

Endzhy Hanym: Out of Step with Her Destiny

by
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(Translated and Annotated by Zaira Khiba and George Hewitt)

This tale is true according to mutually confirmatory narratives by the distinguished exponents of the Abkhazian national 2-stringed instrument called *Apkh'artsa* Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K'adyr Amzyts, and Wamakhⁱ Sh^wynd. Endzhy Hanym, the only sister of Ahmyt Bey [Chachba], ruler of Abkhazia, was so beautiful that the Chachbas themselves would, one might conjecture, have on many an occasion sold her off to Turkey, had not the fact that she was one of their own held them back. Had they sold her openly, even the Padishah himself would certainly have been utterly delighted to take her, but they were afraid of the Russian tsar in case he might reproach them with the charge that they had become kin to the Turk. Had she been sold without her identity being revealed, had a price for her that befitted her family-status not been exacted from the purchasers, and had their skulduggery then been revealed, even Ahmyt Bey extinguishing their blood-line — yes, even that for them would not have been the price of it.

Her life in the palace rested entirely on her whims. In September when the fig is ripe to eat, she would be in the village of Lykhny. In the autumn at harvest-time they would bring her to the capital Aq^w'a. In springtime in the village of Aq'armara they would give her tart mineral-water to drink. In summer she would be taken up to the mountains. Seven maid-servants would tend to her needs without always managing to attain the appropriate standard. She was by now 18 years old and had ripened as she came of age, but she was just as lazy as her milk-sister¹, three years her junior. Every time you saw them together, they would be sitting on sumptuous cushions having each other comb their locks with a golden comb; or, angry with each other, they would turn to reading books, back turned to back. Because the little madams were often peevish with each other, the number of the books they read was indeed far from a low one.

Ahmyt Bey, glorious King of Abkhazia, was fed up with his sister and her milk-sister uselessly lounging about, seated on their lush cushions and doing nothing at all to profit his kingdom in any way. One day as he was deep in thought, following his usual practice of mimicking the portrait of [his grandfather] Kⁱalash Bey hanging above him, his elbow placed on his knee and three of his fingers set against his temple, he suddenly raised his head:

“Georgi, just come over here!”

And his steward, whose name was Georgi, promptly shot forward through the king's attendants amongst whom he had been standing. Intensifying even more the already cunning look on his face, he came in the direction of the king, looking as though he was

¹ A girl suckled at the mother's breast.

likely to say: “I know that you are going to oblige me to carry out some mischief, but, if necessity demands it, it’s inconceivable that I should not carry it out!”

“I’m listening, my dear sovereign!”

The others, not knowing whether to go out or not, were standing to one side.

Tatlastan Dzapsh, though by preference the king named him Chapiaq’, was the one who served Ahmyt Bey as right-hand man. However, when there was need of brains, since Chapiaq’ had none, he would usually make use of his relative Georgi when it came to such trifling matters as killing someone by administering poison, the spreading of gossip, setting folk against one another, and the like.

The king drew himself up to his full height and, putting on the face of someone thoroughly wretched as though carried away with boredom, firstly looked at Georgi and then at the others assembled in the hall. And Georgi, realising what was in the king’s mind, made a signal with his eyes to those standing there. And they, shuffling backwards towards the door, escorted one another out.

“What are we to do with our beloved sister, eh, Georgi?” — Ahmyt Bey after the manner of a great ruler would refer to himself by means of the royal ‘we’!

“Your word will be my command, my dear sovereign,” Georgi replied, revealing in his manner of speech and the craftiness of his visage the extent to which his words were advantageous for the kingdom and the devilishness underlying them.

Ahmyt Bey might now have been pointedly posing the question, but he had already thought about the smart advice given to him by Georgi, had already agreed to it and furthermore had already taken ownership of it. But Georgi yet one more time, making it appear as though Ahmyt Bey had been the one first to conceive the idea which in fact he, Georgi, had formerly devised, spoke about it in detail from start to finish. While he was making his speech, Ahmyt Bey was sitting in his usual posture, imitating K¹alash Bey’s portrait, three of his fingers placed against his temple. Then he unexpectedly straightened himself up and, without even giving Georgi time to complete his speech, cried out:

“That’s good, then; it’s decided!” Then, as if he wished to hear the sound of the word once more, he added: “Kh¹ymk^w’arasa of Dal!”

Thus did they hammer out the destiny of Endzhy Hanym. They took as their decision the proposal that had been conveyed to them, namely that they agree on Kh¹ymk^w’arasa of Dal.

Now that the matter was decided, Ahmyt Bey could even allow himself to indulge in a little emotion.

“Fine, but is it for the Marshans that we have been rearing all our Chachba maidens? They have my father’s sister; they have the daughter of Aly Bey Bzhywa. Am I going to toss my wonderful sister, Endzhy Hanym, into that wasps’ nest?!”

Like all really great ideas, this pair’s plan too was easily conceived.

Kh¹ymk^w’arasa was the oldest of the sons of Daryq^w’a. The white-stone fortress of Warda belonged to him, and of Daryq^w’a’s four sons he was the one who possessed the

greatest power in [the upland-areas of] Dal and Ts'abal. Kh^jymk^w'arasa and Batal Bey were blood-brothers, whilst the younger pair of Shabat and Eshsow had a different mother, who — God rest her soul in shining paradise! — was the blood-sister of Arslan Bey and Hasan Bey. Batal Bey was the one who had married a Chachba-daughter, and this was Aly Bey's daughter. Ahmyt Bey would thus have been related to the people of Dal in a hundred different ways. So, if Kh^jymk^w'arasa should now marry his sister, it would become easier still for the King of Abkhazia by virtue of Kh^jymk^w'arasa's power to bring within his clutches the people of Dal, who were noted for their visceral intractability. At the same time the people of Ts'abal too would find themselves caught in a ring, and all who had made proposals in the name of marriage to Endzhy Hanym would hold Kh^jymk^w'arasa in enmity.

But the King of Abkhazia, taking into account the helpful ideas of Chapiaq'-Tatlastan and his steward Georgi, allowed his thoughts to range even further. Knowing Abkhazian custom and knowing the ways of Chachba daughters, here is what he calculated: "Kh^jymk^w'arasa is a roamer and is never absent where medals are being awarded; while he's away, Endzhy Hanym is sure to take over governance in his villages." Beyond this, his thinking proceeded along these lines: "If somewhere in Dal an assembly is suddenly called, it will be impossible for the namesakes and sisters/daughters-in-law not to argue over who takes precedence in seating. Batal Bey's spouse Esmahan is sure to say: 'My dear, power resides in my hands, I am the daughter of Aly Bey Chachba, and also I am the older'. Then this one, if she's the woman I know, will say: 'No, I am superior, I am the sister of the great King of Abkhazia'. A smouldering resentment will arise between them, and they will be unable to unite."

Ahmyt Bey, the King of Abkhazia, had been convinced all his life that it was better for the kingdom when the peoples of Abkhazia were disunited. It remained ultimately undiscovered why his thinking had proceeded along these lines, for the poor man was ultimately sent into exile, but that is something people know already.

That he had settled the great matter in this way improved the spirits of the King of Abkhazia. And, without delay, he decided that that very night he and Georgi would go and inform Endzhy Hanym how they had fashioned her destiny. In the evening, when they had finished all their affairs, the King of Abkhazia and his steward, somewhat apprehensive about speaking of what awaited them, with faltering steps entered Endzhy Hanym's broad chamber.

"How are things with our sister's health?" the king asked, having sent the ladies away.

Endzhy Hanym, seated on the divan, lowered her legs and, with a flood of tears welling up over her wide eyes, lifted her head. "Has she already heard something, ill-starred maiden that she is?!" was the sense of annoyance that came over Ahmyt Bey.

"What's the matter, our sister?"

"Poor T'ariel, T'ariel!" she said, and, placing her fingers between the pages at the place where she had read it, she spread open the thick volume lying in front of her. "How

hapless was Nestan-Daredzhan!...” was all she uttered, and her tears, for she was no longer able to hold them back, flowed down over her sparkling-white cheeks.

“Have no fear — they get back together,” said Ahmyt Bey, raising a smile, though his heart beat with nervous tension, as he seated himself beside her on the edge of the divan.

“Oh, the two of them find each other! Love wins out in this magnificent work²...,” Georgi wanted to say even more, but with a look from his eyes the King of Abkhazia restrained him.

Wiping away her tears, Endzhy Hanym looked over at Georgi with a feeling towards him of disgust. He was a man of good education and fine upbringing, but he was superficial and crafty, and because of that she didn’t take to him. Of that he was well aware, but it didn’t bother him one jot. And now that he saw the look on her face, he just fixed his gaze on her as if he would say in reply: “Look at me. I’m not at all bothered, for the kingdom’s affairs are what I place above everything”, and, placing his hands behind him, he went and stood against the small window.

As for Ahmyt Bey, he began with the remote past, relating the story of the Abkhazian kings Apsyta and Atsk^ja-Parna, recalling to mind G^wap’a, the father of the ancestral line of the Chachbas, describing history from ancient times, and, by thus weaving this way and that, he brought his anxieties to the ear of his sister. She was listening, her soul in turmoil and with mounting alarm.

Endzhy Hanym knew that, one day when the time came for her to marry, her brother, without him even asking her, was sure to mould her destiny, taking into consideration only what was likely to profit the kingdom. But she, whose life had been thus passing without trouble or concern and free from having to set goals, did not imagine that the day for configuring her fate had come so close. Now, as her brother was speaking so tenderly towards her, she seemed to be hearing the words he was uttering as though they were coming from far away, but all too well did she comprehend their meaning. Sitting there, she was feeling as if her entire body was numb and heavy. Her tears, which she had hitherto been shedding over the book, grew yet heavier and flowed forth with greater frequency now that they had taken on a different meaning. Her brother, sitting beside her, stroked her hair, but Endzhy Hanym knew that the carefully measured plan that was being directed by the hand of her brother, the King of Abkhazia, could brook no vacillation. And she drew towards her that hairy hand, its blistering white veins protruding, and gently kissed it.

“I am at your command, Ahmyt...Sire, Your Majesty!” she said, summoning up her voice only with difficulty.

Ahmyt Bey breathed a sigh of relief and cheered up. He stood up and himself, with a display of emotion, kissed her head. He allowed his fingers to fumble with the book lying

² Reference is to Shota Rust(a)veli’s poem *The Man in the Panther-skin*, Georgia’s national epic, which was composed c.1200.

before her and, unable to conceive of anything else he might do or say, promptly took his leave and was gone.

Together with Georgi, Ahmyt Bey went down and, making the most of his high spirits, advanced to cast his eye all around over his guests seated here and there in his palace. When his sister was left by herself, she stretched out her hand and picked up a fluffy-white doll; holding it tightly to her breast, she lay down. Her heart was beating fast. Before her a new and unfamiliar life was awaiting her. Now she would be laughing, then she would be crying. She was thinking of the man whom others had appointed for her to marry. For the life of her, she simply did not remember him. Many were the men who had visited the palace to seek Endzhy Hanym's hand; all of them so far had either been rejected by her personally or sent home in her name by the King of Abkhazia. There were many dandy officers from the south, their smiles so oozing sugar that their gaze positively adhered to you. There were also many Ashkharywans, a branch of the Abkhazians from just over the Caucasus: their sun-burnt faces, over which their dark visages had cast a shadow, had become a confused blur in her mind. Wafting over them, as Endzhy Hanym's heart told her, hung a smell that never left them of the wet-fronted mountain-wind and sleet which three times a day would soak, and be absorbed by, their clothing. She envisaged them having their legs jammed within the very thighs of their horses and themselves having taken on the temperament of a horse, a a temperament that was coarse, a temperament that was hot-blooded. They were bored inside the light-filled palace; they seemed to her like race-horses looking at her with fire flashing from their eyes, as though they wished to carry her away from here upon the command to take her quickly off yonder to the mountains, to the lofty, uneven peak-region, depriving her forever of the place where she had been reared, then there to plunge her up to her neck into an existence that was both foreign to her and of which she was fearful.

But of Khⁱymk^warasa, the one to whom she would be given, she had no memory. She didn't even know how old he was. Now all of a sudden Endzhy Hanym became reconciled to her fate and tried to think of him with noble thoughts. Her pure soul was in need of relaxation. There where she was gripping it tightly to her bosom squeaks were coming from the teddy-bear they had brought for her from Istanbul. If it had been alive, its fate might well have caused it to be asphyxiated, for Endzhy Hanym was clothed in such delicate skin as would throw states into turmoil. Laughing, she smothered the lifeless bear in kisses, wetting with her tears the felt from which it was made. Without a murmur a maid-servant came in. For just a moment she stood in silence watching how her lady and the toy-bear were rolling around.

"My Lady, Your Majesty, Sh^wliman has arrived," she said, giving voice at last.

Jolted as if suddenly emerging from sleep, the lady laid her bear aside, as a look of concern flashed across her face.

"Georgi didn't see him, I trust, when he was coming?!"

"No, I brought him by the room where the portraits are hanging."

“Invite him in, then!”

The maid-servant immediately opened the door, and Sh^wliman promptly entered.

He began to enter as if standing on a line, his steps planted one behind the other, his left arm set to his rear, his other hand holding his military hat obliquely against his chest. Although he kept his head bowed, he was still very tall. His waste elegant, his shoulders broad — he was very smart in appearance. His general appearance, his gait, his visage — in every respect there was no doubt (unless one were to say that he was in a state of confusion now that Endzhy Hanyim was gazing at him) that he was someone who once valued himself highly. The military uniform he was wearing fitted his frame like a glove; his shoulders were adorned with the insignia of a lieutenant, and, although he was quite young, attached to his chest was an array of marks of honour, one of them (a double sword and banner) was the Order of Stanislav. As his spurs struck the ground, their clickety-click sound rang out in perfect rhythm over the parquet-floor. Endzhy Hanyim was awaiting him with a sad expression on her brow. She had straightened herself and had sat down on a chair. When Sh^wliman, advancing at a smart pace, came to a halt beside her, he bowed with equal smartness and, putting heart and soul into it, kissed her hand, not letting go of it for some time.

“I trust all is well with you, dear Ekaterina?” he enquired in Russian, finally releasing her hand and straightening himself up.

“My heart is heavy with sorrow,” replied Endzhy Hanyim in Abkhaz.

Sh^wliman, toyed with the look on his face, altering it as if to appear now overly surprised, now overly alarmed, but, when he glanced at her once again, his colour changed. He said nothing.

“And you, Sh^wliman, how are you?”

Sh^wliman was disturbed: he could see how Endzhy Hanyim had changed; and quite apart from this trouble that she had mentioned, Endzhy Hanyim had addressed him as ‘Sh^wliman’ instead of using his pet-name ‘Bata’ as in the past. He could see that somewhere something had happened, but, instead of asking what that might be, the sorrow that was boiling up, and lying just below the surface, in his throat prompted him to speak thus:

“How am I, dearest Ekaterina? — I love you, more and more strongly with every passing day, the feeling that once overcame me more and more failing to sap my strength. I love you without knowing anything of what lies ahead for me, not knowing whether I am the luckiest or unluckiest person in the entire world,” were the words he spoke, his sweetest of voices coming from the depths of his heart, and his Russian was expressed in choice and beautiful language. Endzhy Hanyim was listening, her eyelids closed together, and without withdrawing her hand from his. But, as used to be the case in the past, she was finding no solace in those words of love, because she was now fully consumed by thoughts of the obligation placed upon her by her brother in the name of the kingdom and the new life awaiting her. She wished rightaway, without delay, to make him understand

that a different character was to be placed upon the relationship between the two of them, that everything up to this point belonged to their youth and could not continue, but, if she were to aim directly at the bosom-friend of her youth, when he was still totally ignorant and without warning, the heavy words by means of which that news was to be conveyed, she could not bring herself to speak, knowing the severity of the blow those words would inflict upon him. “No matter what, he mustn’t be told what it is, he mustn’t be told about Kh^jymk^w’arasa!” Endzhy Hanym was thinking — Oh, how unaccustomed were her ears to the sound of this name; how she feared it! — For her heart was telling her that, if Sh^wliman suddenly heard about that person, he might, as when they were talking about the highlanders of Dal, utter something untoward, something offensive. Then she might find herself hating him, without being able to forgive him for it. That is not what Endzhy Hanym wanted, for it was her fervent desire that even just the memory of Sh^wliman should remain within her heart untarnished. She lifted her head and, as if to offer an apology in advance, fixed her eyes directly upon him. Sh^wliman, crest-fallen, moved off in the direction of the other corner of the room. He went and stood beside the desk.

