The Caucasian Chalk Circle
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Characters

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE VALLEY

Among the ruins of a badly shelled Caucasian village the members of two kolchos villages are sitting in a circle, smoking and drinking wine. They consist mainly of women and old men, but there are also a few soldiers among them. With them is an expert of the State Reconstruction Commission from the capital.

A PEASANT WOMAN left, pointing: In those hills over there we stopped three Nazi tanks. But the apple orchard had already been destroyed.

AN OLD PEASANT right: Our beautiful dairy farm. All in ruins.

A GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER left: I set fire to it, Comrade.

Pause.

THE EXPERT: Now listen to the report: the delegates of the Galinsk goat-breeding kolchoz arrived in Nukha. When the Hitler armies were approaching, the kolchoz had been ordered by the authorities to move its goat-herds further to the east. The kolchoz now considers resettling in this valley. Its delegates have investigated the village and the grounds and found a high degree of destruction. The delegates on the right nod. The neighbouring Rosa Luxemburg fruit-growing kolchoz—to the left—moves that the former grazing land of the Galinsk kolchoz, a valley with scanty growth of grass, should be used for the replanting of orchards and vineyards. As an expert of the Reconstruction Commission, I request the two kolchoz villages to decide between themselves whether the Galinsk kolchoz shall return here or not.

AN OLD MAN right: First of all, I want to protest against the restriction of time for discussion. We of the Galinsk kolchoz have spent three days and three nights getting here. And now we are allowed a discussion of only half a day.

A WOUNDED SOLDIER left: Comrade, we no longer have as many villages and no longer as many working hands and no longer as much time.
THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER left: All pleasures have to be rationed. Tobacco is rationed, and wine and discussion, too.

THE OLD MAN right, sighing: Death to the Fascists! But I will come to the point and explain to you why we want to have our valley back. There are a great many reasons, but I want to begin with one of the simplest. Makinae Abakidze, unpack the goat cheese.

A peasant woman, right, takes from a basket an enormous cheese wrapped in a cloth. Applause and laughter.

Help yourselves, comrades. Start in.

AN OLD PEASANT left, suspiciously: Is this meant to influence us, perhaps?

THE OLD MAN right, amidst laughter: How could it be meant as an influence, Surab, you valley-thief? Everyone knows that you will take the cheese and the valley, too. Laughter.

All I expect from you is an honest answer: Do you like the cheese?

THE OLD MAN left: The answer is yes.

THE OLD MAN right: Oh. Bitterly. I might have guessed you know nothing about cheese.

THE OLD MAN left: Why not? When I tell you I like it!

THE OLD MAN right: Because you can’t like it. Because it’s not what it was in the old days. And why isn’t it? Because our goats don’t like the new grass as they used to like the old. Cheese is not cheese because grass is not grass, that’s it.

Mind you put that in your report.

THE OLD MAN left: But your cheese is excellent.

THE OLD MAN right: It’s not excellent. Barely decent. The new grazing land is no good, whatever the young people may say. I tell you, it’s impossible to live there. It doesn’t even smell of morning there in the morning.

Several people laugh.

THE EXPERT: Don’t mind their laughter. They understand you all the same. Comrades, why does one love one’s country? Because the bread tastes better there, the sky is higher, the air smells better, voices sound stronger, the ground is easier to walk on. Isn’t that so?
THE OLD MAN right: The valley has belonged to us for centuries.

THE SOLDIER left: What does that mean—for centuries? Nothing belongs to anyone for centuries. When you were young you didn’t even belong to yourself, but to Prince Kazbeki.

THE OLD MAN right: According to the law the valley belongs to us.

THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER: The laws will have to be re-examined in any case, to see whether they are still valid.

THE OLD MAN right: That’s obvious. You mean to say it makes no difference what kind of tree stands beside the house where one was born? Or what kind of neighbour one has? Doesn’t that make any difference? We want to go back just to have you next door to our kolchos, you valley-thieves. Now you can laugh again.

THE OLD MAN left, laughing: Then why don’t you listen to what your ‘neighbour’, Kato Vachtang, our agronomist, has to say about the valley?

A PEASANT WOMAN right: We haven’t said anywhere near all we have to say about our valley. Not all the houses are destroyed. At least the foundation wall of the dairy farm is still standing.

THE EXPERT: You can claim State support—both here and there. You know that.

A PEASANT WOMAN right: Comrade Expert, we’re not trading now. I can’t take your cap and hand you another, and say: ‘This one’s better.’ The other one might be better, but you prefer yours.

THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER: A piece of land is not like a cap. Not in our country, comrade.

THE EXPERT: Don’t get angry. It’s true that we have to consider a piece of land as a tool with which one produces something useful. But it’s also true that we must recognize the love for a particular piece of land. Before we continue the discussion I suggest that you explain to the comrades
of the Galinsk kolchos just what you intend to do with the disputed valley.

