that had slipped off his sloping shoulder.

The man walked unusually fast, and it was plain to the boy that he had left him alive only to save time. There was neither a stick nor a quirt in the man's hands, and it struck the boy as strange that the horses moved so fast without any kind of goading.

After several seconds the path led into a grove, and the man and his horses disappeared. But at the very last moment—one more step and he would be hidden behind a bush—he hitched up the carbine that had slipped off his sloping shoulder again, turned around, and caught the boy's eye. The boy thought he heard a distinct whisper, right in his ear: "You tell, and I'll come back and kill you."

His flock was already far below, and the boy ran down the green mountainside, driving the goat ahead of him. He knew that the grove the man had entered with his horses would soon end, and the path would lead them out to an open slope on the far side of Sabid's Hollow.

When he caught up with the flock and looked up, he saw the heavily packed horses begin to appear, one after another, there on the green slope. Eight horses and the man, distinct against the green background of the grassy slope, quickly crossed the open expanse and disappeared into the woods. Even from here, at a distance of about a kilometer, it was noticeable that the horses and the man were walking very fast. And now the boy surmised that this man needed no stick or whip, he was one of those whom horses feared even without any kind of goading.

Before disappearing into the woods, the man again glanced back and jerked his sloping shoulder to adjust the slipping carbine. Although his expression was now impossible to make out, the boy was sure that he had looked back very angrily.

A day later rumors reached Chegem that some men had robbed a steamboat

going from Poti to Odessa. The robbers had operated precisely and ruthlessly. Not only did they have a man waiting for them near Kengursk with horses bought beforehand, they had also been able to win over four of the sailors to participate in the robbery. By night, they bound the captain, the helmsman, and several sailors and locked them in the captain's cabin. They lowered the lifeboats, into which they had loaded their loot, and rowed to shore.

Late the next day the bodies of the four sailors were found in a marsh near the hamlet of Tamysh. A day later two more bodies were found, eaten away by jackals, beyond recognition. It was decided that the robbers had quarreled among themselves, and the two that survived had taken their cargo to some unknown place or maybe even perished in the marshes. After another few days, this time quite close to Chegem, they found the body of still another man. He had been killed by a shot in the back and thrown off the steep Atary road, almost onto the heads of the residents of the village of Naa, who had stubbornly settled below these precipitous slopes. The body was well preserved, and it was recognized as that of a man who had bought horses a month ago in the village of Dzhgerdy.

The Chegemians took the whole incident rather calmly, because it was a lowland affair—someone else's, especially since it had to do with steamboats. Only the boy, with terror, guessed that he had seen that other man, in Sabid's Hollow.

About ten days after that encounter, a horseman rode up to their house wearing an Abkhazian burka but an official service cap, which indicated from afar that he was an important man, paid by the authorities.

The horseman, without dismounting, stopped by the wattle fence and waited for the boy's father to approach him. Then he pulled his foot from the stirrup and rested it on the fence while he conversed with the boy's father. Shooing away the dogs, the boy hovered near the fence to hear what the grown-ups said.

"Have any of your folks," the horseman asked his father, "seen anyone go by with heavy-packed horses on the upper Chegem road?"

"I heard about that," his father replied, "but I haven't seen the man."

"Not the upper—the lower!" the boy almost blurted, but he bit his tongue in time.

The man, still talking, found the stirrup with his foot and then rode on.

"Who's that, Pa?" the boy asked his father.

"The sergeant major," the father replied. He went into the house without saying anything more.

Only in late fall, when he and his father, after packing a donkey with sacks of chestnuts and climbing up from Sabid's Hollow, sat down to rest on that same lower Chegem path, almost at that same spot—only then could he no longer restrain himself, and he told his father everything.

"So that's why you stopped bringing the goats here?" His father grinned.

"That's not true!" the boy flared; his father had struck home.

"Why didn't you say anything before now?" the father asked.

"You should have seen the way he looked at me," the boy confessed. "I keep thinking he might come back . . ."

"By now you couldn't drag him back on a rope," his father said, standing up and urging on the donkey with a switch. "But if you'd told right away, they still could have caught him."

"How do you know, Pa?" the boy asked, trying not to lag behind his father. Since meeting that man he did not like this place, did not trust it.

"A man with heavy-packed horses can't get farther than one day's journey," his father said. He flicked the switch; the donkey kept wanting to stop, the grade was steep.

"But you know how fast he was walking!" the boy said.

"But no faster than his horses," his father objected. After a moment's thought he added, "And he killed that last man because he knew he had only one day's march left."

"Why, Pa?" the boy asked, still trying not to lag behind his father.

"He probably left him alive," his father said, still thinking aloud, "so that the man could help him pack the horses for the last day's march. And then he got rid of him."

"How do you know all this?" the boy asked, no longer trying to keep up with his father, because they had come out on a slope from which their house was visible.

"I know their infidel ways," his father said. "They'd just as soon not work. I don't even want to think about them."

"I don't either," the boy said, "but for some reason I keep remembering about this all the time."

"It will pass," his father said.

It did indeed pass, and with the years receded so far that Uncle Sandro, remembering it once in a while, questioned whether it had all really happened or whether he, the little boy, had imagined it after people started talking about the steamboat robbery near Kengursk.

But then, after the never-to-be-forgotten banquet that took place on an August night in 1935 or the year before, but certainly no later, it all came back to him with uncommon clarity. Superstitiously marveling at the Leader's menacing memory, he thanked God for his own quick-wittedness.

Uncle Sandro often told his friends—and even, after the Twentieth Congress, people who were merely acquaintances—about this festive night, appending to the story his own youthful imaginings or recollections.

"I can still see it now," Uncle Sandro would say. "His carbine kept slipping off his shoulder, and he kept jerking it up as he went, hitching at it without looking. A very sloping shoulder, That One had . . ."

So saying, Uncle Sandro would gaze at his companion, his big eyes tinged with mysticism. His gaze made it plain that had he told his father soon enough about the man who passed on the lower Chegem road, the whole of world history would have taken a different path, in any case not the lower Chegem path.

All the same, it was not exactly clear whether he regretted his long-ago silence or expected a reward from the none-too-grateful younger generation. Most likely his gaze meant that while he regretted he had not told, he would not be averse to receiving a reward.

Then again, this ambiguity in his gaze implied a dose of demonic irony, which seemed to reflect the confusion and vacillation of earthly judges in appraising Stalin.

The very fact that he died a natural death—if, of course, he did die a natural death—prompts me personally to the religious thought that God requisitioned the dossier on his deeds in order that He Himself might judge him in the highest court and Himself punish him with the highest punishment.