Although this young officer, who had enjoyed a fine upbringing in St. Petersburg and to whom she had first taken a liking, was now heart-broken, his narrow waist sunk inside the full dress-coat that tightly fitted around it, he stood, making himself presentable, having placed his left hand on top of the desk in such a way that she could see his lovely fingers. But, though she was looking at him, Endzhy Hanym was thinking that all the warm feelings she had towards him belonged to her youth, to her flights of fancy. Whatever talent a person raised in, and belonging to, their home might possess, if, whilst suitable for her at birth, he proves unable to attain the disposition that goes with their birth — well, could she truly love this young man with his excessively sweet good looks? But, oh the times when she would secretly let him in by the back door...but, oh those words and verses of his which used to send her head into a spin and which gave her no chance to sleep! “Oh, tender Sh^wliman; oh, sharp-witted Sh^wliman!...” Endzhy Hanym rose, went over to where he was standing, and, taking hold of his arm, pressed herself against him. And when he fixed his gaze on her, she could see that he understood everything. He must already have heard something somewhere.

“What’s this, Sh^wliman? A new poem?” she asked, not knowing what else she could do.

Sh^wliman, there being no doubt that he was already aware of everything, raised a smile with a laugh of pain. It had been some time since he had written and laid a poem before her, but Endzhy Hanym had not even gone near it yet.

“May I read it?” she asked, as she unfolded the white sheet of paper lying rolled up. As though with painted letters, a poem was written on the sheet in a beautiful hand, and at the top stood the initials E. G. Sh. She was the one to whom Sh^wliman used to dedicate all the verses he would leave here, but always the one thing that he would write on them was ‘To Her Highness, Princess E. G. Sh.’. Endzhy Hanym began to read, her arm

around him and her head resting against him. For a time the sheet, lying rolled up, would not respond to her fingers, and so Sh^wliman, standing with his hands at his side and not touching her, came to her assistance.

She stood beside the surf,
Where the waves strike the soles of the rocks.
The coastal wind, loudly howling,
Set her clothes a-flutter.
But the waves, foaming and murmuring,
With a run were lashing the shore,
And her slender legs
They kissed with love.

“How delightful, how delightful, Sh^wliman!” said Endzhy Hanym, flinching, as she let herself lean against him, her arms wrapped around his neck. And he, there where he had been standing as if turned into a pillar of stone, as though emerging from sleep, drew her tightly to his chest, and, with all his heart and soul, began kissing her neck, her cheeks and her eyes.

“Wait, Sh^wliman, you’re a talented and clever man, wait now, that’s enough, I wish you every happiness...” she said, struggling to find her voice, but she did not draw away from him. Her eyes shut, it was another that she was seeing.

Kh^hymk^w’arasa, whom she had not yet seen in the flesh, was standing before her mind’s eye. At the head of young men who, just like him, were dressed in tatters but whose weapons were decorated with silver, he was off driving a herd over the North Caucasus, laughing and looking over his shoulder as bullets flew whistling past him; standing beside a dark abyss, at midnight, plunged into the sightless night, fearless and giving no sign of his presence, that handsome youth was journeying forward with a strong grip on the horse’s bridle. Travelling onward, he began to think of her, of Endzhy Hanym; his face lit up, and his heart suddenly began to soften. He started to let out a shrill call to his comrades, who could not understand what had so unexpectedly animated him. Such were her imaginings as she was preparing her capacious heart for the love of him, that love which was to enter that now light and empty heart of hers. In that heart she was sending him greeting, convinced that he was sensing it, though far away.

When the day appointed for Endzhy Hanym’s wedding arrived, the King of Abkhazia invited eminent persons from north and south of the Caucasian mountain-chain and put on such an extensive wedding-ceremony as no man had seen before. For three days and nights there were games and merriment in the village of Lahlar. Present here were even representatives of all the villages which were formerly part of Abkhazia but which refused to go along with it when Zafar Bey put his signature to the document testifying

that he had sold Abkhazia to the Tsar. Ahmyt Bey, King of Abkhazia, organised horse-racing in the name of his sister's wedding. In the horse-racing Sh^watrakh^j Bzhapsyq^w'a-Ipa, a youth from the Circassian Shapsugh clan, never lacking in manliness, beat the rest. In the javelin-throwing no-one bested Mahmatk'acha Q'azybak^j-Ipa, a man from our T'ap'anta brethren over in the North Caucasus. In the polo no-one got the better of the Abkhazians from Ahchypsy. In the display of horsemanship, just as our lad, Abzhaq^w'an Batyrshlaq' Zh^wanch'k^w'yn, was coming in ahead of the others, his horse gave a strong flick of its tail. He dismounted and, right then and there, mouthing the curse "May you T'amian horse-breeders never again raise anything decent!", placed his pistol right in its head and shot his horse dead. Victory went there to Haly Bey Q'aitmas-Ipa, one of the bridal escorts.

The horse of Ahmyt Bey himself, when entering for the third time, came first. The glorious King of Abkhazia, seated on his horse, could not hold back his joy as tears came into his eyes. Entering for the seventh time, his horse fell and broke its neck. Ahmyt Bey this time could not restrain his anger and personally gave seven of his grooms a thrashing. A further seven were thrashed by Chapiaq' Dzapsh-Ipa. The narratives of Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K'adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd present mutually confirmatory testimony to the truth of this.

Resplendent Endzhy Hanym, as befitting the modesty of the sister of Abkhazia's supreme king, maintained a sorrowful expression.

Afterwards a wedding-feast was held in Aq^w'a as well, in the King of Abkhazia's great palace. Those present here were officers from Tiflis³ and Kutaisi⁴, plus guests from Mingrelia, as well as from the Abkhazians only those new men, their shoulders covered in epaulettes and chests adorned with decorations, who merited sitting at table with General Mikhail Shervashidze and sitting together with whom at table was dignified for him. In the seating-area of Aq^w'a's fortress-garrison cannon-fire boomed out.

An unforgettably splendid day! Endzhy Hanym's face expressed sadness, exceptionally deep in thought as she was. In vain were all attempts to raise her spirits taken in turns by members of the bridal escort and the bride's retinue of friends; as when the sun shines through the clouds, from time to time she would raise a smile, but otherwise her lovely face had the same shadow cast over it as before.

Endzhy Hanym remained deep in thought even as in a golden carriage she was being conducted to the accompaniment of loud gunfire, passing along the shore-line of the R. K^jalash^wyr. Two hundred horsemen were travelling in escort with the King of Abkhazia's sister. The times were bad, evil-doers were many — they might have cut off their path. Autumn had overlaid nature's greenery with a veneer of gold. Wherever one looked the beauty of the place was such as to make one dizzy.

³ Capital of Georgia, known in Georgian at the time of this story as T'pilisi, which was conventionally rendered into English as Tiflis; since 1936 the city has been called Tbilisi.

⁴ The main city in Western Georgia.

And the people of Dal did not fall short in putting on a large ceremony of their own. One would have thought that all the bandits from far and wide across the broad acres of Abkhazia were gathered at the wedding of Kh^hymk^w'arasa Daryq^w'a-Ipa. The wedding was on a huge scale, with games and merriment. Once or twice they even loosed off shots at one another.

Coming to view the bride were kinsmen, neighbours and guests. On the third day it rained a little, and the ground turned to mud. Immediately they began with hoes to scrape out from the bride's chamber the mud that was being trailed in on the visitors' feet. And then, as one of the wives of the hosts expressed it, whenever they washed the floor, the same sparkle as before would be restored.

"Who was that with the black moustache?" Endzhy Hanyim surreptitiously enquired of her friend, when a giant of a man who had appeared and then, after seeing the bride, had departed. He made the floor under his feet positively crackle as he walked on it; he wasn't too tall, but he was powerful in the stature of his limbs, like some silvan being, and his sparkling black eyes gleamed out of his face, which was blanketed by an equally sparkling black beard.

"That was Batal Bey, your brother-in-law," replied her friend with a smile.

"Gracious, how like a bear he is!" said Endzhy Hanyim in a whisper.

But she had not yet set eyes on Kh^hymk^w'arasa, and she was even shy about asking questions concerning him. Having the thought that she really desired to see him, her heart would miss a beat. Prior to this Endzhy Hanyim had never had to spend so much time on her feet and was exhausted. For one or two nights she had hardly been able to lay down her head.

On the third day when dusk fell, Kh^hymk^w'arasa himself came into the bridal suite. What a wait she had had for him there, her heart consumed by loneliness; she was worn out! For a moment when she looked at him, it simply did not enter Endzhy Hanyim's head that this was him. The reason was that in general appearance there was nothing about him by which one would mark him out from the other visitors. In no way did he have the appearance of a man just married. It was only when she took another look at him that she noticed that he had fully fitted himself out — a brand new grey cherkesska, glistening epaulettes carrying the marks of his rank, his decorations gleaming with golden rays, whilst his weaponry glimmered with rays of silver. He too was not excessively large, but, because he was gaunt, at first glance she had the impression that he was tall. Even so, there could be no two ways about it: he was a bad lot. Endzhy Hanyim's heart winced. Where was that fine young man in whom she had placed her hopes, that one possessed of a horse's robust temperament, in whose eyes there glowed like fire a desire akin to a pure mountain-stream?! There could also have been no doubt that he was quite advanced in years, even if she had not seen all his medals and marks of military rank, acquired over years of service. From the first look full into his face it seemed to her that he had not a scintilla of sweetness about him. If one didn't mention his decked out shoulders and

chest, the manner of his entrance bore no sign that today was for him even any kind of celebration. His friends were with him, but, upon coming through the door, they held back. He came, lifted her veil and looked her full in the face. Her whole body was shaking. He looked her full in the face, the gaze projecting from his eyes as sharp as thorns, as though he was desirous of discerning whether he was being tricked or not, whether his wife was suitably beautiful or not.

“Welcome!” he uttered, his heart seemingly relaxed after he had had a good enough stare. In the silence of the room, although his voice was not too loud, it sounded stentorian. Endzhy Hanym animatedly nodded her head.

Two servants brought in a table, holding it at opposite ends, whilst another two brought in two comfortable chairs.

“Sit down!” he commanded and sat down at the table himself. Endzhy Hanym, realising that her husband did not wish to talk to excess, went quietly and took her seat, without giving him cause to say anything more.

Kh^hymk^w’arasa had handed his fluffy Circassian hat to the servant who had come rushing to his side, had straightened himself and had sat down, setting his thick, stumpy fingers on his knees. As though not yet convinced that she was beautiful to the extent that was fitting, he continued to gaze fixedly at her. Where his head was completely shaven, his pate was utterly smooth. Although his gaze was harsh, one could see pain on his skull-like face, his eyes deeply set in their sockets, fully round and quite yellow, like those of a falcon... It was only later that she found out that he was deeply troubled by something⁵, but, even so, his eyes betrayed both intelligence and concealed torment.

“Are you going to set before us some scraps to eat, man?” Kh^hymk^w’arasa turned and set his eyes on the servant who was standing a way off. Now too his voice was not overly loud, but it still sounded like a bellow.

“How so, my liege? Here you have venison, here bone-marrow, dessert...”

“It was a joke, man, a joke!”

He said this simply because nothing else occurred to him to say, but it caused Endzhy Hanym’s heart to miss a beat. As for his companions, standing beside the wall near the door, when they heard the joke their master had uttered, they all broke out in laughter but without taking it to excess in order not to expend their really good laughter prior to his articulating a really good joke. They were, after all, afraid of him. Between them and the newly-weds was suspended a white, transparent curtain. There they stood, ready to be cheerful, if ordered to be cheerful, or to depart, if ordered to depart.

“Have a taste of something!”

Endzhy Hanym raised her head and fixed her wide eyes on her husband. He drew a deadly sharp knife, cut up the meat and set it before her, whilst he himself picked up an especially tender little piece.

⁵ Literally, Abkhaz says ‘had severe toothache’, but a literal translation is inappropriate.

“I believe you eat pork; your mother is, after all, a daughter of Dadiani, and the Dadiani family of Mingrelia do eat pork, don’t they?” he asked, making as if to laugh and shooting out his words in rapid succession, as though, obliged to utter his joke, he quickly wished to stop talking.

Endzhy Hanym felt all the energy drain from her body. Not knowing what to say, she again raised her wide eyes and looked at him.

“It was a joke,” he flashed a smile and then resumed his normal expression. “I greatly respect Ahmyt Bey,” he said, as he transferred his sharp knife to his other hand, and, placing his right hand on hers, he caressed it. Involuntarily, Endzhy Hanym’s hand jerked back, and he, noticing this, looked at her with an even more intensely furrowed brow.

Again they sat together like this for a little while, neither of them divining what they should do, neither of them able to eat anything.

“Come on, let’s each of us raise a glass,” he said at length. “No, no!” replied Endzhy Hanym in alarm, shaking her head. And her husband, observing how his wife was prey to an excessive fear of him, raised a smile. As he was smiling, something was reflected on that smile of his, though it was difficult to ascertain if it arose out of stupidity, or whether he was in the grip of childishness. When she saw that, Endzhy Hanym’s heart melted a touch, but it could not entirely warm her up: she was overcome by the same trembling as she had been before.

Then once again they remained sitting in silence for a while. Finally, Kh’y^hmk^w’arasa made to stand up. In the process he glanced through the white curtain, and his gaze fell upon his friend, who had a look of contentment about him.

“You know what’s expected, *Mon Roi*⁶,” he said, keeping his voice low. Kh’y^hmk^w’arasa, who had intended to leave, halted and once more thrust his sharp gaze upon her. And Endzhy Hanym too quietly got to her feet.

And that was that...

Everyone who was standing as if turned to stone-pillars, as though awakened from sleep, all of a sudden merged together in confusion as they took up position by the far-corner. One picked up the 4-stringed instrument called the *chamg*^w*yr*, another struck up a song, and the others took up its refrain. Kh’y^hmk^w’arasa, his wife in tow, conducted her to his luxurious bed.

“Such is how it has to be; so must it be!” was all she could think of in her agitated state, her brow troubled. Wherever she placed her legs, it was as if they had turned to cotton-wool, as if from head to toe she had lost sensation; devoid of strength Endzhy Hanym went along with her husband’s guiding hand. Following her husband’s guiding hand, all she could hear was how racingly her heart was beating. He seated her on the comfortable bed, and stroked her hair; his elbow brushed against her breast. “Like this?! Like this?! In full view of everyone?! With them all looking on, is that how it is to be?!” were the thoughts behind her furrowed brow. Lovingly he laid her down on her bed; she

⁶ The original is in Circassian.

closed her eyes, and her arms fell away beside her. He brushed her cheeks with his rough moustache and gently kissed her lips. Then he straightened himself up, quickly turned away, and with military gait, his footsteps striking the floor, he was out and away.

The following day, some time towards the afternoon, all the noises in the yard and marquees subsided. And all of a sudden Endzhy Hanyim's sense was that either someone whom nobody was expecting or someone whom they were very much expecting had arrived. In an instant, everybody rushed together and pressed against the windows. Endzhy Hanyim remained alone where she stood, but still eager to learn what had happened.

“What can you see there?” she enquired from where she was standing.

“Our glorious great king has come, our glorious great king!” the women standing at the little window shouted, their voices all mingled together.

“What? How could our glorious king be here?” thought Endzhy Hanyim in amazement.

“Our glorious king Aslambakⁱ⁷, the glorious King of Abkhazia, Arslan Bey!”

King Ahmyt Bey's proud sister, blushing all over, was burning with the flames of anger; loathing for her brother's foul foe, her own queenly pride, and pity for her brother that they spoke of someone else as being superior to him — all these feelings comingled in her mind and she flew into an all-consuming rage, body and soul.

“Come over here!” she shouted, finding her voice for the very first time. The young women, their minds awash with what they were seeing outside, came and took up position tight around her.

She, Endzhy Hanyim, who resembled an amber bead, had had her happiness and bright future denied by virtue of her brother's affairs of state without her requiring him to speak twice about his decision, and yet here were the people of this good-for-nothing Kh^jymk^w arasa whom she had married yelling: “Our glorious king has come!”, delighting in Aslambak^j, who was the worst of her brother's enemies, someone who had murdered his own father with his own hand!

At that moment down below, starting from the yard, the lads were rolling up the stairway and carrying onto the balcony a carpet, which they laid down right up to the bride's feet, having covered the entrance to even her chamber in the bridal apartment. Even when fetching their bride, the king's sister, they hadn't done as much as this! Everyone standing there bowed their heads; the bride alone remained standing fully erect. Mounting the stairs and heading in this direction was the one who had occasioned all this commotion — Aslambak^j himself.

Infuriated as she was, when she raised her eyes, she saw how that sly creature did indeed possess the look of a king. Just one look at him told you that he could not have been less than sixty years-old, his beard as grey as grey could be. His clothes, very beautifully sewn to fit him, his proud bearing, his gait, his appearance which demonstrated that he was accustomed to power, his facial features which resembled the

⁷ The Turkish-leaning older brother (by the same father only) of the Russian-leaning Zafar Bey.

facial features of the prophets depicted on an image for veneration — in every respect that reprobate did have about him a greatness which her brother, Ahmyt Bey, somewhat lacked.