**THE OLD MAN** right: Agreed.

**THE OLD MAN** left: Yes, let Kato speak.

**THE EXPERT**: Comrade Agronomist!

**THE AGRONOMIST** rising. *She is in military uniform*: Last winter, comrades, while we were fighting here in these hills as partisans, we discussed how after the expulsion of the Germans we could increase our orchards to ten times their former size. I have prepared a plan for an irrigation project. With the help of a dam on our mountain lake, three hundred hectares of unfertile land can be irrigated. Our kolchos could then grow not only more fruit, but wine as well. The project, however, would pay only if the disputed valley of the Galinsk kolchos could also be included. Here are the calculations. *She hands the expert a briefcase.*

**THE OLD MAN** right: Write into the report that our kolchos plans to start a new stud farm.

**THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER**: Comrades, the project was conceived during the days and nights when we had to take cover in the mountains and often were without ammunition for our few rifles. Even to get a pencil was difficult.

*Applause from both sides.*

**THE OLD MAN** right: Our thanks to the comrades of the Rosa Luxemburg kolchos and to all those who defended our country.

*They shake hands and embrace.*

**THE PEASANT WOMAN** left: Our thoughts were that our soldiers—both your men and our men—should return to a still more fertile homeland.

**THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER**: As the poet Mayakovsky said: 'The home of the Soviet people shall also be the home of Reason!'

The delegates on the right (except the old man) have risen and, with the expert, study the agronomist's plans. Exclamations such as: 'Why is there a fall of 66 feet?'—'This rock here is to be dynamited!'—'Actually, all they need is cement and dynamite!'—'They force the water to come down here, that's clever!'
A very young workman right, to the old man, right: They are going to irrigate all the fields between the hills—look at that, Alleko.

The old man right: I am not going to look at it. I knew the project would be good. I won’t have a revolver pointed at my chest.

The soldier: But they are only pointing a pencil at your chest.

Laughter.

The old man right. He gets up gloomily and walks over to look at the drawings: These valley-thieves know only too well that we can’t resist machines and projects in this country.

The peasant woman right: Alleko Bereshvili, you yourself are the worst one at new projects. That is well known.

The expert: What about my report? May I write that in your kolchos you will support the transfer of your old valley for the project?

The peasant woman right: I will support it. What about you, Alleko?

The old man right, bent over the drawings: I move that you give us copies of the drawings to take along.

The peasant woman right: Then we can sit down to eat.

Once he has the drawings and is ready to discuss them, the affair is settled. I know him. And it will be the same with the rest of us.

The delegates embrace again amidst laughter.

The old man left: Long live the Galinsk kolchos and good luck to your new stud farm!

The peasant woman left: Comrades, in honour of the visit of the delegates from the Galinsk kolchos and of the expert we have arranged a play featuring the singer Arkadi Cheidze, which has some bearing on our problem.

Applause.

The girl tractor driver has gone off to fetch the singer.

The peasant woman right: Comrades, your play will have to be good. We’re going to pay for it with a valley.

The peasant woman left: Arkadi Cheidze knows 21,000 verses by heart.
THE OLD MAN left: We rehearsed the play under his direction. It is very difficult to get him, by the way. You and the Planning Commission should see to it that he comes north more often, comrade.

THE EXPERT: We are more concerned with economy.

THE OLD MAN left, smiling: You arrange the new distribution of grapevines and tractors. Why not of songs, too?

Enter the singer Arkadi Cheidze, led by the girl tractor driver. He is a sturdy man of simple manners, accompanied by musicians with their instruments. The artistes are greeted with applause.

THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER: This is the comrade expert, Arkadi.

The singer greets those round him.

THE PEASANT WOMAN right: I am very honoured to make your acquaintance. I’ve heard about your songs ever since I was at school.

THE SINGER: This time it’s a play with songs, and almost the whole kolchhos takes part. We have brought along the old masks.

THE OLD MAN right: Is it going to be one of the old legends?

THE SINGER: A very old one. It is called ‘The Chalk Circle’ and is derived from the Chinese. But we will recite it in a changed version. Yura, show the masks. Comrades, we consider it an honour to entertain you after such a difficult debate. We hope you will find that the voice of the old poet also sounds well in the shadow of Soviet tractors. It may be mistaken to mix different wines, but old and new wisdom mix very well. Now I hope we will all be given something to eat before the recital begins. That usually helps.

VOICES: Of course.—Everyone into the club house.

All go cheerfully to the meal. While they begin to move off, the expert turns to the singer.

THE EXPERT: How long will the story take, Arkadi? I have to get back to Tiflis tonight.

THE SINGER casually: It is actually two stories. A few hours.

THE EXPERT very confidentially: Couldn’t you make it shorter?

THE SINGER: No.
THE NOBLE CHILD

THE SINGER, who is seen sitting on the floor in front of his musicians, a black sheepskin cloak round his shoulders, leafing through a small, well-thumbed notebook:

Once upon a time
A time of bloodshed
When this city was called
The city of the damned
It had a Governor.
His name was Georgi Abashvili
Once upon a time.

He was very rich
He had a beautiful wife
He had a healthy child
Once upon a time.

No other governor in Grusinia
Had as many horses in his stable
As many beggars on his doorstep
As many soldiers in his service
As many petitioners in his courtyard
Once upon a time.