With burning cheeks, Endzhy Hanym was even more captivating, a picture of beauty. Her face was visible, but at the same time she had forgotten that her veil should have been raised. Aslambak^j calmly stepped forward and stood beside her. It was only up to his chest that Endzhy Hanym, who herself was not small in stature, reached, his fine-quality costume, edged in gold-braid, shimmering in front of her. Like a mark of power, his left hand held a large red apple, gleaming brightly. He took out a handkerchief, which was as brilliantly white as the driven snow, wiped it all over the apple, and handed it to her. And she, unable any longer to devise a way to refuse, took it from him.

“Bless you, my dear sister!” he said, and, placing his hand gently on her head, kissed her cheek. Then, taking a step back, he removed the ring he had on his index-finger and slipped in onto two of her fingers.

“Have this in the name of your great brother; your happiness is tied to the stone set in this jewel,” he said. Endzhy Hanym, thrown into confusion, raised her eyes but could not bring herself actually to stare straight into his. In truth her stone of destiny was that lovely ring, made of yellow gold, fashioned for him with a tiny image, a jasper set in the eye with seven pearl-pieces encircling it. She was so deeply impressed by it that her heart was captivated by its heavenly beauty. And with him standing there close to her, it was as if her blood recognised him, for the warmth of her heart, quite independently of any thoughts of hers, was taking to him with the speed of lightning. “I have seen him somewhere, but where have I seen him?” she was thinking but couldn’t remember. “Where have I seen him? Where have I seen him?” she kept thinking, even when Aslambak^j himself had departed.

And the reason I am telling all this — after the departure of Aslambak^j, Kh^jymk^w’arasa, paying his second visit, rushed into the bride’s chamber as though wishing to be reassured that she had stayed in her place and, having shot at her a glance as sharp as a thorn, promptly exited. Now, after all this, when she saw him, she noticed even more, as when one is entering a darkish room from a brightly lit one, yes, even more because of the disdain in which (as one might suppose) she held him, how lacking in appearance, how without any trace of sweetness, how boring he was.

“Just let me set eyes on Shabat, and I’ll give him a lesson on who should and who should not be brought to Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s wedding!”, said Kh^jymk^w’arasa.

“Wait, Kh^jymk^w’arasa, if the noble Aslambak^j has attended the wedding-feast we organised, that is an even greater mark of renown!” Such were the words which fell upon Endzhy Hanym’s ears by way of reply, a reply which must have been doubly offensive to her: firstly, that it was deemed a cause for renown that Aslambak^j, who was stained with his father’s blood, was present at Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s and thus her own wedding too; and secondly, that they spoke so insolently to her husband.

“Fine, but..., fine, but, if Ahmyt Bey hears of it, will the fallout be pretty? Just think on that, Haly Bey!” the poor soul replied, lowering his voice.

Down below where he’d descended, Aslambak^j sat down amidst a throng of people and began talking to them. The folk who had come were telling him about their wants and what was good in their lives; one was asking him to help, another requesting that he issue a judgement in their affairs. “Very soon there’ll be appearing a Turkish army, English ships, Frenchmen with mortars, and Akhan-Ipa will stand beside me as right-hand man. When, after driving the infidel off the blessed land of Abkhazia through the might of Allah, I sit down in my proper place, then prosperity will start to blossom in our country just as it did in days of old,” was the message Aslambak^j was preaching. The people stood around listening to him, wishing him success in realising his desires.

It was only after all this that it finally dawned on Endzhy Hanym. She was now extremely tired with all this thinking: without a shadow of a doubt, it was her sense that she had seen this man somewhere, but she was having difficulty remembering where it had been. So carried away was she by the thinking process that forgetfully she even broke tradition by sitting down. Finally, it came to her in a flash! She remembered everything. She had been small at that time. At most she could only have been about 8 years-old. It had been when she was at the K^jalash^wyr palace⁸.

Yes, yes, she remembered. How could one forget that?! It’s just that she couldn’t get it into her head that that young man then so marvellously youthful, that wonderful young man and this Aslambak^j, already advanced in years, were one and the same person. But she had not even the slightest hesitation about it — it was him, except it was just that in her mind’s eye it seemed to her as if he was still the youth he had been then, as viewed through a child’s eye.

She was small at that time, but even so it was coming back to her: she and the daughters of her father’s brother at one moment had slipped out of the sight of the nurses who were supervising them and had made their way up the sloping meadow behind the palace, picking flowers. And tiny Endzhy Hanym, plodding through the green grass, failed to see that she had moved off from the other children. Going forward, she had failed to notice when he suddenly appeared, a horseman, his face bound in black; he swooped down upon her like a falcon, snatched her up and made off with her. He gave her no time to emit even a squeak. And nobody at all noticed what had happened. The child had had no understanding at all about what had befallen her as the man, with her in tow, made his way through to a house standing in a shore-line wood clothed in vegetation. Had the little princess ever been treated so roughly by anyone?! The man whose face was masked in the folds of his Abkhazian headgear had taken the child up into a house and, with a push, had flung her into a dark room. She recalled how, when her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she had seen that there were many children inside

⁸ K^jalash^wyr (aka K’elasur) is a district on the south-east of the capital at the mouth of a river of the same name.

that room, both older than her and younger, etc.. The children were all screaming; she was frightened, but what she feared most of all was that a mouse might gobble her up. How much time passed she didn't remember, but after a short while they had gathered them together, moved them outside, and herded them to the shore, blinded by the light of day that shone over their eyes. A boat was moored there. All the children were herded aboard. People dressed in black were thrashing, lash upon lash, those who seemed about to cry out. Down in the broad and capacious hold where they'd been stuffed, her gaze had fallen upon that young man. What most of all remained lodged in her memory was the lovely shirt he was wearing. Perhaps one might see such a thing in a dream; be that as it may, never thereafter did Endzhy Hanym see a shirt like that being worn by any man in real life. With the image in her mind's eye, even now Endzhy Hanym was thinking that it was woven solely of gold-thread. That handsome man had been wearing a golden shirt! He was sitting on a comfortable chair, lounging back as it were, from time to time drawing on the hookah standing beside him; then he would lift his head, his eyes quite devoid of any lustre. One of his elbows was on the back of the chair, and, as his hand was gently swaying where it hung down, her gaze had fallen upon his exceptionally long fingers, threaded through rings. In his other hand he was holding a whip from the stable, quite out of keeping with his appearance. The children were being brought in one by one and being turned this way and that as they were shewn to him, whilst he, barely able to keep his bleary eyes open, said nothing. But, when Endzhy Hanym was shewn to him, his face, albeit barely visibly, altered, and, albeit barely visibly, he moved his finger, beckoning towards him the black man who was ushering the children in. With barely a parting of the lips, his voice simpering, he spoke as though unable to do more and asked a question. The way he moved his hands and body were the same as before — as if he was incapacitated, as if he was lazy. And the other fellow merely shrugged his shoulders as if to say: "How should I know?!" and began to speak. It was as if they were speaking in Abkhaz, but the child, listening there, could make out nothing. How could she have known then that it was the thieves' argot in which they were conversing?

The one dressed in gold turned and fixed his dull eyes on Endzhy Hanym.

"Whose daughter are you? Do you know?" he asked in his normal tone.

"I am the daughter of Zafar Bey, King of Abkhazia!" Endzhy Hanym shot back, defiantly and with clarity.

"How can that be, girl?!" Though hitherto he had been unhurried in his actions, as soon as he heard this, in a flash his face changed, and, drawing back, he swung his large whip and, in quick succession, inflicted three blows on the black man. "Take her back to the very spot from where you abducted her and leave her there this instant!" he bellowed, altering his voice and forgetting his thieves' tongue.

What happened next lodged in the memory of her childhood as an ugly image. The black man was on his way with the child held over his horse's neck, when, lo!, as they were approaching the palace, a large number of horsemen suddenly appeared from each

and every side, in a mêlée of shouts and cries. They were people she knew, they were the ones searching for her. The horses were spinning round this way and that; they had the black man surrounded. The ring they had formed around him was tightening like a lasso. Her father's brother, Hasan Bey himself, was holding the child in an embrace of tender affection. A confused mix of shouting and the thunderous sound of horses' hooves began to develop.

Then, when those who had met her set off with her in disorderly fashion in the direction of the palace, the child looked back and saw the black man trampled beneath horses' hooves and left lying among the grass in the meadow where she had been gathering flowers that morning. And the horse on whose back she had been travelling hither was standing over him... neighing.

After that, perhaps to allow her to forget this event, no mention of the affair had passed anyone's lips. Had she not seen Aslambak^j the previous night, it was unlikely that she would even have realised that he had been the one drawing in drags from that haze-inducing hookah, the man dressed in the golden shirt.

Standing where she was, Endzhy Hanym was very agitated by this recollection belonging to the realm of her childhood. The carpet, rolled up earlier, they had already brought down. Quite some time passed. Outside they set up a target for shooting, and the sound of the shots multiplied. Endzhy Hanym seemed to find it boring.

It was then that the young women were suddenly sent into a flap, a sure sign that again someone important had arrived. Who on earth could be coming now?!

Endzhy Hanym was thrown into a state of anxiety; Endzhy Hanym flinched, convinced at once that, be he God or be he Satan, there was someone there.

There entered through door the very image she had conjured up in her mind's eye that day, the day when her brother had told her that he was giving her in marriage — that firey man of the mountains, the impetuous man of the mountains with the temperament of an unbroken horse, driving at the head of a group of young bloods a herd from the North Caucasus. Lo, that's who it was — for certain, he was the one she had envisioned that night, the one to whom she had given greeting in her heart. These sky-coloured eyes of his were shining out from the darkness when, sensing her greeting, the young man whom she had looked upon that night as something out of this world began to look away.

Even his very clothes were exactly as her heart had visualised them back then: everything he was wearing was ordinary and worn; he was dressed in rags, but every piece of his weaponry glimmered. He was a young man of twenty-five or less. His waste was slender like a girl's; he was lithe, but there could be no doubt that he was powerful and agile — in a word, just as she had imagined him then.

“Whilst Aslambak^j, a king's son, might well have stood out amongst those earlier arrivals, this one resembles the very moon itself!” said Endzhy Hanym.

When he noticed that everyone was looking at him, how even the bride was looking at him, the young man couldn't help but smile, his cheeks burning intensely.

He bowed to all without distinction and moved towards the bride.

Then one of the young women picked up the *chamg^wyr* and began to sing. The young man, when he saw that the song was about him, blushed even more, but his eyes were shining in such a way as to reveal that he was inwardly content.

“He who allowed no bird time to perch on branch,
He who allowed no mother and child time to enjoy the bonds of nurture,
Our guest of yesterday, Shabat the Golden,…”

were the words of the song the girl was singing. The young man shook his head as if to say: “Is this really necessary?”

“He who used the rib-cages of officers to plait his fence,
He who used the rib-cages of generals to over-plait these,
Our guest of yesterday, Shabat the Golden.”

...The young man had brought as a gift for the bride a stupendous necklace, threaded with high-quality stones. Endzhy Hanym, standing there before him, could not hide, poor woman, how pleased she was with the present.

One of the girls came and stood beside him, holding a glass she had placed on a dish. What caught Endzhy Hanym’s eye was that those girls were demonstrating how delighted they were with the guest, but they were saying nothing out of their sense of decorum.

“Who was this wonderful specimen?” enquired Endzhy Hanym after he had gone.

“He is your brother-in-law, isn’t he?!”

“Is he the one known as Shabat the Golden?”

“The very same.”

“Even so, what’s he achieved that’s so special that you should sing a song about him on the *chamg^wyr*?”

The words of their queen went straight to the girls’ hearts, and, with excited enthusiasm and hardly letting one another get a word in edgeways, they began to relate the story of Shabat the Golden.

“How can you not have heard about Shabat the Golden?!”

“He is the foster-child of Smail Hatkh^wa.”

“His foster-father even taught him the language of animals and birds alongside all the other lessons.”

“Then, two years ago, when the Tsar’s army was descending upon the Ts’abal plain, it was Shabat the Golden who stood at the head of the people.”

“Two years ago in August Shabat the Golden mounted an assault on the army-base by himself. As a man alone he fought the great army. Imagine the scene — he has thirty vipers inside him; he has thirty vipers standing at his side!”

“Shabat the Golden was betrayed by his ‘glorious brothers’, and, as Shabat the Golden slept, he was taken prisoner by them. Shabat the Golden was trussed up; they spirited Shabat the Golden away to the army.”

“The army advanced through the Ts’abal valley, flattening it beneath horses’ hooves; not a house, not a wicker-cottage was left unburnt; all the maize-stores were emptied, and all the livestock driven off.”

“Who was killed was killed; who was not killed was wounded; who was not wounded was deported.”

“When Shabat the Golden was betrayed by his ‘glorious brothers’, those decorated ones bound his feet to a trunk, carried him off to Tbilisi and had him imprisoned.”

“For a whole year they kept him tied up against a wall in chains. Then, when they released him, they didn’t even allow him to return home but despatched him to serve in the army.”

“Upon arrival there he immediately displayed great heroism and received a decoration.”

“On his way here he sent the people of Ts’abal a message: ‘My mighty brothers, you who wished to enter Dal at the head of the Cossacks; you who sold me for the price of a miserable old medal! I am now on my way, but it is for you that I am heading. Either depart of your own accord or come to face me riding your mangey horses! I shall not permit you any longer to make a home for yourselves here!’ he said.”

“Those who heard this, saying they preferred not to mount their mangey horses, went into exile and went down to Abkhazia. The sons of Mzalej went to Atara, the sons of Kh^hryps to Aradu, whilst the sons of Msawyst chose G^wyp as their residence.”⁹

“When he arrived, he gathered his brothers and said: ‘Our people are agitated; we must fight for our people.’ In full view of everyone, he ripped off his golden decorations and tossed them onto the fire. ‘You also should do exactly the same as this, if you have Abkhazian blood coursing through your veins!’ Haly Bey Q’aitmas-Ipa and your young brother-in-law Ehsow went and stood beside him. Haly Bey, Shabat and Ehsow went off into the forest in pursuit of a life of brigandage.”

Endzhy Hanym was listening to the noise of the girls’ twittering as though she was in a dream. As from one to another they related in turn the story of Shabat the Golden, she was unable to do anything other than twist her head from side to side, now this way, now that. Right from the start she regarded what they were saying as fiction. But what she now understood without a shadow of doubt was this: it was these brigands upon whom everyone’s head was fixated, to whom everyone’s heart was given over, and this was true of everyone around here, including these very girls. They were the brigands who were opposing the King of Abkhazia and the Tsar’s laws. They were the ones lighting up everyone’s eyes and to celebrate whom their songs were composed.

⁹ Atara, Aradu and G^wyp are inland-villages in the Ochamchira District to the south-east of Abkhazia’s capital.

“So, is Shabat the Golden the enemy of everyone decorated with an epaulette?” she asked.

And they replied with enthusiasm: “Yes, yes, Your Majesty!”

“Such being the case, is he my husband’s enemy too?” The young women, considering that they had evidently said too much, lowered their heads, unable to think of anything to say.

“Such being the case...” Endzhy Hanym said again, growing ever more heated, and her cheeks flushed red, small dimples appearing on both sides, as she produced a look that would have utterly flummoxed poor Sh^wliman. “Such being the case, my brother too is the enemy of that Shabat of yours, for my glorious brother, the great King of Abkhazia, carries on his shoulders the highest decoration of all.”

The girls were devastated and said nothing. Some time intervened before at last the one who seemed to be their leader quietly ventured: “What has your brother got to do with it, my dear lady, Your Majesty? Your brother — may his span of life be long! — is our glorious king, of whom our fathers speak first when they are holding the choice portions of heart and liver at our ceremonies, is he not?”

Endzhy Hanym once again wanted to say: “So you say, but was it not just now that you were shouting ‘Our glorious king!’ with reference to Aslambak^j, who killed his father with his own hand?”, but her words dried up on her tongue as they came up onto it from her throat. The reason was that all of a sudden she had the thought that, if she said anything further, it would go right then and there to the very marrow of the girls and thereafter, in fear of her, they would not be inclined to say anything to her without her having to drag it out of them by force. After all, she wanted to know everything, being intent upon assuming here the position of hostess and senior female. Then too she first of all wanted to go on hearing, though she did not know why, the story of that ill-starred young man, that Shabat the Golden. And the young women standing there with sweat pouring over their foreheads as they believed her to be angry, when they observed their queen smiling over some thought in her head, looked this way and that at each other and breathed a collective sigh of relief, as they recovered their composure.

Grandmother of the Marshan clan, K^wymp’yilkhan Byrzyk^j-pha, had reached the grand old age we associate with the raven. It used to be said that the Grim Reaper had forgotten about her, that through devilish guile she had deceived that Lord of the Dead himself, rendering him unable to appear before her. No-one knew how old she was, though folk used to say that she was 200 years-old. And every single member of the Marshan family called her ‘our grandmother’, but in all probability no-one knew whether she was mother to their grandfather’s father or to their grandfather’s grandfather. Everyone called her ‘the old witch’. But she was no trouble to anyone. All shrivelled up, a huddled mass of wizened skin and bone, on a soft cushion she sat. She drank neither water nor wine, and a mouthful of maize-bread was enough for her each day.

Since Eshsow and Shabat, being the youngest of the brothers, had no home of their own, she resided in the palace of Batal Bey, after whom they came in terms of seniority. Shabat and Eshsow were brothers to Batal Bey and Kh^hymk^w’arasa through their father, but their mother was different. It would have been inconceivable for Kh^hymk^w’arasa’s wedding to proceed without the presence of K^w’ymp’ylkhan. When the wedding-day arrived —she couldn’t possibly be seated on a horse after all —, they hammered sticks together in the manner of a stretcher, placed her and her cushion together on top of it, and set off with her for Warda. A journey which for a man would not have taken three hours saw them on the road from morning to evening. A short while after they set off, the old lady would become so tired that she could go no further. Then they would have to break their journey. Whenever they set off with her, folk would come out onto the path in the hope of catching a glimpse of K^w’ymp’ylkhan Byrzykⁱ-pha. The children would run alongside the stretcher, whilst adults would advance, standing somewhat to the rear. Anyone looking on from a distance would have thought they were conveying a corpse. But, without pausing, the one they were transporting would the while be composing little ditties, her poor tongue all by itself down where it was lodged in her throat uttering a stream of weird things. Wherever they saw a flat stretch of grass, they would halt and perform a round-dance. “Harvest-dance (*Auraasha*)! Sway together to and fro as though you are Ahchypsywans — think of yourselves as bats with outstretched wings and imitate; in the manner of people from Bzyp, avoid boastfulness; in the manner of Abzhywans, avoid competing with one another!” The old lady’s lips would flap without taking a rest; she’d keep on speaking and saying something as she observed them performing the harvest-dance. “Does anyone seriously imagine I’m afraid that wretched folk who have nothing to wear on their bodies or heads are going to shake their shrunken stomachs about too much?! Let them dance the *Auraasha*! Ah, if Grand Old Adlag^jyq^w’a Marshan goes up to his house, he falls prey to lice, and if he pops outside, a flock of creditors descend on him.” Grand Old Adlag^jyq^w’a Marshan — Adlag^jyq^w’a was her husband. Possibly, if not that, he might have been her father-in-law or even her son. “*Auraasha*! Ho-ho-ho!” When the old lady spoke, they would hold their ears close to her mouth and then, speaking loudly themselves, convey her utterances to the people. In seven places they interrupted their journey. And when they drew near to the Warda fortress, a further three times they came off the road. She would raise her hand, which was not even the size of a meagre stick, and give a blessing to the charred houses and children standing bare-foot in the mud. She would bless the poverty-stricken villages and the peasants down below, their eyes full of sorrow, gazing up at the clouds. Damn their souls! Only let the hordes not sally forth again with their dull cannons and the sun glistening on their sabres in order to empty the people’s maize-stores, which in any case already had nothing inside them, to drive off their herds, which in any case were already minuscule, to put to the torch — damn their souls! — their old, cone-shaped hovels which they had plaited and put up without their heart being in it, having at the back of

their minds the thought that maybe the very next day they would in any case be burnt down. Up above towards the peaks the clouds were parting. From within the splits in the clouds the sky resembled deep pools of water.

Somehow or other by dusk they managed to convey her in one piece to Kh^jymk^w'arasa's fortress. During the course of the journey she had divided up and handed out all her golden clothes; she then removed her fur-coat (instead they folded a blanket round her); she gave her fine-leather shoes to a little girl (they bound a towel around her feet); she gave away her rug (they laid out beneath her a somewhat threadbare shepherd's felt-cloak). Here in the palace it was quite a different matter. Here everyone was sated and warm. It was the eve of the wedding. "I'll probably die here now; are you thinking you'll get me back again to Lata alive?" she said as she sat down, with a sigh of exhaustion. Her lady-in-waiting, a venerable old woman, on hearing this could not help but smile. Fifty-five years previously they had also come with the old lady in precisely this fashion at the time when Kh^jymk^w'arasa's father, Daryq^w'a, was getting married. And at that time too she had apparently made exactly the same comment.

Before Kh^jymk^w'arasa's guests went to visit the bride, they would go up and bow down to the old lady. Such was the custom. "So, we have yet another bride here, ha, ha, ha!" Those who did not know her would go up there thinking that the decrepit old lady was lying prostrate on a bed, unable to speak. But, before a guest even stepped inside the broad chamber, K^w'ymp'ylkhan, seated on a cushion with her withered legs crossed, would take a peep with her beady eyes at the one who had entered, find out who he was, and then straightaway say something specific about him.

When Hadzhy Byrzyk^j Adag^w'a-Ipa, King of the Ubykhs, went to her, she cast a glance at him and spoke thus: "Hey, Ubykh-Mubykh or whatever you call yourself, Byrzyk^j the dandy, the broken horn, little scion of my great brothers who would launch themselves against a coastal surge with just an unsheathed knife!" And he, not to be outdone, apparently made reply: "Hey, my grand sister, lost sister of the Byrzyk^j clan, daughter of ravens, bride of crows, you who have worn out the folk of these parts, but of whom the folk in the next world dream!" It was evidently at that point when the old lady invited him over and kissed his head.

He was one who did manage to hit upon something to say by way of riposte, but the majority, when targeted by her with verbal shots like this, would be reduced to laughing out loud, poor things, not knowing what they should do. It goes without saying that everyone who went there would beat a hasty retreat.

But, when Shabat the Golden stepped forward from those standing around quarrelling and went in to K^w'ymp'ylkhan, he stayed there for some time.

Then he came out; they brought him his horse; he mounted and spun round and round. First he looked towards those who were shooting at the target and hesitated, but then he gathered his composure and set off towards the gate, disregarding the shouts of 'Halt!' from the organisers. At that moment, deathly white like a ghost, the old lady in person

appeared standing in the doorway. And those standing close by clearly heard what she said:

“Shabat, my dear, take good care of yourself, for you are the one I observe to be worthy to uphold the grand old tradition of the Marshan clan. Without your presence here, anyone looking at these fellows will think to himself: ‘Could these really have been the manly Marshans?!’ And the people will be left with no knowledge of the meaning of heroism.”

From where Shabat was standing he was unable to hear what she said — it was too far away. He turned round, laughing, and gave a wave of his hand, in which he was holding his riding-crop. When they saw the old lady standing in the doorway, and when they heard her voice issuing as if from the grave, the people were stunned, they were awe-struck, they were thrown into confusion. As Sh^wamakh^j Psou Abydzh was coming at a gallop to duck beneath the target and became distracted by gazing in that direction, his horse veered off course, and he crashed full frontally with his horse into the masses. And for the rest of that day they had no topic of conversation apart from that. Also there was the fact that they had offended Shabat the Golden, coming to visit the bride at his brother’s wedding, and had not even conducted him to the seating area; and then there was what Byrzyk^j-pha had said about him. That all of this is the absolute truth I have heard Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K’adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd tell in mutually supporting testimony.

.....

The night was already somewhat advanced when she went to her bed. She stretched out and lay down on her back. Having been on her feet since that day’s dawn, she was absolutely exhausted; it seemed to her as if her limbs were shattered. But for tonight she didn’t pay it a moment’s attention. She was waiting, her heart pounding at a fast rate.

Her mind was working away without pause, one thing more than another rending her heart, bringing images before her eyes. Short of patience, disturbed in heart and mind, tossing and turning where she lay, she was keeping an unbroken watch on the door. And finally in he came, his clothes all shiny white; he drew back the curtain and moved towards her. With some shyness, he placed the palm of his hand against his mouth and coughed. One might suppose her to be asleep, but — hello! — she’s awake, isn’t she?! Then boldly he lowered himself onto the edge of the bed.

Lying there at full stretch, she wasn’t moving. But her insides were churning like a watermill. Sounds were ringing in her ears. At first when she saw him, how she had disliked him, how her heart had sunk, how vexed she was, imagining him to be devoid of any sweetness when she was thinking of him in comparison with the others, the men who had caught her eye that day — now she remembered nothing; now her brain wasn’t working; the sounds running through her every fibre were roaring in her ears; ready, composed, her eyelids drawn together, she was awaiting the wonder to come...

He turned and, like the day before, placed his lips against her cheek. At first it seemed to her as though her soft hairs were all standing on end like a cat's. "Grant me your blessing, grant me your blessing, Golden Anana, Queen [of maidens]!" Her character, being one of shy reserve, ran ahead of the satisfaction, the right of which was allotted to her. Something like a thunderbolt sent a streak of energy through her body, and she curled up. Why is the wretched man wasting time? "Grant me your blessing, Golden Anana G^wynda!" Why is he not rushing? What's in his mind? How was she yet to know that it wasn't a matter of him not seeing it as something to be hurried, but rather that he simply didn't see himself being in a position to hurry and he wasn't in any fit state to be able to hurry? "Grant me your blessing, Mighty King¹⁰, you who control what it means to be a man, the source of births, and the power of creativity! I pledge to bring you as a sacrifice my best bull. Grant me your blessing, Mighty King..." Holding her in full view, it seemed to him that her furrowed brow betrayed a sadness, her eyes were dim, she was shaking all over. Their hearts, racing away, were pounding together. Even she could hear the beat. Once again forgiveness and love rose up in her throat to stop her breathing, and once more she regretted the thoughts she had had the previous night. For it seemed to her as if this coarse, cold man with eyes that were black from their very sockets had now actually become all soft and gentle. All soft and gentle he had indeed suddenly become, she supposed, and her heart leapt with joy and lost its heaviness, but how was she to know that softness and gentleness were not what would be able to mend her heart now?...

He was now tossing and turning more than her, as a feeling of vexation perplexed him, and fire was taking hold of him. "Your blessing...Mighty King...My best bull as a sacrifice..."

He had no wish to believe as yet that his potency was constrained; he had not suffered any worries on that score till tonight; that was something that this proud man of the mountains had not even thought about. In this way did quite some time pass. Gradually she grew accustomed to his fingers, engaged as they were in searching for her, like a puppy pawing at a rug — without any result.

The one and only sound pervading the silence was of the two of them breathing so heavily it was not contained in their throats.

Thus, unable to make out whether it was the howl of a jackal or the screech of a screech-owl, a harrowing sound in the distance struck her ear.

"A little wolf is on the prowl..."

He said this, perhaps imagining (who knows?) that, by getting her to think, even for just a moment, of something else, he could make her forget the very thing that was distressing her.

¹⁰ The godhead of fertility (Phallos) is being addressed, as the author himself clarifies in a footnote appended to his own Russian version of this tale.

“Did I ask you anything about the times when a wolf-cub might be on the prowl, you wretched man?!” she thought, as she lay there struggling with feelings of sadness and shame, shyness and irritation, which were more and more rushing into her head.

From dawn the next day Kh^jymk^w’arasa did not appear again before his poor wife during the hours of daylight. He was waiting for nightfall. But, when even the night produced nothing for him, he rose before dawn the following day, quickly washed, dressed and departed. He was absent for about two weeks. He was travelling in far-off places. Then he came back again, took off again, and that time there was no news of him for about a month. He couldn’t bring himself to settle in his house and homestead. His castle-fortress slipped completely out of his consciousness. Feeling embarrassed towards each other, as soon as their eyes met, he and his little wife would avert their gaze from each other.

Kh^jymk^w’arasa was travelling, but his travelling was not without purpose. He communicated, and made contact, with sorcerers, fortune-tellers and men of knowledge. When he was conversing with them, sweat would pour over his brow and the blood would run cold in his veins, but what could he do, poor thing? There was a tigress, white of forehead, pacing around his house and affording him no benefit at all, regardless of what the stars suspended in the heavens might hold in store for him. Thus did he find himself enmeshed in something beyond understanding — a decision about it had to be made. In a word, he paid visits to the wise. This was secret business — who could be in any doubt as to what would befall anyone who betrayed Kh^jymk^w’arasa?! They told him that he must perform a sacrifice to the Mighty King, and he did so. With his own hand he selected the best of his bulls, and, alone with his milk-brother, they picked up an elderly man renowned for his purity and set off in the early morning for the Little Warda forest. The milk-brother held the rope; Kh^jymk^w’arasa, who had been fostered out as *atalyk*¹¹ to his milk-brother’s family, was driving the bull, whilst the man of purity was standing at the front leading them forward. He was holding a bowl, covered up. Haughty Kh^jymk^w’arasa, as though today the very fibres of his body were disintegrating, did not hold back at all as he encouraged the bull onward with his shouting. Both the bull’s horns were adorned with a candle each. When they reached the open grassland concealed in the dense forest, they lit a fire. Kh^jymk^w’arasa and his milk-brother brought the huge breeding bull to the ground; the man of purity withdrew his blade and sliced through its throat. Kh^jymk^w’arasa brought a smouldering brand and dipped it in the blood. In no time at all they flayed the bull and roasted the heart and liver.

The sun shone out from the branches of the trees, and its long-sinewy rays spread warmth over the meadow. The man of purity arose and, holding one end of a towel with his right hand whilst with his left hand he tossed the other end over his shoulder, took

¹¹ For the historical practice whereby the scion of an upper class family would be handed over to a lower class family for rearing partly in order to build social bonds between the families and classes concerned see Shalva Inal-Ipa’s ‘The social reality of *atalychestvo* in the 19th and start of the 20th century’ at: http://abkhazworld.com/Pdf/Atalyk_Shалva_Inal_ipa.pdf.

hold of the heart and liver; the other two knelt down. Standing in silence in the immensity of the forest, it seemed to Kh^jymk^w'arasa that even his friends could hear the sound of his beating heart. He lifted up his eyes, full of hope, and looked into the face of the man of purity, but, boiling with rage, he averted his gaze at once. All three of them tasted the heart and the liver, their brows furrowed, their ancient visages full of intelligence, unable to look at one another directly in the face. *Atalyk* and milk-brother divided up the bull's meat, hoisted it up and carried it to the house of the man of purity.

After that Kh^jymk^w'arasa felt able to keep himself at home for about a week, but then he had to go off once more. During the sea-assault on the Shapsughs¹², he was awarded a large bronze medal. Without sparing himself, he would go forward demonstrating to his enemies' rag-tag militias the meaning of Abkhazian heroism. Thereafter he again sought out the sorcerers, fortune-tellers and men of knowledge to whom he had gone previously. They told him that a sacrifice had to be made in the name of Amza [the Moon], (one seventh) part of (the deity) Great Ajtar¹³. He did so. They told him: "Go to the base of the holy shrine of Inal-Q^w'yba, whose blessing will come to us." He went. Having scattered before him a few nights of semi-fulfilment, the great divinities to whom he was bringing his sacrificial animals later on began to forget all about him. Kh^jymk^w'arasa continued to be unsparing of himself and saw an increase in his stature in terms of military decorations. Even the Tsar himself had heard about Kh^jymk^w'arasa. "Ensign Prince Kh^jymk^w'arasa Marshan is heartily committed to Russian authority," was the substance of the reports that used to be conveyed to Chernyshev, the Minister of War, by General Rosen¹⁴, then-head of the Caucasian Army. Once again Kh^jymk^w'arasa visited the sorcerers, fortune-tellers and men of knowledge. "Have you had dealings with a woman?" they asked. "No," he responded. "Your younger brothers, Shabat and Eshsow, have laid a curse on you," they said. He sought salvation. During the attack on the Sadzians, he received the Order of Stanislav, 3rd grade. "You have transgressed your oath," said the sorcerers, fortune-tellers and men of knowledge. "You said that, as long as your blood is flowing in your veins, the Russian Tsar is your enemy, and then, forgetting your words, you accepted military honours." So, what way out does he have? Easy. "You must take a fine animal for sacrifice, fashion a fine candle, go to the foot of the tree where you swore your oath, and save yourself!"

Kh^jymk^w'arasa continued performing sacrifices just as before. He received the Order of Stanislav, 2nd grade.

¹² The Circassian tribe living to the north-west of the Ubykhs, today reduced to a rump-population centred on the coastal town of Tuapse.

¹³ For information on this and other deities and/or shrines named in this story see N.S. Janashia's (Dzhanashia's) 1937 article 'The religious beliefs of the Abkhazians' [sic], including the seven subdivisions of Ajtar, on pp.117-153 of *Georgica. A Journal of Georgian and Caucasian Studies 4 & 5*, Hertford (UK).

¹⁴ Gen. Rosen lost command of the Caucasian Army in January 1838.