Georgi Abashvili, how shall I describe him?
He enjoyed his life:
On Easter Sunday morning
The Governor and his family went to church
Once upon a time.

Beggars and petitioners stream from a palace gateway, holding up thin children, crutches, and petitions. They are followed by two Ironshirts and then by the Governor's family, elaborately dressed.

THE BEGGARS AND PETITIONERS: Mercy, Your Grace, the taxes are beyond our means ... I lost my leg in the
Persian War, where can I get . . . My brother is innocent, Your Grace, a misunderstanding . . . My child is starving in my arms . . . We plead for our son’s discharge from the army, our one remaining son . . . Please, Your Grace, the water inspector is corrupt.

A servant collects the petitions, another distributes coins from a purse. Soldiers push back the crowd, lashing at it with thick leather whips.

SOLDIER: Get back! Make way at the church door!

Behind the Governor, his wife and his Adjutant, the Governor’s child is driven through the gateway in an ornate little carriage. The crowd surges forward to see it.

THE SINGER while the crowd is driven back with whips:

For the first time on this Easter Sunday, the people see the heir.

Two doctors never leave the child, the noble child Apple of the Governor’s eye.

Cries from the crowd: ‘The child!’ . . . ‘I can’t see it, stop pushing!’ . . . ‘God bless the child, Your Grace!’

THE SINGER:

Even the mighty Prince Kazbeki Bows before it at the church door.

A fat prince steps forward and bows before the family.

THE FAT PRINCE: Happy Easter, Natella Abashvili!

A command is heard. A rider arrives at the gallop and holds out to the Governor a roll of documents. At a nod from the Governor the Adjutant, a handsome young man, approaches the rider and stops him. There follows a brief pause during which the fat prince eyes the rider suspiciously.

THE FAT PRINCE: What a magnificent day! While it was raining in the night I thought to myself: gloomy holidays. But this morning: a gay sky. I love a bright sky, a simple heart, Natella Abashvili. And little Michael, a governor from head to foot, tititi! He tickles the child. Happy Easter, little Michael, tititi!

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE: What do you think of this, Arsen? Georgi has finally decided to start building the new
wing on the east side. All these miserable slum houses are
to be torn down to make room for a garden.

**THE FAT PRINCE:** That’s good news after so much bad.
What’s the latest about the war, Brother Georgi? *The
Governor shows his lack of interest.* A strategic retreat, I hear?
Well, minor reverses invariably occur. Sometimes things go
well, sometimes not so well. Such are the fortunes of war.
Doesn’t mean much, eh?

**THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE:** He’s coughing! Georgi, did you
hear?

*Sharply to the two doctors, dignified men, who stand close to the
little carriage:* He’s coughing!

**FIRST DOCTOR to the second:** May I remind you, Niko
Mikadze, that I was against the lukewarm bath? A minor
oversight in warming the bath water, Your Grace.

**SECOND DOCTOR equally polite:** I can’t possibly agree with
you, Mikha Loladze. The temperature of the bath water
was the one prescribed by our great and beloved Mishiko
Oboladze. More likely a slight draught in the night, Your
Grace.

**THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE:** But do take better care of him.
He looks feverish, Georgi.

**FIRST DOCTOR bending over the child:** No cause for alarm,
Your Grace. The bath water will be warmer. It won’t hap-
pen again.

**SECOND DOCTOR with a poisonous glance at the first:** I won’t
forget it, dear Mikha Loladze. No cause for alarm, Your
Grace.

**THE FAT PRINCE:** Well, well, well! I always say: one pain
in my liver and the doctor gets fifty strokes on the soles of
his feet. And that’s only because we live in such a decadent
age. In the old days it would have been: Off with his head!

**THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE:** Let’s go into the church. Very
likely it’s the draught here.

*The procession, consisting of the family and servants, turns into the
church doorway. The fat prince follows. The Adjutant leaves the
procession and points at the rider.*
THE GOVERNOR: Not before divine service, Shalva.

ADJUTANT to the rider: The Governor doesn’t want to be bothered with reports before the service—especially if they are, as I suspect, of a depressing nature. Go and get yourself something to eat in the kitchen, my friend.

The Adjutant joins the procession while the rider enters the palace gateway, cursing. A soldier appears from the palace and remains standing in the gateway.

THE SINGER

The city lies still.
On the church square the pigeons preen themselves.
A soldier of the palace guard
Is jesting with the kitchen maid
As she comes up from the river with a bundle.

_A girl tries to pass through the gateway, a bundle of large green leaves under her arm._

THE SOLDIER: What! The young lady is not in church? Shirking service?

GRUSHKA: I was already dressed to go. But they wanted one more goose for the Easter banquet. And they asked me to fetch it. I know something about geese.

THE SOLDIER: A goose? Feigning suspicion. I’d like to see that goose.

_Grusha doesn’t understand._

One has to be on one’s guard with women. They say: ‘I only went to fetch a goose’, and then it turns out to be something quite different.

GRUSHKA walks resolutely towards him and shows him the goose:

_There it is. And if it isn’t a fifteen-pound goose, and they haven’t stuffed it with corn, I’ll eat the feathers._

THE SOLDIER: A queen of a goose. It will be eaten by the Governor himself. So the young lady has been down to the river again?