Meanwhile, his poor wife, though self-confident from the first day she took up residence in Warda and hopeful of becoming one whose words would carry weight, was somewhat thrown off balance by the relationship between her and her husband. Once able to endure everything, and though she was of the considered opinion that this was a temporary matter, she began to find her hopes becoming ever more dashed. “Never mind what we might say, has anyone ever seen such a thing as this?” was the thought in her head. But, regardless, she began to see with utter clarity that all around her no-one had any affection for her. It wasn’t a matter of affection for her on their part — it seemed to her as though their servants, relatives and neighbours both hated and feared her. That astounded the young princess, who had been brought up in the lap of luxury and whom everyone loved. She took care to ensure that her look was one of sweetness and that sweetness characterised everything she said; she would distribute gifts. But the way her fine gifts were received was as if the recipients feared that somewhere along the line she would extract from them a price in return. She could not understand how she had come to find herself in this situation, and often she would hide away and cry, even filling up with an ever increasing sense of loathing. She had no friend apart from her milk-sister, who accompanied her. Everyone would carry out her instructions and run about in accordance with the looks she gave them, but she gained nobody new prepared to put their trust in her in a normal human way. She knew nothing about what had happened, about what had been said concerning her. She did not know that the words of her many-times-great mother-in-law K^w’ymp’ylkhan Byrzyk^j-pha had been reported and were circulating in every single hamlet.

Here’s the story about what she had said. The day they fetched the bride the old lady had summoned a woman whom she trusted and apparently gave her this instruction: “Tonight, when they bring the bride out and pass by, keep a watchful eye on their trail and make an exact note of the place she passes water.” And she did exactly as the old lady said. Moreover, everyone had observed how K^w’ymp’ylkhan, when they first introduced the bride to her, had met her with a frown in place of any sign of joy. Then, after the bride had left, she had apparently sat for quite a time with her head in her hands. Later, she sent everyone out and summoned Batal Bey, spending a while telling him something. But no-one heard even by way of gossip what it was that she had been saying.

And the reason I’m saying this... That woman apparently came and told the old lady what she had seen. The old lady evidently saw the grass at the place where Endzhy Hanyim had passed water all scorched and looking like waste ground. “Eh, my dear, this can’t betoken anything good; thanks to this bride of ours, the Dal valley is destined to be consumed in flames,” is seemingly what K^w’ymp’ylkhan Byrzyk^j-pha said. The people of Dal knew the old lady who had cheated death to possess a divine spiritual sense. What she said was alone sufficient for them to regard Endzhy Hanyim as one whose footsteps trailed bad luck. Quite apart from that, the times themselves were ill-starred. After all,

only two years had passed since the Tsar's army had burned Ts'abal to the ground and expelled the entire population¹⁵.

When Batal Bey entered in response to her summons, the old lady spoke up and said the following:

"Batal Bey, my dear, I'm going to tell you how things are. It turns out that our little bride and your own 'friend' [= wife] are related in a hundred ways, don't you see? Their fathers, Ahmyt Bey and Aly Bey, are Chachbas and sons of two brothers. Their mothers and the daughters of Dadiani are daughters of two brothers. In addition, they are wives of brothers."

Batal Bey laughed beneath the tangled mass of his moustache and opened his mouth to say something, but, when he looked into the old lady's eyes, he restrained himself, as though someone had smacked him on the lips. From where he stood he was listening to her, his ear fixed on her every word, in order to discern the direction in which her words were heading. But Byrzyk¹-pha's words went off in an entirely different direction from what he was expecting:

"Let's not have a rivalry on our hands between these two, Batal Bey, my dear; let them not argue over seniority!"

"If we have no argument, neither will they have one. It's possible that, just as he is superior to me, his wife will be superior too as far as the women are concerned, isn't it?"

"You've spoken wisely, Byrzyk¹-pha's little darling, you!" Batal Bey stretched out his shoulders.

"You've spoken wisely — you deserve a long life, my little fool!" At this Batal Bey's shoulders visibly shrank.

"My dear, glories are what you all have sought. You all want absolutely no-one but Chachba women. Let them bring nothing but advantage to you! — I entreat God, who created me out of nothing. But the character of the Chachba women is bad, whatever the reason I've told you this might be." The old lady gave a deep sigh. "And then there's another tie of kinship here..."

There was a look of puzzlement on his face.

"Don't you know what it is? Your brother, Shabat, is the son of the sister of this little bride's father — your brother whom last year you handed over in fetters to the Infidels, the one whom you threw into prison." When she was saying this, the old lady held her head drawn over to one side as she spoke in whispers. Her small face was covered in a thousand wrinkles, her tiny eyes, soaking wet, were sunk into the centre of it.

Batal Bey's head suddenly sank, folding in upon his chest.

"Go and get it into the head of your lady-wife that, even if she is the senior by age, the one with the power is the wife of the senior male. And also she happens to be the sister of Abkhazia's glorious king, whatever all of you might say."

¹⁵ This punitive expedition took place in 1837.

Having said this, she sent her great-great-great grandson, Batal Bey Marshan, away. But that was the day of the wedding. Since then half a year had passed. And Endzhy Hanym had certainly done nothing that could be said to have brought ruination to the people of Dal. On the contrary, she considered herself to have been duped in every respect. And there were instances where she was correct.

She sat down and wrote a letter to her brother, King of Abkhazia, Ahmyt Bey Chachba. It was by the grace of God that she had taken paper with her when she was being brought here. She filled with characters both sides of four large sheets. She wrote in Russian¹⁶; now read it, if you're a man! "To my beloved brother, Brightest Prince Mikhail Georgievich Sharvashidze, Ruler of Abkhazia, as chosen by God and the people." When Ahmyt Bey received and read his sister's letter, he couldn't help smiling and felt a sense of relief. At the start of the letter his sister was writing that she was bored there, that she was frightened there, and like a small child she was beseeching him to bring her home. But according to what he went on to read, he gathered that it was her intention actually to strengthen herself. Again he smiled, when he thought of how his sister's proud blood was doing its job. He learnt moreover how the attitudes and restlessness of the peoples of Dal and Ts'abal had become such that even his inexperienced young sister was able to see them.

Naturally, he was aware of the situation there as described in the letter — it wasn't for nothing that he had spies distributed throughout the villages, in accordance with instructions from his steward Georgi! Quite apart from that, Ahmyt Bey was visited that very day in person by the young Dal princes, the sons of his father's sister, Shabat and Eshsow, who were the organisers of the uprisings there.

In a good frame of mind from early morning, Ahmyt Bey was receiving the people. He was seated in his usual posture — his elbows set upon his knees, in thought with three of his fingers held against his brow, just like K¹alash Bey's portrait hanging above his head. Georgi too was standing there at his side. On this day Ahmyt Bey was also being visited by his close relative, Babysh Ch^w'k^{at}'ua, who would bring him news from Samyrzaq'an¹⁷. So here now were the three lands torn away from Ahmyt Bey's realm and already known by the designations assigned to them by the Russian: Sadzny, Dal-Ts'abal, Samyrzaq'an. The establishment of this province of Samyrzaq'an was especially galling to Ahmyt Bey. It was different in the case of the peoples of Sadzny-Khylts'ys. They were in alliance with the Ubykhs and the Circassians, having removed themselves from Abkhazia since the time when Ahmyt Bey's father had turned towards Russia. Now if they prefer the Russian Tsar's yardstick to the glorious King of Abkhazia, let them have it! Nine years before he had put them to the torch, and, given time, he would move against them again. Also, it had been just the year before last when Ahmyt Bey had

¹⁶ It was only later in the 19th century that a script was devised for Abkhaz.

¹⁷ Abkhazia's most south-eastern province, abutting the Georgian province of Mingrelia. Today the Gal District roughly equates to historical Samyrzaq'an (aka Samurzaq'ano).

shewn the people of Dal-Ts'abal what his power was like, and he was destined to return there once more. He would cross, if necessary, even the Bagada bridge, which was considered to be quite impassable by man. Furthermore, there were even kinship-ties between them to be factored in here. And there should be some roles for that kinship-factor too to play —unless, after all, it had been in vain that he had given his little sister in marriage, after God had endowed her with her great good-looks! The times would never unfold in precisely this same way, and the wind never blows in just one spot. But these Samyrzaq'anans!...

Ahmyt Bey listened very attentively to Babysh. At length he deemed it appropriate for even Georgi to be sent out. Shabat and Eshsow were sitting waiting for him. But for a while he had no time for them. Where was he to find time for them?! Babysh too left, but immediately they came and informed the King of Abkhazia that he had General Raevskij himself as guest. The King of Abkhazia cast a furtive glance in the direction of the pair from Dal but said not a word. They remained seated where they had been sitting in wait. The unfortunate thing was that they could hear everything that he and his interlocutor were saying to each other, but how could he have behaved differently? He could hardly have just told them to get out.

Raevskij had recently been appointed to the post of 'Commander, Black Sea Coastal Line'¹⁸. As soon as he arrived, the King of Abkhazia concluded that this was a man with whom one could do business. The new general was a kind-hearted man. In several areas he and Ahmyt Bey found themselves in full agreement with each other.

Raevskij was not one of those generals who wished to bring the mountain-folk to heel through fire and the sword. As soon as he took up his post, he set himself the task of constructing roads; he wanted to improve trade along the coast. "Trade and education are more advantageous than cold steel in order to get the mountain-folk to listen us," he would write to the Viceroy and to the Tsar himself. Ahmyt Bey too, having previously considered that the Russians were not behaving correctly towards him, gave him strong support, becoming for him, as it were, a great and respectful client.

But there was something the King of Abkhazia did not know. He did not know that those holding the offices of Viceroy and Tsar were emotionally inclined strongly to disfavour Raevskij's noble projects, and that they took the same negative view of Raevskij himself. Raevskij's father¹⁹ had apparently exhibited acts of heroism as a great leader at the time of the tumultuous war between the Russians and the French; holding the hands of his children, he kept them with him and would apparently launch attacks at the head of the army. But the reason why his son was here in the Caucasus was evidently because he had been sent into exile. It seems that at one time he had been close to the

¹⁸ The Black Sea Coastal Line was established in 1839.

¹⁹ Nikolaj Nikolaevich Raevskij senior (1771-1829) had been a distinguished officer in the war against Napoleon.

group of Russian nobles who wanted to topple the Tsar²⁰. Even now, even though he held the post of general, he was apparently being kept under surveillance.

Ahmyt Bey's mood brightened considerably, but he couldn't help but feel somewhat disturbed by the fact that, while he and the general were talking, these brigands were sitting there, two inert masses. When the Russian recognised them, he might think there was something going on here. If only someone would call them away! But, as Raevskij was moving towards the door, he suddenly noticed Shabat and, in full view of Ahmyt Bey, whose heart at first missed a beat, offered him a most warm greeting — not only a greeting, he actually embraced him.

“Hearty greetings, brave prince!”

And Shabat, laughing in his sparkling manner, responded, speaking fluently in Russian.

“Hey there, welcome, sons of our peerless father's sister!” said Ahmyt Bey, referring to himself, according to his usual custom, with the royal plural, like a grand sovereign.

Shabat and Eshsow straightened themselves up and turned in his direction.

“Move over here please, move over here. Since the last time I saw you, I've been missing you... How are you, peerless sons of Dal?!”

The thought did not even enter his head that, if a long time had passed since he had seen them, the blame was partly his own: Shabat had been taken prisoner and jailed in Tbilisi, whilst Eshsow had spent time in the forest protecting himself. But now he was in a good mood, and, when he was in a good mood, Ahmyt Bey, glorious King of Abkhazia, was subject to emotional displays. The brothers, in order of seniority, kissed his sleeve and then moved to their rear.

“We cannot complain, Your Majesty. We are constantly praying to God that the power of our great king suffer no impediment,” the older one said.

From where Ahmyt Bey was sitting, all hunched up, he shot a glance at Shabat. He was standing at his full height, his waist still narrow, such that one could not detect any trace of change anywhere to his outward appearance. The way he was looking, with his head held high, fully suited him. His younger brother too, who had kept his features, was looking in exactly the same way. Ahmyt Bey, who had grown accustomed to their whole family's fawning and duplicitous ways, felt a jolt in the depths of his heart as he now observed this pair's haughty manner, but he was actually being energised by it. Say what you like, his spirits were high.

“What is new in my territory of Dal? How much time has passed since I saw it?!”

“Come up and be our guest, Your Majesty. All the people will bid you welcome,” Shabat answered him. “Only come without militia and cannons!” He laughed, flashing his white teeth.

He made no comment about Ahmyt Bey having called Dal ‘my territory’, for it did not belong to him any more than the moon in the sky was his possession, but the eyes of his

²⁰ Reference is to the Decembrist Revolt of 1825.

younger brother twinkled like those of the whelp of a wolf. And that too did not pass unnoticed by the King of Abkhazia. Smiling silently he placed three of his fingers against his brow. But that wasn't a topic for thought now. This pair were not simply paying a visit without having some business in mind. After all, they were perfectly well aware that he could that instant summon his guards and order them to bind the two of them tightly or give them poison as soon as they sat down at table, and that today would not be the first time he would have done the likes of that. If, even despite knowing this, they had come, their coming must betoken something. He was today surely to hear something new in respect of the question of Dal, about which he was troubled.

They were standing, whilst Ahmey Bey was sitting in his usual fashion, three fingers resting beneath his forehead. He knew the extent to which the people of Dal were restless. Regardless of the true extent of their restlessness, things seemed to be made out to be even worse when they were preparing reports to the government. "Of the people of Dal," he was thinking, "Kh^jymk^w arasa, our new brother-in-law, is such a one in whom one can, somehow or other, have hopes." But for the time-being he was not the one holding power — the ones holding sovereign power were those who opposed the king's yardstick. And Shabat and Ehsow held the leading position. He raised his head, laughed towards them, and decided to address them in sweet tones.

But, even so, he did not invite them to sit down.

"You would not have come, I suppose, unless you had some business?" said Ahmyt Bey, his voice in the deepest of registers, adding to his words their gravity.

Shabat's face suddenly altered, turning cold. He moved a step forward and, with all his might, he slammed his cane down on the floor. A piece of the parquet-flooring came away, ricocheted, bouncing up and to the side. A second time he struck it with his stick, and a second time a small section split in two and went flying. Yet a third time, with even more force, he swung his stick, and it stuck in the board.

"Sire, Your Majesty...", he began. Ahmyt Bey smiled, from the spot where he was looking at him.

In a trice the man from the mountains had damaged the parqueted surface with which Ahmyt Bey had covered his floor, only recently so made out of box-wood that one could see one's face in it. Laughing in his heart, the King of Abkhazia had the thought: "He's doing this deliberately in order that my heart should fracture and I become so upset as to forget myself and start blathering." Otherwise, if it had happened to him without him having made just such a calculation, he would have been consumed with hatred and anger.

"I hear that your brother Batal Bey has built a large palace; are you going to be splintering the parquet-flooring in this fashion there too, Shabat?"

"It'll not be long before you hear that I've trussed up Batal Bey in fetters," replied the other in passing.

“How can you say such a thing, Shabat?” said Ahmyt Bey, making his voice sound as if what he’d heard had bruised his heart. “When you brothers are snarling at each other, it pains us.” With a seeming movement of his hand on the arm of the chair, he signalled to the other that he himself was actually the one meant when he said “us”. “What we desire is that you should be united arm in arm.”

As though Shabat and Eshsow had spoken to each other, they lowered their heads.

“Finish your speech; I interrupted your words...”

“Sire, Your Majesty,” said Shabat, having placed his hand on his walking-stick, now stuck in the parquet-flooring. Ahmyt Bey realised that he had made a start on explaining the precise reason why he had come. Unable to wait any longer, he lifted up his head. “Sire, Your Majesty, you have heard, have you not, how, when great K’alash Bey issued the summons, 40,000 young men would rally like flames in a fire to his banner. Don’t take offence, but, when *you* move against us in order to kill us, you despatch heralds through all your villages, able to muster no more than 2,000, and the hands of the majority of even those have never held a rifle, only a hoe. You’ve been able neither to accomplish your task nor to slaughter us.”

“God will get me there too in time,” thought Ahmyt Bey; but what he actually said out loud was: “You’ve apparently come to insult me, Shabat.”

Shabat, however, as if he hadn’t heard that, let it pass. As if afraid that he would not be permitted to have his say, hardly managing to catch his breath, as he spoke so much, sweat poured over his face. The younger one, not liking something (whether it was what his brother was saying or his manner of saying it — who knows?), was fidgeting nervously in displeasure.

“Sire, Your Majesty, instead of strengthening or widening your realm, all that’s left to you to take piecemeal, sliced and chopped up, is a bit of coastline here, a valley there, everything incomplete. You advanced with the Tsar’s army and locked and bolted our gates. You yourself tore off from your kingdom the land of the Sadzians, which belonged to the kingdom of Abkhazia from time immemorial. You entered the Ts’abal valley, and that too became a land apart. Those to whom you refer by the phrase ‘my territory’ have already forgotten you; the one they know is that young rascal you established in Sh^wyk^wran, known as Lisovskij... True, the Tsar gives you decorations, but your power is surely lost to you — it is ebbing away...”

Ahmyt Bey lay back and gazed at Shabat, seeming to detect something new about him, as he busily talked, his smile full of arrogance. He let nothing slip past him as he listened to what he was saying, but all the while he was deep in thought.