GRUSHKA: Yes, at the poultry farm.

THE SOLDIER: I see! At the poultry farm, down by the river.

_Not higher up, near those—those willows?_  

GRUSHKA: I go to the willows only to wash linen.
THE SOLDIER insinuatingly: Exactly.
GRUSHA: Exactly what?
THE SOLDIER winking: Exactly that.
GRUSHA: Why shouldn’t I wash my linen near the willows?
THE SOLDIER with exaggerated laughter: ‘Why shouldn’t I
wash my linen near the willows!’ That’s a good one, that
is!
GRUSHA: I don’t understand the soldier. What’s so good
about it?
THE SOLDIER slyly: If someone knew what someone’s told,
she’d grow hot, she’d grow cold.
GRUSHA: I don’t know what I could know about those
willows.
THE SOLDIER: Not even if there were a bush opposite?
From which everything could be seen? Everything that
happens there when a certain person is washing linen?
GRUSHA: What happens there? Won’t the soldier say what he
means and have done with it?
THE SOLDIER: Something happens. And perhaps something
can be seen.
GRUSHA: Could the soldier mean that—once in a while on a
hot day—I put my toes in the water? For otherwise there’s
nothing.
THE SOLDIER: And more—the toes and more.
GRUSHA: More what? At most the foot.
THE SOLDIER: The foot and a little more. He laughs
heartily.
GRUSHA angrily: Simon Chachava, you ought to be ashamed
of yourself! To sit in a bush on a hot day and wait till some-
one comes along and puts her leg in the river! And most
likely with another soldier! She runs off.
THE SOLDIER shouting after her: Not with another soldier!
As the singer resumes his story the soldier runs after Grusha.
THE SINGER
The city lies still, but why are there armed men?
The Governor’s palace lies at peace
But why is it a fortress?
From the doorway at the left the fat prince enters quickly. He stands still and looks around. Before the gateway at the right two Ironshirts are waiting. Noticing them, the prince walks slowly past them, signs to them, then exits quickly. One Ironbirt exits through the gateway, the other remains on guard. Muffled voices come from different sides in the rear: 'To your posts! The palace is surrounded. Distant church bells. Enter through the doorway the procession and the Governor's family returning from church.

THE SINGER

Then the Governor returned to his palace
Then the fortress was a trap
Then the goose was plucked and roasted
Then the goose was no longer eaten
Then noon was no longer the hour to eat
Then noon was the hour to die.

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE in passing: It's quite impossible to live in this slum. But Georgi, of course, builds only for his little Michael. Never for me. Michael is everything, everything for Michael!

THE GOVERNOR: Did you hear Brother Kazbeki bid me a 'Happy Easter'? That's all very well, but so far as I know it didn't rain in Nukha last night. It rained where Brother Kazbeki was. Where was Brother Kazbeki?

THE ADJUTANT: That will have to be investigated.

THE GOVERNOR: Yes, at once. Tomorrow.

The procession turns into the gateway. The rider, who has meanwhile returned from the palace, walks towards the Governor.

THE ADJUTANT: Don't you want to listen to the rider from the capital, Your Excellency? He arrived this morning with confidential papers.

THE GOVERNOR in passing: Not before the banquet, Shalva! THE ADJUTANT to the rider, while the procession disappears into the palace and only two Ironshirts remain at the gate as palace guards: The Governor doesn't wish to be disturbed by military reports before the banquet. The afternoon His Excellency will devote to conferences with prominent architects who have also been invited to the banquet. Here they are
already. Enter three men. As the rider goes off, the Adjutant greets the architects. Gentlemen, His Excellency is awaiting you at the banquet. His entire time will be devoted to you. To the great new plans! Come, let us go!

one of the architects: We are impressed that his Excellency thinks of building in spite of the disquieting rumours that the war in Persia has taken a turn for the worse.

the adjutant: All the more reason for building! That's nothing. Persia is far away. The garrison here would let itself be chopped to pieces for its Governor.

Uproar from the palace. Shrill screams of a woman. Orders are shouted. Dumbfounded, the Adjutant moves towards the gateway. An Ironshirt steps out and holds him up at the point of a lance.

What's going on here? Put down that lance, you dog! To the palace guard, furiously. Disarm him! Can't you see an attempt is being made on the Governor's life?

The palace guard Ironshirts refuse to obey. Staring coldly, indifferently, at the Adjutant, they watch the proceedings without interest. The Adjutant fights his way into the palace.

one of the architects: The Princes! Don't you realize that the Princes met last night in the capital? And that they are against the Grand Duke and his governors? Gentlemen, we'd better make ourselves scarce.

They rush off.

the singer

Oh, blindness of the great! They walk like gods
Great over bent backs, sure
Of hired fists, trusting
In their power which has already lasted so long.
But long is not forever.
Oh, Wheel of Fortune! Hope of the people!

From the gateway, enter the Governor with a grey face, manacled, between two soldiers armed to the teeth.

Walk, Your Highness, walk even now with head up.
From your Palace the eyes of many foes follow you!
You no longer need an architect, a carpenter will do.
You will not move into a new palace, but into a little hole in the ground.
Just look about you once more, you blind man!
The arrested Governor looks about him.
Does all you once possessed still please you? Between the Easter Mass and the banquet
You are walking to that place from which no one returns.
The Governor is led away. The palace guard follows. A horn sounds. Noise behind the gateway.
When the houses of the great collapse
Many little people are slain.
those who had no share in the fortunes of the mighty
Often have a share in their misfortunes. The plunging wain
Drags the sweating beasts with it into the abyss.
Servants come rushing through the gateway in panic.
The servants in confusion: The hampers!—Take them all into the third courtyard! Food for five days!—Her Ladyship has fainted! Someone must carry her down. She must get away.—And what about us? We’ll be slaughtered like chickens, it’s the old story.—Jesus and Mary, what’s going to happen? There’s already bloodshed in the town, they say.—Nonsense, the Governor has just been asked politely to appear at a Princes’ meeting. Everything’ll be all right. I have this on the best authority.
The two doctors rush into the courtyard.
First Doctor trying to restrain the other: Niko Mikadze, it is your duty as a doctor to attend Natella Abashvili.
Second Doctor: My duty? It’s yours!
First Doctor: Niko Mikadze, who is in charge of the child today? You or me?
Second Doctor: Do you really think, Mikha Loladze, I’m going to stay another minute in this cursed house for that little brat?
They start fighting. All one hears is: ‘You neglect your duty!’ and ‘Duty be damned!’ Then the second doctor knocks down the first.
Second Doctor: Oh, go to hell! Exit.
THE SERVANTS: There's time enough before night. The soldiers won't be drunk till then.—Does anyone know if they've started a mutiny yet?—The Palace Guard has ridden away.—Doesn't anyone know what's happened?

GRUSHKA: Meliva the fisherman says a comet with a red tail has been seen in the sky over the capital. That means bad luck.

THE SERVANTS: Yesterday they were saying in the capital that the Persian War is lost.—The Princes have started a great revolt. There's a rumour that the Grand Duke has already fled. All his Governors are to be hanged.—The likes of us will be left alone. I have a brother in the Iron-shirts.

Enter the soldier Simon Chachava, searching the crowd for Grusha.

THE ADJUTANT appearing in the doorway: Everyone into the third courtyard! All hands help with the packing!

He drives the servants out. Simon finally finds Grusha.

SIMON: There you are at last, Grusha! What are you going to do?

GRUSHKA: Nothing. If the worst comes to the worst, I've a brother with a farm in the mountains. But what about you?

SIMON: Don't worry about me. Polite again. Grusha Vachnadze, your desire to know my plans fills me with satisfaction. I've been ordered to accompany Madam Natella Abashvili as her guard.

GRUSHKA: But hasn't the Palace Guard mutinied?

SIMON serious: That's a fact.

GRUSHKA: But isn't it dangerous to accompany the woman?

SIMON: In Tiflis they say: Isn't stabbing dangerous for the knife?

GRUSHKA: You're not a knife. You're a man, Simon Chachava.

What has this woman to do with you?

SIMON: The woman has nothing to do with me. But I have my orders, and so I go.

GRUSHKA: The soldier is a pig-headed man; he gets himself into danger for nothing—nothing at all. As she is called from the palace: Now I must go into the third courtyard. I'm in a hurry.
SIMON: As there's a hurry we oughtn't to quarrel. For a good quarrel one needs time. May I ask if the young lady still has parents?

GRUSHA: No, only a brother.

SIMON: As time is short—the second question would be: Is the young lady as healthy as a fish in water?

GRUSHA: Perhaps once in a while a pain in the right shoulder; but otherwise strong enough for any work. So far no one has complained.

SIMON: Everyone knows that. Even if it's Easter Sunday and there's the question who shall fetch the goose, then it's she. The third question is this: Is the young lady impatient? Does she want cherries in winter?

GRUSHA: Impatient, no. But if a man goes to war without any reason, and no message comes, that's bad.

SIMON: A message will come. Grusha is again called from the palace. And finally the main question . . .

GRUSHA: Simon Chachava, because I've got to go to the third courtyard and I'm in a hurry, the answer is 'Yes'.

SIMON very embarrassed: Hurry, they say, is the wind that blows down the scaffolding. But they also say: The rich don't know what hurry is.—I come from . . .

GRUSHA: Kutsk.

SIMON: So the young lady has already made inquiries? Am healthy, have no dependents, earn ten piastres a month, as a paymaster twenty, and am asking honourably for your hand.

GRUSHA: Simon Chachava, that suits me.

SIMON taking from his neck a thin chain from which hangs a little cross: This cross belonged to my mother, Grusha Vachnadze. The chain is silver. Please wear it

GRUSHA: I thank you, Simon. He fastens it round her neck.

SIMON: Now I must harness the horses. The young lady will understand that. It would be better for the young lady to go into the third courtyard. Otherwise there'll be trouble.

GRUSHA: Yes, Simon.

They stand together undecided.
Simon: I'll just take the woman to the troops who've remained loyal. When the war's over, I'll come back. In two weeks. Or three. I hope my intended won't get tired waiting for my return.