“It is true, for today this proud young man has many possibilities. Given the nature of the times, it’s possible that his words might attract the support of the Sadzians, and not only them, but also the Ubykhs and the Circassians,” Ahmyt Bey was musing, “then too

the peoples of Ahchypsy, Aibga, Psh^wy, and the Svans²¹ —now, with the people’s nerves on the very edge, is when the time is ripe for them to rise up. And he, with nobody able to say anything against him, is perfectly capable of standing at the head of the people like a silken flag —yes, he is indeed. Anyone can see after all,” he went on thinking, “that he has the temperament of an unbroken stallion.” But Ahmyt Bey, whose power of prediction had never let him down, knew even now in his heart that it was impossible for anyone like him to invest their hopes in this person. “The reason is,” he was reckoning, “he lacks the staying-power to fulfil his potential. Yes, he’s a veritable silken banner when the people are enraged, plagued by psychoses, and with the worm of madness gnawing at their innards. Then it is that their character coincides with that of this individual who permanently carries this worm inside him. He’s the first to rise up, the first to go forth, the bravest of the brave, the shrewdest of the shrewd. But he passes by in a flash and is then extinguished — and that’s it — like a straw in a fire. Afterwards, when peace is established, he becomes superfluous to needs; he who has lived as one with such a worm inside him becomes superfluous to the needs of the masses who all of sudden forget that his passion was driven by that worm within. We are the ones now to whom the time belongs,” reasoned Ahmyt Bey. “The time for idiots of this kind has passed. People like this do not have the means to defeat us. When peace comes, the one who rushes forward is always superfluous, because those who have held power emerge once more. The one who first sallies forth must either perish or become superfluous. If he’s an honest man, we kill him; if he’s dishonest, we’ll unmask him. The likes of Shabat the Golden have always existed, but even so those who have held power keep hold of it. This one too will pass away; there will remain only the song which the blind have dedicated to him, rhapsodising him like a fairy-tale, like a phantom-vision.”

While internally spinning this tale of misfortune about the older of the brothers, the King of Abkhazia held the younger one too in his gaze.

“I shall go, taking along the young men, and shatter all the gates. You will see if the communities across the length and breadth of Abkhazia in their entirety don’t swear by Ahmyt Bey. They will all come and stand before you; then you too, as your ancestors used to do, will stand at the head of Abkhazia united and as one!” were the words Shabat was engaged in delivering.

²¹ The Svans are a Kartvelian people (related to the Georgians, Mingrelians and Laz) whose traditional homeland is the mountainous north-western region of Georgia. Divided into Lower and Upper Svanetia, this latter sub-area is perched in the highest reaches of the valley of the R. Ingur and was historically divided into the province of the princely Dadi/eshkeliani (or Dachkelani) family and so-called Free Svanetia, Lat’ali being the frontier-village between the two. Most parts of Georgia were annexed by Russia in 1801, but it was not until 1883 that the whole of Svanetia was brought under Russian administration. The punitive Russian expedition against the Free Svanetian village Khalde in 1875-76, which saw the village razed to the ground, formed the substance of a tale by Sergo K’ldiashvili. This tale’s Georgian text with English translation can be found on pp. 75-95 of George Hewitt’s ‘A Georgian Reader (with Texts, Translations and Vocabulary)’ (SOAS, 1996).

That was not at all what Ahmyt Bey was expecting. Making himself comfortable, he sat in his seat.

“If it’s possible, so be it; if not, you will come after me with your militia and kill me with your own hand, and you’ll win yet another decoration.”

Ahmyt Bey raised his head and for a time, absolutely overcome with fury, looked straight into the eyes of Shabat. But, for he had no desire that the younger one, the wolf’s whelp, should notice, he immediately lowered his head. No, Ahmyt Bey couldn’t involve himself in such an affair as that. He was convinced that for now the unification of the country was an impossible task — people always say that nothing is impossible, but... If he went down that path, he would probably have to reject everything on which he had already embarked. Ahmyt Bey was well aware that at such a time as the one they were experiencing someone without a kingdom might well become king. And in his place someone more obedient would be brought in and seated there in Lahlar with the title of ‘king’. Everything would become the same as it was, except that someone else would sit in his place, and he himself would be added to those seeking the kingship as just one more among others; if not that, he’d be reduced to meandering on the mountain-slopes without house or homestead. Ahmyt Bey was now gripped by the false impression that what he’d been imagining had actually happened to him.

“Do you see how things are, Shabat? Two states, two really great states are at war. What we should be pondering today is where we can go to escape meeting our doom between the two of them, Shabat.”

“So, will you be waiting, say, until these two states destroy each other?”

“What’s that? — me waiting? I too am engaged in some preparations of my own,” smiled Ahmyt Bey surreptitiously, and the image before his eyes was of himself having already entered at the head of an army the hamlet of this fellow who was chattering away. “They’ll be hoping to get help...” he was thinking. “But it’s winter when we’ll be going for them, a time when all the roads are closed. We’ll return, having left them no grain in their maize-storehouses for milling, having burnt the crops, having driven off their herds, leaving them with nothing to feed an army, even if one should come to them. Then, after sowing, we shall return and trample all their fields under our horses’ hooves. We’ll then just see if, when hunger takes hold of them, that war-mongering worm doesn’t leave them, won’t we?!”

“Do you, Sire, Your Majesty, need to be taught what’s to be done? Isn’t it just what from time immemorial our fathers have been doing? If our country Abkhazia has fallen between two powers, you must ally yourself with one of them, the one that has the greater staying-power — you are the king. But first strengthen your domestic affairs, unite Abkhazia.”

“Hah, you simpleton!” was the thought that struck Ahmyt Bey. He sat silently seething, while Shabat paced up and down like the shuttle on a loom.

“Don’t you know, Shabat,” said the King of Abkhazia, “that what has happily seen us through to the present day is the very fact that we take up separate positions?...”

Shabat came to a halt and stood looking at the King of Abkhazia in astonishment.

“Let’s suppose our homeland has become one. The word spoken by Ahmyt Bey, King of Abkhazia, is the yardstick for everyone. He will say: ‘Fellow-countrymen, give up associating with these Turks.’ Will you men of the mountains do that?”

Ahmyt Bey raised his head and looked straight at the brothers. “No, sir, by the grace of God, there is one still pure in heart and mind — Ahmyt Bey Chachba. He aims to fold his arms around those of his people who have remained loyal to him and lead them forth into the light. He doesn’t even hate his Abkhazian realm being in turmoil but thinks that it should actually be so! Having tomorrow in mind is what directs his steps today!” Having said even this, he looked up at the ceiling in a state of total serenity, as if he had looked into the face of almighty God.

Shabat stood in astonishment. He despised what Ahmyt Bey had said, because he had heard that he would charge anyone he was seeking to destroy with having had contact with the Turks. Now he saw with utter clarity that everything he had said with heartfelt sincerity to Ahmyt Bey had not penetrated his head but had bounced off his brow. But even so he had no wish to depart without giving voice to the concern still in his heart.

“Recall to mind, Sire, Your Majesty, Abkhazia’s great King Leon. Is it not the case that at the time when he was able to mould that great state²² he was in the same situation in which you find yourself now?”

But Ahmyt Bey had no desire even to listen.

“Well, hello, Shabat! Where is Leon, and where are we?! At that time the Abkhazians were demographically numerous, whereas now you have despatched all the people to Turkey... There’s nothing to keep us from extinction, don’t you see? I know that you have thrown in your lot with the Turks...after all, my agents are doing their work...”

“Sire, Your Majesty, there’s no-one on our side who has thrown in his lot with the Turks — you lowlanders are the ones who are actually responsible for the population moving away. Even if you have despatched your spies to keep us under surveillance, they have come back without gaining any understanding of the true situation.”

But Ahmyt Bey’s mind was elsewhere. He rose, opened with his own hand the chest that was standing in the corner, and took out a sheet of paper.

“Here, Shabat, look at this and see what kind of document it is. In Georgia too my spies are active,” he said, thrusting forward his paper in a threatening manner. “This is a copy of the Adrianople Treaty, which was signed at the end of the Russo-Turkish war²³.”

²² Reference is to the 8th-century King Leon II, who some time around 790 established the Kingdom of Abkhazia, which encompassed essentially the whole of western Transcaucasia, and which lasted for two centuries until the kingdoms of Abkhazia and neighbouring Georgia became united through dynastic inheritance.

²³ In 1825.

If you read it, you will see that the Turk agreed that the whole of Transcaucasia belongs to the Russian.”

Shabat was crest-fallen. Ahmyt Bey, laughing inwardly, was staring at him, as he stood there as white as a sheet. But he could see the younger one, who was eager to be off, even while standing there like the whelp of a wolf. “Yes,” he mused, “his brothers all by themselves will gobble up that older one of the pair. This younger one is the one who’s full of anger. But he too is likely to fall victim to his incapacity for compromise, isn’t he? — his brothers will devour him too. They’ll come to me to say: ‘We’ve gobbled them up, Your Majesty, King of Abkhazia; now you must speak on our behalf in government’.”

There is only one who is forever...of that Ahmyt Bey, glorious King of Abkhazia, was convinced.

Bright lights of anger flashed in front of Shabat’s eyes. Drawing his eyelids together he was endeavouring to compose himself in an attempt to forestall his natural inclination, which was all for not obeying him. Now he had come to realise that he had not recently spoken as much in vain as he had that day.

“What have the Turks got to do with it?...Are the Turks the ones we’re concerned with now?” he said, well, not so much say as whisper, no longer inclined to speak and actually unable to do so.

Ahmyt Bey held him in his view, laughing, as though he would say: “That will remain between you and me.” Then, indicating to them that his heart was not in hearing anything further that his interlocutor might utter, he said:

“Now, Shabat, so you’re off to Dal anyway. Do you suppose I don’t know that the wretched people of Dal have no clothes to wear or arms to bear? I’ll give you 16 loads of cloth; take it for them.”

“Thank you, uncle. It’s just that I have somewhere to go and am in a hurry. If you are going to send cloth to the people of Dal, you can find someone to take it to them too.”

“I bid you good day!” Shabat turned away, taking his brother with him.

Before he had reached the door, Shabat halted with a stamp of his foot. He had heard a story about Ahmyt Bey pressing some lever somewhere in his sitting-room, and, as a person is taking his leave of him and stepping near the spot concerned, the floor opens up, and that person collapses into the void beneath — the rumour was that the contraption was made to work in some such way as that. So, holding his brother back, he was the first to cross over that cursed spot, then, holding Eshsow’s hand, he carefully drew him across too.

Ahmyt Bey just stood watching them with his sly smile. When their eyes met, as if to say: “See how you don’t trust me then?!” his whole face changed, and he shook his head.

“How is our sister Endzhy Hanym...our sister Endzhy Hanym?” he called after them in such a way that one might interpret the fact of his asking after his sister as also having

some devilish intent. Then, even though they did not look back, he added: “May she find the appropriate way of ministering to your needs, you great residents of Dal!”

With this let us close the story of Shabat and Eshsow’s visit to the palace of the King of Abkhazia — let it only find its place in Hell below! You, my readers, have probably had enough of this, but you should know with what utter reluctance I myself am engaged in what I am writing. What can I do? Without it the grand narrative composed for the *apkh’artsa* and Abkhazian harp (*aj^wymaa*) and sung by Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K’adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd cannot be completed.

So that is how it came to pass. Shabat and Eshsow, remaining not a moment longer at the palace, mounted up and were gone. Travelling along the road they said not a word, for they were disposed to imagine that everywhere, on all sides some unseen persons were lying in wait for them. Proceeding only with vigilance, they entered Ts’abal.

Ahmyt Bey summoned Sh^wliman, sat him down and had him write a letter. He spoke in Abkhaz, but Sh^wliman translated and wrote it in Russian. Their letter turned out to be so explosive as to render rock asunder. They wrote there that the peoples of Dal and Ts’abal were without pause attacking fortresses and paying no heed to the word of the King of Abkhazia. The King of Abkhazia, worried only about strengthening the power of the great Tsar, had finally invited and spoken with the ring-leaders of those packs of wolves, Shabat and Eshsow Marshan. In response to the words he had used to express his affection they had spoken inappropriately to the King of Abkhazia and had moreover convinced him that they were largely inclined towards the Turk.

The following day the King of Abkhazia was receiving officers. Here too what they discussed were the arrogant peoples of Dal and Ts’abal.

“They are to be pacified!” said Chapiaq’-Tatlastan Dzapsh-Ipa.

“They are to be pacified!” said Georgi the steward.

“They are to be pacified!” said the King of Abkhazia’s amanuensis Sh^wliman.

“Uraa!” went up the cry from the officers, wishing themselves success in the great task that awaited them; they quaffed champagne and smashed their glasses into tiny pieces. The upper- and lower-ranking nobles, who were not admitted upstairs, sat down below; aloft they were holding another grand party. From Bombora²⁴ resounded the sound of cannons.

Oh God, you who created me from nothing, don’t allow the harridon who trails misfortune in her wake to sleep, the one who was brought into the midst of our family to destroy it by Kh^jymk^w’arasa Daryq^w’a-Ipa, whose own time is up, by the holy shrine of the people of Dal, whose blessing be upon us! May God shew her a dreadful dream! When she came into the house, she did indeed view such a dream — may her eyes pop out of their sockets! Before her eyes there apparently appeared an image seemingly of a

²⁴ On the coast, north-west of the capital near the town of Gudauta (G^wdowta) and on the way to Gagra.

roe-deer having found a resting-place in a delightful green meadow set right in the heart of a thick forest. Some wild beast and a panther had taken a fancy to that deer — would that I might hear that the viewer herself had fainted at the sight of them! — but the pair of animals were evidently unable to advance upon to the deer through fear of each other — would that the devil might advance upon her who had the dream, and let me only hear that the Lord of the Dead lay in ambush for this dreamer! As the wild beast and the panther were lying in wait, eyeing each other, without them noticing it, a lumbering bear came growling out of the forest looking as though it had made a meal of the wondrous deer, in whose place I only wish I could see the viewer of this dream! Thus, as the wild beast and the panther lay in wait keeping their eyes on each other, the bear had indeed made a meal of the roe-deer — would that it had made a meal of her who saw it all in the dream! — oh yes God, my creator, if only...

This story about the king's sister and the people of Dal was told in a shortened and abbreviated version by Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K'adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd. I, a poor Abkhazian, am not the one engaged in writing it down in full — distinguished wise men sitting before the great Padi-shah and drawing their pen-nibs across the page would be unable to delineate what's in a woman's heart when that woman is a chip off the old block of the Devil himself. After all, when I, a fugitive from death, was held in Sukhum as a prisoner and hostage, I was taught just some of the rudiments of writing, otherwise I have no education at all. Those grand exponents of the *apkh'artsa* Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K'adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd, without a word of a lie taught me to narrate in song these great events of history in order for me to convey them to you in the more extended fashion, fleshing out their bones, that I am now engaged in doing, fearful though I be — I swear by all that's holy in Psh^wy! — that the flesh I putting on that skeleton might turn out to be some kind of alien being.

Oh great deity of the Abkhazians, aid the people of Dal, for they were never able to get a real view of their young bride! She would read books until midnight. At 10 o'clock she would wake up and at 11 o'clock have her tea prepared. Tea isn't sustenance for an Abkhazian! Where was the like of it in Abkhazia?! Poor things, they would bring the stuff from Georgia, and it is said they had a well-known nobleman appointed just for that task. Without a word of a lie, no lady born into this world before or since possessed such an appearance as she! They would feed her the fatty tail of a sheep sprinkled with Russian sugar; they would give her to drink excessively filtered milk, which they would draw from their black cows. They would not put on her feet any shoes apart from footwear from Istanbul interlaced with silk from China. No-one's gaze was allowed to linger on her, for that, they said, would spoil her visage; neither was her gaze permitted to linger on any man, for that, they said, would set her heart beating too fast. When her brothers-in-law were entering the compound, she would be looking towards the door wondering what gift they had brought her. But her husband, out of jealousy, was not at all happy about people entering into her presence. Her brother-in-law Batal Bey brought her

a wondrous present — the gift he brought her was the fool Mustafa, a black-skinned negro. Her brother-in-law Shabat the Golden gave her as bridal gift a lion-cub and a tame deer. The tame deer died of boredom, whilst the lion-cub grew every day and escaped; it was killed in the Sak^j'an pasture by members of the Ts^w'ydzhba family from Ch'lou²⁵... Out of step with her destiny, Endzhy Hanyim was hemmed in by the wall of Khⁱymk^w'arasa's fortress, by her own loneliness, and by the cold-heartedness of the people, forming, as it were, three concentric rings. "Who might this fine young man be?" Endzhy Hanyim, whom they had not had a good opportunity to see and get to know, pointedly asked again. "That's your brother-in-law, Shabat the Golden," they replied. "Ah, and the one of whom I was truly worthy was *him!*"

"As for the others, how they simply deceived us! You were evidently Daryq^w'a's true son!" she said. In embarrassment, Shabat the Golden could only stare with excessive admiration at his lovely fingernails.

Endzhy Hanyim, who had the talent to paint the path of a bird in flight, set about preparing, according to the ancient custom, a suit of clothing for the one who had taken her fancy. And don't imagine she'd run short of cloth! Musing on the appearance of the one who had made such an impression on her, she kept failing to notice when the scissors cut into her delicate hand. This became a matter of note, an object of debate. Shabat the Golden's visits here were promptly terminated.

In the course of time Endzhy Hanyim acquired a quite different character — only let her be the last of her ilk to be born into the Chachba family! When she went out of the fortress, in the place where the mountain-torrent would fall from the rocks, at the spot where the wind blows in, she would stretch out on a hammock consisting of a blend of square netting on top of which soft mattresses had been tossed. At other times Mustafa, who was quite harmless, would sway her hammock. When anything happened in the estate or hamlets that needed a decision, the steward would come here and ask her, because, it cannot be denied, Endzhy Hanyim had indeed taken control. Oh God who created me out of nothing, make it happen so that the eyes of the clan of the one who at that time blinded the people of Dal not see the dawn!

The sun's rays were warming her body, whilst the light wind that was blowing moderated its heat. The princess lay there, her skin soaking up the softness of the hammock, the sweet wind's fingers stroking her up and down, her eyes drowsy, as though exhausted by love. The gushing sound of the mountain-torrent could be heard, as the birds mingled the strains of their songs. Over here bees in search of pollen were visiting the flowers that were growing on the slope feeling the warmth of the sun, and their humming droned on and on at a constant, uninterrupted level. Meanwhile, seated yonder, the negro Mustafa too was nodding off. The string attached to the hammock was wrapped over his thumb, whilst his lazy hands were twiddling his worry-beads. 'Click'

²⁵ Inland in the Ochamchira District.

would go one stone of the beads, then, before another ‘click’ came, Endzhy Hanym had the sense that quite a long time was intervening.

Luxuriating in the fullness of the calm, the sounds of nature infusing her whole body, her skin feeling Nature’s breath where she was recumbent on her soft hammock of a bed, she began to experience a dizzy spell. It seemed to her that even her very blood was lazy in its coursing through her veins. She was thinking of nothing in particular anywhere, but even so from time to time tears, free of any pain or concern, would take hold of her. Now and then she would raise her head and cast a glance at Mustafa the negro as if she’d caught sight of him afresh, and a smile that properly belonged to the inner store of smiles as if by force burst forth from the peace of her inner being. Then she would again lay back her head and in a lazy voice call out to her servant, deafened by a knife, aping his manner.

“Come over here, you!” she would say. The fool Musafa would stand up.

“Come, kiss it here!” she would say, her voice all drowsy. Mustafa would heave a sigh and, swinging his fat thighs this way and that, move towards her. He would stand beside her and, as when she would ask him just to fetch her some water, without making her repeat her words and without any degree of enthusiasm, he would place his wet lips upon her tender flesh, which resembled a soft, fresh cheese. Then he would return back to his worry-beads.

One day over the cliff a goatherd was tending a herd when some goats broke away from the rest. As he pursued them, this fellow found himself conveyed towards the place where the wind blows. And in God’s own truth, with the sound of the bell around the neck of the billy-goat selected for slaughter jingle-jangling away, some goats were trampling on the flowers growing on the spot warmed by the sun’s rays yonder. Shortly thereafter, the goatherd too appeared, summoning his goats with cries of ‘rreit’, rreit’. The sun was setting. Never expecting to see a single soul hereabouts, the poor old goatherd came to a halt, thunder-struck. The wondrous picture that emerged before him, right there in front of his eyes, was akin to the holy icon of Elyr²⁶ blazing forth at the base of a hairy old wineskin. Against the evening sun that was skirting down the side of the cliff he spied the maiden as miraculous a being as the daughter of the deity of hunting (by name Azh^weipshaa). His beard, a mass of thoroughly tangled hair, was frozen in the position it assumed when he opened his mouth in amazement. As for the fool Mustafa, when he noticed the goatherd, he began to drive him off, mumbling “Mer-er-er”, and waving his arms and legs, as one does when shooing away a dog. Endzhy Hanym, certainly seeing something here to relieve her boredom, lifted her head and watched him, laughing and laughing. The goatherd at first was alarmed, turned round and fled, even forgetting his goats. He had no shoes, but what need had he of them, when the soles of his feet were such that no bullet would penetrate them, for they were all calluses and corns. When he had gone, Endzhy Hanym continued laughing; Mustafa was mumbling

²⁶ Site of a church not far to the south-east of the town of Ochamchira.

“Mer-er-er” in irritation, and the click-clicking of his worry-beads gained an ever faster pace.

Now the goatherd was hardly likely to abandon his goats, was he? No, he immediately came back. Mustafa remained irritated, and it was all causing Endzhy Hanym much mirth.

“Fetch him over here, my imbecile, will you?!” she said, finding her voice. God forgive the idiocy of any man claiming to have understood a woman!

As for the negro, just as a good hostess looks again to the tidying up of her room when a guest arrives, with a sense of concern he was gazing at his mistress, who was barely covered by a thin sheet and wearing only a chemise, whilst she beckoned to the goatherd. And he hobbled over in dread.

Endzhy Hanym, laughing the while, sat up on her hammock, gazing at the goatherd with her devilish eyes. Oh, ripe for mourning, ripe for mourning be the one who believes he has understood a woman! From his old head down to his old feet she examined him with her warmly glowing eyes, as when the blazing sun warms up a lizard.

“Tomorrow you will bring me some nice yoghurt and goat-fat,” she said, her furtive smile shining in his face such as to blind his tinder-dry eyes.

The goatherd turned and hobbled off, unable to believe what he had seen.

The next day he came with the said yoghurt. He brought her goat-fat too. She began asking him his name; irritated, the fool Mustafa looked on in utter coldness. “Khy^wpats^wapaq^w’aq^w’ari,” he replied. She couldn’t understand. His name was actually Q^w’lang^leri Khy^wpats^wg^la-Ipa — it was just that he was tongue-tied. It can’t, after all, be easy to spend 40 years in the forest, can it?! The goatherd had even forgotten the very basics of speech.

The yoghurt was fine indeed, and the goat-fat was as white as snow. Endzhy-Hanym expressed her gratitude to the goatherd for that. Before even a week had passed, his goats again appeared on the sun-warmed hillside. Even before they had wandered onto the spot, the goatherd himself also turned up in search of them. The goatherd’s mischievousness made Endzhy Hanym laugh heartily. And thus again on the second day and on the third day too. As soon as he shewed up, the fool would drive him off. The princess would laugh long and loud. The negro, maintaining exactly the same expression but filled with reproach, would watch her.

The goatherd would come, the fool would howl, the princess would laugh. This became for her tantamount to a game.

She would split her sides. The fool, the utter fool Mustafa was actually jealous of the old goatherd, who was driving him out of his mind. And wasn’t the fact that that idiot goatherd had schooled himself to come every day something utterly amazing? Anyone’s sides would surely split.

The boundary which Mustafa would not permit the goatherd to cross was creeping ever closer.

The germ of an idea had stirred in the mind of the old goatherd such that one might even conclude that his brain, which had been dried out and frazzled by the sun, was evidently capable of thought. He had heard that herdsmen sometimes come upon the daughters of the deity of the hunt, Azh^weipshaa — important herdsmen, overseers of herds in the mountains. And hadn't he this year introduced 100 goats to the forest? This year he had indeed done exactly that, and, hey-hey, that could be just the thing by which he might entice the princess, my chubby little bear! If he'd known who she was, how afraid he would have been! She laughed long and loudly. If only he knew her identity! — I could have wanted nothing more! But where was there anyone to ask? He only had a short-term contract-apprentice, who was the one person upon whom he used to set his eyes. Before seeing his full face, one would see his massively thick eyebrows, his eyes being such, if one looked into them, that one would not detect any sign of intelligence there. She stroked his cheeks, which were dreadfully rough like where a tree-trunk has felt the cut of a saw. A red-hot blush flashed over the face of the goatherd, who had been a prisoner of the forest. Even Mustafa of all people couldn't help but smile, such was the speed with which the goatherd shot off away from her side.

Henceforth he was given permission to come close to her. He was carried away by a fierce hatred of her. Whoever this was, she was one of the princesses. She was mocking him, nothing more. The mongrel Mustafa was a nervous wreck over her allowing him to come close to her, and that just caused her a great deal more amusement.

Over the course of time Endzhy Hanyim set herself the task of driving the fool to utter distraction. The next day the emboldened goatherd appeared yet again. He came now with his apprentice as well. The apprentice was extremely dutiful in all things, and for that reason the goatherd decided to shew him too the spectacular vision of which Azh^weipshaa, deity of hunting, had deemed him worthy. “Come, come over here, my chubby little teddy-bear! Who's that with you?” The ‘daughter of the godhead’, in the shape of a non-transient spectre, was tormenting the mind of a man unaccustomed to masochism, and again beckoned to him to come to her. But this is no spectre! The young woman was lying there looking like the daughter of Azh^weipshaa, pretending to be completely feeble, and speaking only with her eyes.

“Go, why don't you, my capon, to the palace and supervise those who help one another there!” she said.

“Go, why don't you, lad, and just drive away the flock on Hag^lar's Hill,” he said.

She told him she had caught a chill. Well, imagine for yourself how she could have caught a cold at the height of the summer-heat! She told him he had to rub for her the goat-fat over the soles of her feet, her sides and her breast. The goatherd became infuriated. He was dependent on no-one after all. He was a pure Abkhazian who had never entered anyone's service. If goat-fat had to be rubbed over her, well, the one to give her the massage should surely have been the one she sent away! But he was unable

to go against her wishes, all soft like a lamb as she was; there was no way for him to refuse her.

He began with her heels. “More! More!”

“‘More!’ indeed — as if I’m under some obligation!” he thought. If only she’d lain still, what harm would there have been?!

However, when he was rubbing her back, he too suddenly felt a pleasant sensation. But she kept on shuffling about and hindering him. Oh, how soft her flesh was — like a freshly-gathered and salted cheese. A sensation of warmth suffused his heart. His blood and veins felt a heat and pulsing of the heart he did not recognise. He was mollified even more when he began to rub the goat-fat on her breasts. His gnarled hands, adapted to nothing but holding sticks, became tender, but how that wretched woman made things difficult for him, one might say! She was impeding him, twisting and shuffling about on her hammock, and kept on stopping his hand from moving.

The goatherd’s temperature was rising and his head was in a dizzy-spin. The way his mind was working, it seemed to him as if it was splitting apart after the manner of an avalanche. He stopped. Sweat poured over him. A bright smile broke out over his idiotic face. He lowered his eyes, and his pulse was beating fast. He really had to force himself to raise his head again.

“Oh, I hope you’re not tricking me, my princess,” was the question in his eyes. “Have no fear, my little idiot,” was the reply in her eyes.

One day K^w’ymp’ylkhan Byrzyk^j-pha was sitting, as was her habit, by the little window looking out at the road, when, with a clatter of hooves, Kh^jymk^w’arasa entered the yard, ploughing it up; he then leapt from his horse, tossed his bridle to the youth who’d rushed to meet him, and mounted the stairs like a boy. He flung open the door, rushed in to where their grandmother was sitting, and, thrusting out his chest and stretching out his arms, gracefully glided into the room as though dancing the dance of the Ach’ars²⁷.

“Mother to us all, see my new medal, Nan?!”

Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s joy knew no bounds. When laughing, as always something was reflected in the look on his face, though it was difficult to determine if it was a matter of stupidity or childishness.

“Is that you, Kh^jymk^w’arasa, dear? Just come, come over here.”

Kh^jymk^w’arasa, chuckling out loud, moved quickly over to her.

“Just lower your head.”

Supposing that, as she normally did, she was going to put her hand on his head and bless him, he bent down. K^w’ymp’ylkhan raised her stick with its pen-like metal top and rapped Kh^jymk^w’arasa over the head, all grey like Mt. Ertsakh^w.

²⁷ Largely Muslim Georgians who live in Ach’ara (or Adzharia) in south-west Georgia by the border with Turkey.

“What are you doing, Gran?”

“Rather than worrying about mendals²⁸, it would be better if you didn’t forget your wife!”

The smile dried on Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s face, and straightway he drew himself up.

“There’s no need for embarrassment, is there, Gran?!”

“We’ve never had any reason at all to be embarrassed, but I don’t like how our princess is presenting herself; on the other hand, you have been absent for half a year...”

Kh^jymk^w’arasa was furious, felt ashamed and speedily went out of the room. At the door he bumped into Batal Bey.

“Kindly convey to our grandmother for me that I was in fact here three months and also five months ago, but, though I was here, I just didn’t have any opportunity of seeing her.”

Batal Bey raised his head and looked at his older brother full in the face; he was obviously trying to force a smile, but his eyes were full of pain.

“His name is Q^w’lang^jeri Khylpats^wg^ja-Ipa. He’s with the herd over the hill,” he said, lowering his head, by way of reply.

Kh^jymk^w’arasa had a long journey to make, and, without staying around or even going to his house, he mounted up and departed. But quite simply the hills had done for the goatherd, and it was only after a week that they found him. Even then they would not have located him, had not the crows detected him first. The goatherd’s father apparently had some brothers. While he’d been alive, they had hardly bothered about visiting him, but, when they heard that he had died, they gave 100 out the 1,000 goats he possessed to the apprentice and began to drive off the remainder. As for the apprentice, he said that he and the goatherd had discussed the matter before his death and that 200 should come to him. They paid a visit to Batal Bey to request that he mediate an agreement between them. Batal Bey divided the herd equally — 200 each to the two brothers and to the apprentice, in all 600. The other 400 that remained thus belonged to the prince, who had adjudicated the matter.

In this way was the dream of the Chachba daughter, fated to have the bad dream, realised. In the manner of the game she was playing with her toy-bear on the day when she heard she had been betrothed, she became the actual bear’s dinner. She was the deer, and she duly became the bear’s meal. The wild animal and the panther might possibly still be lying in wait, eyeing each other...

Kh^jymk^w’arasa was on his way with the light-footedness of a chamois. When he gave his horse its head, from the edge of any abyss it would go flying over. And as the wind was whistling against his face, he found it difficult to focus his thoughts. While travelling onwards at speed, he saw himself as an impetuous man of the mountains rushing headlong on to his destination. He came to a halt, jumped off his horse and tightened his

²⁸ The presence of the unmotivated -n- reflects the spelling of the original, catching the old lady’s pronunciation, and is not a misprint.

horse's girths; but even then he still saw himself as an impetuous man of the mountains standing on the edge of an abyss. None of this was to Kh^lymk^w'arasa's liking. He was a member of the ancient Marshan family; he was a prince, and that was precisely how he was now looking upon himself — he should have been someone who, by the mere wave of his hand, could have had impetuous youths rushing in their thousands to his summons, someone who, from his crystal castle, could have folded his arms around the homeless or stood over their hovels, if need be, like the light of dawn, or, if need be, offering a covering of shade, sometimes as far above them as the stars, at other times as a powerful force, after the manner of the deity of the hearth, standing there at the very centre of their destiny, just like his ancestors. A look of sadness appeared on his face. He began to think about what his wife had done to him, but, quite without him noticing, his thoughts took off in a different direction. Had he never been able to let the thought enter his head that he would be dealt a blow such as this or was he deeming that blow to be a sign that manifested beyond doubt his decline and fall? — he saw that he was in a state of utter confusion. He was thinking of the greatness that befitted his blood-line, though not for a second, either from the perspective of an observer or within his own heart, was he possessed of it. It was as in a dream where you suspect you are being punished, where you think you are on familiar mountains but then where you see that they are not the familiar ones at all. It was as if his inner fibres were disintegrating and he had become a fraud. He was starting to think about what he'd heard concerning his wife, but, as when a horse's girth suddenly flies loose from its fitting, his mind kept wandering off; he should have been angry, he should have been driven crazy, but his mind was such that it was sorting things out (intellectually and emotionally), namely that she was truly his wife, and he was not convinced that the actual target of what she had aimed at him was the Kh^lymk^w'arasa of old.

At first he decided to shame his wife and, in accordance with the ancient custom, to send her off to her brother, seated on a donkey, her nose and ears sliced off, or alternatively just to kill her in secret, as his brother-in-law the king used to do to those not to his liking. But for the time-being he held back, unable entirely to believe what had happened, and wanting to emerge from the nightmare that held him captive.

Now is a time when a bastard undeserving of Abkhazia holds the crown, when one of those truly deserving of Abkhazia is quaking like a hunted beast on a boat in the middle of the sea or roaming about on the mountain-sides, while another fit for the kingship is smashing our gates as part of the army of the bastard unfit for kingship, when everyone is seeking decorations, when everyone is dependent on others... And Dal, disconnected from Abkhazia proper because of the lack of roads, is in the process of seeing its greatness slip away and is close to turning into a mere field... A new time was coming which Kh^lymk^w'arasa had not yet understood. He considered that he had been born for power and from the very start was incapable of allowing the thought to enter his head that life could possibly even exist without it. Was it appropriate that he too should reject that

power and step into the tracks of a wild man of the mountains, like his younger brothers? Or even, to the extent of becoming powerless like an ordinary man, should he go forth himself to meet the new order which had now come into being so as to fill his empty veins with it? If even this shame that his wife had aimed at him was to be endured, were there not many other things too to which he would have to become reconciled so that that new order might take root in his blood? After all, even if it had not at that time been as clear in his mind as now, was not the reason he had married her so that he could thereby get the better of his brothers, who had ground out that new power and become his enemies?