Grusha: Simon Chachava, I shall wait for you.

Go calmly into battle, soldier
The bloody battle, the bitter battle
From which not everyone returns.
When you return I will be there.
I will be waiting for you under the green elm
I will be waiting for you under the bare elm
I will wait until the last soldier has returned
And even longer.
When you return from the battle
No boots will lie before the door
The pillow beside mine will be empty
My mouth will be unkissed.
When you return, when you return
You will be able to say: all is as it was.

Simon: I thank you, Grusha Vachnadze, and farewell!

He bows low before her; she bows low before him. Then she runs off without looking round. Enter the Adjutant from the gateway.

The Adjutant harshly: Harness the horses to the big carriage! Don't stand there doing nothing, idiot!

Simon Chachava leaps to attention and goes off. Two servants crawl in from the gateway, loaded down with heavy trunks. Behind them, supported by her women, stumbles Natella Abashvili. She is followed by another woman carrying Michael.

The Governor's wife: As usual, nobody's paying the slightest attention. I hardly know if I'm standing on my head or my feet. Where's Michael? Don't hold him so clumsily! Pile the trunks on to the carriage! Shalva, is there any news of the Governor?

The Adjutant shaking his head: You must get away at once.

The Governor's wife: Is there any news from the town?
THE ADJUTANT: No. So far all is quiet. But there isn’t a minute to lose. There’s not enough room for the trunks on the carriage. Please pick out what you need.

Exit the Adjutant quickly.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE: Only essentials! Quick, open the trunks. I’ll tell you what I’ve got to have.

The trunks are lowered and opened.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE pointing at some brocade dresses:

That green one! And of course that one with the fur trimming. Where are the doctors? I’m getting this terrible migraine again. It always starts in the temples. This one with the little pearl buttons... Enter Grusha. You’re taking your time, eh? Go and get the hot water bottles at once!

Grusha runs off, and returns with hot water bottles. The Governor’s wife orders her about by signs.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE watching a young woman attendant:

Don’t tear the sleeve!

THE YOUNG WOMAN: I promise you, madam, no harm has come to the dress.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE: Because I caught you. I’ve been watching you for a long time. Nothing in your head but making eyes at the Adjutant. I’ll kill you, you bitch! She beats her.

THE ADJUTANT returning: I must ask you to make haste, Natella Abashvili. They are fighting in the town. Exit the Adjutant.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE letting go of the young woman: My God, do you think they’ll do something to me? Why should they? All are silent. She herself begins to rummage in the trunks. Where’s my brocade jacket? Help me! What about Michael? Is he asleep?

THE NURSE: Yes, madam.

THE GOVERNOR’S WIFE: Then put him down a moment and go and fetch my little saffron-coloured slippers from the bed-chamber. I need them to go with the green dress. The nurse puts down the child and goes off. To the young woman: Don’t
stand around, you! The young woman runs off. Stay here, or I’ll have you whipped! Just look at the way these things have been packed! No love! No understanding! If one doesn’t give every order oneself . . . At such moments one realizes what one’s servants are like! Masha! She gives her an order with a wave of the hand. You all gorge yourselves, but never a sign of gratitude! I won’t forget this.

The Adjutant very excited: Natella, you must leave at once! Orbeliani, Judge of the Supreme Court, has just been hanged! The carpet weavers are in revolt!

The Governor’s Wife: Why? I must have the silver dress—it cost 1000 piastres. And that one there, and all my furs. And where’s the wine-coloured dress?

The Adjutant trying to pull her away: Riots have broken out in the outer town! We’ve got to leave this minute! A servant runs off. Where’s the child?

The Governor’s Wife to the nurse: Maro, get the child ready! Where are you?

The Adjutant leaving: We’ll probably have to do without the carriage. And ride.

The Governor’s wife still rummages among her dresses, throws some on to the heap to go with her, then takes them off again. Drums are heard. The sky begins to redden.

The Governor’s Wife rummaging desperately: I can’t find that wine-coloured dress. Shrugging her shoulders, to the second woman: Take the whole heap and carry it to the carriage. Why hasn’t Maro come back? Have you all gone off your heads? I told you it’s right at the bottom.

The Adjutant returning: Quick! Quick!

The Governor’s Wife to the second woman: Run! Just throw them into the carriage!

The Adjutant: We’re not going by carriage. Come at once or I’ll ride off on my own!

The Governor’s Wife: Maro! Bring the child! To the second woman: Go and look, Masha. No, first take the dresses to the carriage. It’s all nonsense, I wouldn’t dream of riding! Turning round, she sees the fire-reddened sky and starts
back in horror. Fire! She rushes off, followed by the Adjutant. The second woman, shaking her head, follows with a heap of dresses. Servants enter from the gateway.

THE COOK: That must be the East Gate that’s burning.

THE CHEF: They’ve gone. And without the food wagon.

How are we going to get away now?

A STABLEMAN: This is going to be an unhealthy place for some time. To the third chambermaid: Sulika, I’m going to fetch some blankets, we’re clearing out.

THE NURSE entering through the gateway with her mistress’s slippers: Madam!