He exercised self-restraint and, even without going anywhere near his house, he upped and left. Peace reined in Abkhazia; but he was not constrained by its borders and went over the North Caucasus. Khⁱymk^w’arasa with a small army crossed over into the North, where war was in progress, by way of a mountain-ridge deemed to be intraversable and entered a Chechen *aul*²⁹ from a direction where they saw no reason to be vigilant. He was going to take out his hatred for his wife on the Chechens, lead astray, like the unbelievers of old, by the blood of foreigners. The Russian officers began to be amazed at his heroism. Of course, heroism is something to occasion amazement in time of war, but for him all of that was akin to a dream. The officers were surprised at his fearlessness and daring, but they could see that the heartless and proud man of the mountains might tomorrow turn and direct his harshness and cold-heartedness against them. But even so they spoke of him as one of the best. He was invited to Tiflis, even to the viceroy, where they showered presents upon him, but for him all that was a dream. The daughters of the best Georgians would flirt with him, but he shewed not the slightest interest in them. This was not because of his impotence nor because he was thinking that, wretch that he was, there might be some advantage for him there amongst them — simply, this true man of the mountains was devoid of interest in anything.

At that time Endzhy Hanyim was greatly troubled. The fear she had of her wretched husband was a pain lodged deep in her heart. And then, when she began thinking of what had happened to her, all her strength drained away. She became disgusted with herself. Now and then she would unexpectedly contort her face into a grimace, as if she was someone else, standing off to the side and pulling faces like a small child, and this was all the time, every time she found herself recalling what had happened to her and not only when she was standing in front of a mirror. “Good gracious, am I going mad?...It was the fool Mustafa who provoked me!” she said, and, booting him out, she sold him off to Psh^wy. She had no pity whatsoever for the filthy goatherd who had perished. Now and then she would actually laugh and laugh, whenever she remembered him as if delighting in the fact that her recollection was such torment to her. She would hold on to the wall,

²⁹ The Russian designation for a village in the North Central and North East Caucasus. The Chechens live in the central North Caucasus, and they were notably fierce opponents of the Russians during the Great Caucasian War of 1817-64.

and a myriad of bright coloured lights would crash against the image in front of her eyes and pass away, shattered into tiny fragments. How upset she was about it. “Dear me, it’s even making me feel sick,” she was thinking. She’d be nauseous and dizzy, even when thinking about absolutely nothing at all and for no particular reason! It was only afterwards when the realisation dawned on her.

It was as though someone else was causing her dizziness and nausea! If only she could ask her milk-sister! — she was ashamed. Moreover, she began experiencing occasional cravings for pickles. Previously she had disliked them. She began yearning for sour apples. For no reason at all she would become emotional. Autumn was already approaching. That was the end of her time for lounging on the hammock and enjoying the refreshing breezes.

It was already a full three months that she was feeling like this. And then it was that she came to recognise that she had fallen pregnant. She cursed the thing inside her; she cursed herself. At first she had no idea what she should do. She made up her mind to devise some scheme regarding the situation in which she found herself and aimed to summon an old woman knowledgeable about such matters. But her daring and capacity were not great; on the other hand, time was inexorably passing. And with that passage all of her intentions ran out of time, because she found herself even more drowsy than before and even more emotional than before. She heard that her husband having reached Lata had departed without coming in the direction of home. She remained completely empty, utterly alone and in a highly emotional state among strangers within the palace. Here everyone was naturally waiting to see what on earth she would have to say. But was this out of their compassion for her? — No. They were afraid of her husband, that’s all. Moreover, she sensed that there was unrest outside. And before long she was convinced of it.

One day as she was sitting, her heart aching with pain and full of self-loathing, some voices could be heard beyond the castle. At first she paid no attention — her own sorrows were enough for her, but the voices, far from abating, grew ever more intense. During her husband’s absence, she summoned his milk-brother, who was charged with the guardianship of the fort. When he entered, Endzhy Hanyim found herself overcome with a feeling of extreme displeasure. The people were in a rebellious mood, massing at the gates.

“So, what do they want? What’s the reason why you’re standing there, your head sunk on your chest? Are you going to say quickly what’s going on or not?!”

“The people have heard that the King of Abkhazia is intent on attacking them with an army. They are cursing the princess — may the blood solidify in their lifeless mouths! — impudently saying of her that they shouldn’t have to set eyes on her, being someone who trails misfortune in her wake.”

Endzhy Hanyim shot to her feet in a rage. Her flowing golden locks were gathered together in a coil on the top of her head. A marten-fur was thrown over her shoulders.

She was wearing a green-coloured dress. She moved towards the door, setting her priceless necklaces and earrings tinkling.

“This instant send someone to the local chief of police!”

“That’s not necessary, *Ma Princesse*³⁰, Your Majesty; why should we provoke the people when their temper is already up regardless? We are capable of deciding our affairs by ourselves.”

“In that case I shall go myself and talk to them; I want to hear what they are saying.”

Bright red in her fury, she mounted the stairs, her clogs going clickety-clack the while. She noticed how the folk charged with protecting the fort were readying themselves, doing the rounds of the cannons set to project through the embrasures. Her husband’s milk-brother accompanying her at her side was issuing instructions to the soldiers as he passed along.

The noises outside were dreadful. Overcoming her dizziness as she progressed, she quickly mounted the part-stone staircase and, standing on the battlements, took a look outside. The wrath in her heart was stoked even more. A mass of people thronged down below, threatening, armed from head to toe with weapons. Somewhat behind them stood cavalymen, men of Ahchypsy and T’ap’antans, who had journeyed from afar.

“Let’s go out and talk to them; I want to discover what they want.”

“That’s dangerous, *Ma Princesse*. It’s better that we invite their spokesmen to come in here.”

And that’s exactly what they did. Seven men came, and the one at their head was an elder.

Endzhy Hanym was extremely displeased. Looking into their dark visages, she became confounded, but her hatred was even stronger. She stared into the faces of those who had come, moving from one to another.

Their faces, totally emaciated and full of sorrow and worry, were enough to shew the princess how things stood: their hatred and pain were reflected on them in equal measure. Hands preferably holding plough-hafts were tightly gripping weapons. Something needed to be said. She wanted to speak, but she couldn’t find the right words. Unexpectedly, emotion overcame her and prevented her from speaking, and her tears welled up in spite of herself.

Then the face of the old man standing at the front suddenly changed, as the princess could see. Endzhy Hanym was standing, a tall and dazzling figure, and anyone would now have noticed that she was pregnant from the way her grass-coloured dress fitted around her waist. The old man ran his fingers through his tidy beard and gazed at Endzhy Hanym, who was conflicted with feelings of high emotion and ire.

“Let me take away your pain, My Dear Princess!” he said, as his hatred dissipated and his heart softened. In exactly the same way the hearts of his colleagues too melted, as Endzhy Hanym could see. Her tears began to flow in profusion, but she did not hold

³⁰ The original is in Circassian.

cupped hands to her face; she stood as she had been standing, fully straight and true, her head held high, her tiny hands clenched.

“Dear Princess, we had no desire to upset you, but...,” said the old man. “Your brother has again set out to destroy us, for what reason we do not know. But you are young, what fault is it of yours, Poor Lady?!”

Endzhy Hanym turned to look at her husband’s milk-brother. She could not work out if there was anger or not in her heart, but she stopped crying. And the milk-brother understood what she wanted the very instant he looked at her.

“Venerable Badra,” he said, addressing the old man. “Our princess, our young bride, wishes to say something.”

“Let her speak, sir,” said the old man, nodding in assent. Everyone listened.

Endzhy Hanym wanted to speak with words of enmity, she wanted to shew them her power, because it was their fault that she was subject to dizzy spells, because tension was coursing through her veins, but most of all — because she cried against her will and they could see her weakness. But just at that moment a sensation of calm, of a draining of strength, and of joy ran through her whole body. The reason was that at that critical juncture the baby in her womb suddenly moved. Whether or not the being in her womb had yet actually formed into a baby I know not, but it was in the process of maturing and turning into a glorious fruit. Something very sweet and the cause of high emotion had seeped into her heart and suffused her entire body from head to foot. Endzhy Hanym bloomed and shone. Then it was, in her now becalmed frame of mind, that she began to speak.

“Respected fellow citizens, I am not granted the right to speak before you, but, if you will deign to give it to me, what I shall say to you is this: I do not think that my brother will conceive a desire to destroy you, his people.”

Those listening let out a sigh as if to say: “Eh, if only it were so!” But that was not what Endzhy Hanym was seeing or hearing; it was her unexpectedly kind-hearted frame of mind which was dictating her actions. She was waiting to see if the babe developing inside her like a fruit would move once more.

“...But even if it might be so, I — please excuse me — but I have a mind of my own and am not my brother’s slave. What I want is to become worthy of serving you, the people amongst whom I now find myself living, that is the thing to which I am dedicating my heart and mind.”

“My Lady, let *us* be the bearers of your pain and sorrows!” they responded in unison. Khⁱymk^w’arasa’s milk-brother gazed at Endzhy Hanym in joy and surprise.

“And henceforth if all is well, I too wish to share in your joyfulness, but otherwise — please, God, don’t say it! — should a new era dawn, I too shall share in your toil and trouble, if I am worthy to live amongst you.”

“May you not be deprived of your worthy desserts, My Lady!” said the envoys. And, without saying anything more, as though they were at fault, they turned and moved away.

But Endzhy Hanym was now into her stride.

“Respected fellow-citizens!” she again found her voice, one that she herself did not recognise. “Don’t go away, returning like that. Our lord is not here, but his milk-brother *is* here. Go inside; you are all welcome.”

The envoys halted. They hesitated, not knowing what they should say about the invitation.

“Do go inside; it’s not right that you do otherwise. I saw that you also have guests from afar with you...” Then she turned towards her husband’s milk-brother with the words: “Open the gates!” Having said this, with the sound of her clogs going clickety-click over the stones, she set off up the steps.

The man, to whom the princess had not spoken so peremptorily, at first looked upon this as nothing less than a miracle, but immediately, without her having to repeat her words, he issued orders to his people, and they entered his house in the blink of an eye. A heavy scraping sound issued from the gates, and they opened wide. The envoys, accompanied by Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s milk-brother too, went in, and the whole assembled throng in a mass entered the fort’s enclosure. Cannons fired from the crenels, smoke forming above them, in bright white puffs. But it was festivities that the cannon-fire betokened.

That day in Kh^jymk^w’arasa Daryq^w’a’s palace all the doors were open; they also took the lids off the wine-jars, in which 100 year-old wine was stored. The soldiers who were tasked with protecting the fort, put aside their weapons and rolled up their sleeves in order to serve the guests. They downed and slaughtered weighty bulls. The princess herself, a shining beauty, began to serve the guests, but were the natives of Ahchypsy, who well knew where the flight-paths of the coastal eagle and mountain eagle intersect, ever going to allow that? — No. With bowl-like vessels they started toasting Kh^jymk^w’arasa Marshan, master of the Warda fortress. They would toast Endzhy Hanym Chachba, his irrepressible wife. They toasted the land of Abkhazia, incorporating coast and mountain, a stranger to slavery. And that this is no lie Kh^watkh^wat Agkh^wa, K’adyr Amzyts, and Wamakh^j Sh^wynd stated when bearing mutual witness.

“*Ma princesse*, Dear Lady, we’ve allowed people armed to the teeth into the grounds of the fort, but the matter now is whether they will leave and go on their way or not,” said Kh^jymk^w’arasa’s milk-brother. “If things turn nasty, there are many of them, whereas my warriors are small in number.”

But Endzhy Hanym felt in her bones that nothing untoward would occur. She understood that she had never during her time on earth done such a fine thing as that day.

“No, brother of our lord, our guests are not people to defile the law of hospitality,” was the answer she gave him.

And thus did it transpire. The guests ate, drank, gave their toasts and benedictions; then, fully satisfied, they went out of the fort’s enclosure and departed, telling the tale of how Endzhy Hanym, Kh^jymk^w’arasa Daryq^w’a-Ipa’s own partner, had performed the

duties of a female warrior. Endzhy Hanym's name achieved great renown, and respect for her rose to the heights.

Nevertheless, she was unable to overcome her own great sorrow. Today, when she believed she had achieved some real value, when she had tested herself in a deed demanding true greatness, the pain of her fall became even stronger. How would she meet her husband, whenever he returned, tired and exhausted, from afar? With what a swelling of the heart would she tell him how she had managed things in such a way that those who had come with hate had departed with their hearts mollified! Was not now the time when she would be able to return to the blood flowing through his veins that potency of his which had temporarily deserted him? With what great delight he would meet the joyous report!... At this point her musings came to an abrupt end.

Her head was in a dizzy spin. She might possibly have stood on the fort's upper wall and jumped off, had it been she alone who would have died then. It was as she was in such a distressed state that her husband himself returned. With brow furrowed in sadness, he mounted the stairs and dragged his tiredness and exhaustion through the seven rooms, desirous, like all men who have ever existed, that there should be someone looking forward to his return.

Beyond the seven rooms he caught sight of her. She was standing, wearing her grass-coloured dress. When he saw her, dazzling and beautiful, at the far end of the spacious and empty chamber, he raised his weary face. The white shepherd's cloak fell from his grip where he held it trailing behind him.

At that moment it might have been when Endzhy Hanym clearly saw how her husband resembled an old castle, which, weathered by biting winds, stands as a firm bulwark offering means of self-protection. He was standing motionless, just like such a castle.

At a run she went rushing to meet him. Her golden clogs slipped off her feet and fell on the floor as she moved forward. Sinking in front of him on bended knees, she entreated him with tears as though he were a protecting deity, begging that her current purity, which had overflowed like a torrent, might win the day over her earlier infidelity, that he understand everything, and that he forgive without saying a word her for all she had done.

The old Abkhazian's heart quivered. Apart from that day, it had been impossible for Khⁱymk^w'arasa, who had been raised on a diet of courtly manners, to see a woman's tears right in front of him. His heart was in disarray; he didn't know what to do or say.

At first, without her noticing, his visage turned gloomy. He looked with disgust at his wife lying prostrate before him and felt a yearning to stand on her and even crush her beneath his feet. But at that moment a violent wind blew and flung open the small windows. His ears were struck by the sounds which loudly pierced the silence. And he noticed, recognising it body and soul, that what had returned to him never again to leach from the blood in his veins had, like a powerful wine, entered and suffused his blood and veins making him unsteady throughout the length and breadth of his body. It seemed to

him that he had wakened with a jolt from the dream of life in which had found himself trapped, unable to escape. His hands relaxed at his side; he became meek and full of emotion.

The wind was blowing a gale all around, rattling and shaking the small windows. But it was no ordinary wind. The old warrior, who in the world outside had been like chaff blown on the breeze but who now, having gathered himself together, was on his way back, knew that what had come spreading through the blood in his veins was his potency.

By the bank of the R. K^w'ydry [K'odor] the castle stood atop the lovely meadow with its covering of green grass. The castle was strong; from a distance it looked the colour of rust, but something was lacking — it would not have acquired its magnificence, had not the lovely meadow on which it stood been adorned with green grass. In one of the rooms of that great castle and looking equally as full of strength, mighty strength and of a most rusty hue the man was standing in the manner of a pillar of stone. Adorning his feet, affording him the appearance of height, her knees planted on the floor and the hems of her grassy-green dress spread out in front of him, knelt his wife, looking as if she had raised him up and was holding him aloft in her arms.

The little windows were rattling away; the wind was blowing a gale. Beneath them, rolling the boulders along, was flowing and overflowing, as from time immemorial, the K^w'ydry, threatening the while...

Translators' addendum

Douglas Freshfield on the R. K'wydry [K'odor]

A short distance below Lata the Kodor forces its way through the last ridge of the Caucasus in a deep limestone cleft. The road is a groove cut boldly in the face of blindingly white cliffs; the views from it of the great woodlands stretching in every direction are superb.

'The Exploration of the Caucasus', chapter entitled 'The Solitude of Abkhasia' in vol. 2, p.212, 1896.

William Gifford Palgrave (one-time British Vice-Consul in Sukhum)

Of the early history of the Abkhasian race little is known, and little was probably to be known. More than two thousand years since we find them in Greek records inhabiting the narrow strip between the mountains and the sea along the central eastern coast of the Euxine, precisely where later records and the maps of our own day place them. But whence these seeming 'autochthones' arrived, what the cradle of their infant race, to which of the 'earth-families', in German phrase, this little tribe, the highest number of which can never have much exceeded a hundred thousand, belonged, are questions on which the past and the present are alike silent.

'Essays on Eastern Questions', 1872, p. 256