A FAT WOMAN: She’s gone.

THE NURSE: And the child. She rushes to the child, and picks it up.

They left it behind, those brutes! She hands the child to Grusha. Hold it for a moment. Deceitfully, I’m going to look for the carriage.

She runs off, following the Governor’s wife.

GRUSHA: What have they done to the Governor?

THE STABLEMAN drawing his index finger across his throat: Fst.

THE FAT WOMAN seeing the gesture, becomes hysterical: Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Our master Georgi Abashvili! At morning Mass he was a picture of health! And now! Oh, take me away! We’re all lost! We must die in sin! Like our master, Georgi Abashvili!

THE THIRD WOMAN trying to calm her: Calm down, Nina. You’ll get away. You’ve done no one any harm.

THE FAT WOMAN being led out: Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Let’s all get out before they come! Before they come!

THE THIRD WOMAN: Nina takes it to heart more than the mistress. People like that get others even to do their weeping for them! Seeing the child in Grusha’s arms. The child!

What are you doing with it?

GRUSHA: It’s been left behind.

THE THIRD WOMAN: She just left it? Michael, who was never allowed to be in a draught!

The servants gather round the child.

GRUSHA: He’s waking up.
THE STABLEMAN: Better put him down, I tell you. I'd rather not think what'd happen to the person seen with that child. I'll get our things. You wait here. Exit into the palace.

THE COOK: He's right. Once they begin, they'll slaughter whole families. I'll go and fetch my belongings.

All go except the cook, the third woman and Grusha with the child in her arms.

THE THIRD WOMAN: Didn't you hear? Better put him down!

GRUSHA: The nurse asked me to hold him for a moment.

THE COOK: That one won't come back, you silly!

THE THIRD WOMAN: Keep your hands off him.

THE COOK: They'll be more after him than after his mother. He's the heir. Grusha, you're a good soul. But you know you're not too bright. I tell you, if he had the plague it couldn't be worse. Better see to it that you get away.

The stableman has come back carrying bundles which he distributes among the women. All except Grusha prepare to leave.

GRUSHA stubbornly: He hasn't got the plague. He looks at you like a human being.

THE COOK: Then don't you look back. You're just the kind of fool who always gets put upon. If someone says to you: Run and get the lettuce, you have the longest legs!—you run. We're taking the ox-cart, you can have a lift if you hurry. Jesus, by now the whole neighbourhood must be in flames!

THE THIRD WOMAN: Haven't you packed anything yet?

There isn't much time, you know. The Ironshirts will soon be here from the barracks.

Exit both women and the stableman.

GRUSHA: I'm coming.

Grusha lays the child down, looks at it for a moment, then takes clothes from the trunks lying about and covers the sleeping child. Then she runs into the palace to get her things. Sounds of horses' hoofs and of women screaming. Enter the fat prince with drunken Ironshirts. One of them carries the head of the Governor on a lance.

THE FAT PRINCE: Put it here. Right in the middle! One Ironshirt climbs on to the back of another, takes the head and holds it
over the gateway. That’s not the middle. Further to the right. Good. What I do, my friends, I do well. While an Ironshirt with hammer and nail fastens the head by its hair: This morning at the church door I said to Georgi Abashvili: ‘I love a clear sky’. Actually, what I prefer is lightning from a clear sky. Oh, yes. But it’s a pity they took the brat away. I need him. Badly. Search the whole of Grusinia for him! 1000 piastres reward!

As Grusba enters cautiously through the doorway, the fat prince and the Ironshirts leave. Trampling of horses’ hoofs again. Carrying a bundle, Grusba walks towards the gateway. At the last moment, she turns to see if the child is still there. Promptly the singer begins to sing. She stands rooted to the spot.

THE SINGER

As she was standing between courtyard and gate, she heard
Or thought she heard, a low voice. The child
Called to her, not whining but calling quite sensibly
At least so it seemed to her: ‘Woman’, it said, ‘Help me’.
Went on calling not whining but calling quite sensibly:
‘Don’t you know, woman, that she who does not listen to
a cry for help
But passes by shutting her ears, will never hear
The gentle call of a lover
Nor the blackbird at dawn, nor the happy
Sigh of the exhausted grape-picker at the sound of the
Angelus.’
Hearing this
Grusba walks a few steps towards the child and bends over it.
she went back to the child
Just for one more look, just to sit with it
For a moment or two till someone should come
Its mother, perhaps, or someone else—
She sits down opposite the child, and leans against a trunk.
Just for a moment before she left, for now the danger was too great
The city full of flame and grief.
The light grows dimmer as though evening and night were falling,
Grusha has gone into the palace and fetched a lamp and some milk,
which she gives the child to drink.

THE SINGER loudly:
Terrible is the temptation to do good!
Grusha now settles down to keep watch over the child through the
night. Once, she lights a small lamp to look at it. Once, she tucks it
in with a brocade coat. Now and again she listens and looks up to
see if someone is coming.
For a long time she sat with the child.
Evening came, night came, dawn came.
Too long she sat, too long she watched
The soft breathing, the little fists
Till towards morning the temptation grew too strong.
She rose, she leaned over, she sighed, she lifted the child
She carried it off.
She does what the singer says as he describes it.
Like booty she took it for herself
Like a thief she sneaked away.

3

THE FLIGHT INTO THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

THE SINGER
As Grusha Vachnadze left the city
On the Grusinian highway
Towards the northern mountains
She sang a song, she bought some milk.

THE MUSICIANS
How will the merciful escape the merciless
The bloodhounds, the trappers?
Into the deserted mountains she wandered
Along the Grusinian highway she wandered
She sang a song, she bought some milk.
Grusha Vachnadze continues on her way. On her back she carries
the child in a sack, in one hand a bundle, in the other a big stick.
GRUSHA singing:

Four generals set off for Iran
Four generals but not one man.
The first did not strike a blow
The second did not beat the foe
For the third the weather was not right
For the fourth the soldiers would not fight.
Four generals went forth to attack
Four generals turned back.

Sosso Robakidse marched to Iran
Sosso Robakidse was a man.
He struck a sturdy blow
He certainly beat the foe
For him the weather was good enough
For him the soldiers fought with love
Sosso Robakidse marched to Iran
Sosso Robakidse is our man.

A peasant’s cottage appears.

GRUSHA to the child: Noontime, eating time. Now we’ll sit here quietly in the grass, while the good Grusha goes and buys a little mug of milk. She lays the child down and knocks at the cottage door. An old peasant opens it. Grandpa, could I have a little mug of milk? And perhaps a corn cake?

THE OLD MAN: Milk? We haven’t any milk. The soldiers from the city took our goats. If you want milk, go to the soldiers.

GRUSHA: But Grandpa, you surely have a mug of milk for a child?

THE OLD MAN: And for a ‘God Bless You’, eh?

GRUSHA: Who said anything about a ‘God Bless You’? She pulls out her purse. We’re going to pay like princes. Head in the clouds, bottom in the water! The peasant goes off grumbling to fetch milk. And how much is this mug?

THE OLD MAN: Three piastres. Milk has gone up.

GRUSHA: Three piastres for that drop? Without a word the old man slams the door in her face. Michael, did you hear that?
Three piastres! We can’t afford that. She goes back, sits down again and gives the child her breast. Well, we must try again like this. Suck. Think of the three piastres. There’s nothing there, but you think you’re drinking, and that’s something. Shaking her head, she realizes the child has stopped sucking. She gets up, walks back to the door, and knocks again. Open, Grandpa, we’ll pay. Under her breath: May God strike you! When the old man appears again: I thought it would be half a piastre. But the child must have something. What about one piastre?

the old man: Two.
grusha: Don’t slam the door again. She rummages a long time in her purse. Here are two piastres. But this milk has got to last. We still have a long journey ahead of us. These are cut-throat prices. It’s a sin.

the old man: If you want milk, kill the soldiers.
grusha  _letting the child drink_: That’s an expensive joke. Drink, Michael. This is half a week’s pay. The people here think we’ve earned our money sitting on our bottom. Michael, Michael, I certainly took on a nice burden with you! _Looking at the brocade coat in which the child is wrapped_: A brocade coat worth 1000 piastres, and not one piastre for milk. She glances round. Look! There’s a carriage, with rich ladies. We ought to get on to that.

In front of a caravansary. Grusha dressed in the brocade coat is seen approaching two elegant ladies. She holds the child in her arms.
grusha: Oh, you ladies want to spend the night here, too?
It’s awful how crowded it is everywhere! And not a carriage to be found! My coachman simply turned back. I’ve been walking half a mile on foot. Barefoot, too! My Persian shoes—you know those heels! But why doesn’t someone come?

the elder lady: That innkeeper certainly takes his time.
The whole country has lost its manners since those goings-on started in the capital.
The innkeeper appears, a very dignified old man with a long beard, followed by his servant.
THE INNKEEPER: Excuse an old man for keeping you waiting, ladies. My little grandchild was showing me a peach tree in blossom. There on the slope, beyond the cornfields. We're planting fruit trees there, a few cherries. Further west—pointing—the ground gets more stony. That's where the farmers graze their sheep. You ought to see the peach blossom, the pink is exquisite.

THE ELDER LADY: You live in a fertile region.

THE INNKEEPER: God has blessed it. How far on is the fruit-blossom further south, my ladies? I take it you come from the south?

THE YOUNGER LADY: I must admit I haven't been paying much attention to the landscape.

THE INNKEEPER politely: Of course, the dust. It is advisable to travel slowly on our high roads. Provided, of course, one isn't in too great a hurry.

THE ELDER LADY: Put your scarf round your throat, dearest.

The evening breeze seems rather cool here.

THE INNKEEPER: It comes down from the Janga-Tau glaciers, my ladies.

GRUSHA: Yes, I'm afraid my son may catch cold.

THE ELDER LADY: A very spacious caravansary! Shall we go in?

THE INNKEEPER: Oh, the ladies want rooms? But the caravansary is full up, my ladies. And the servants have run off. I very much regret it, but I cannot accommodate another person, not even with references . . .

THE YOUNGER LADY: But we can't spend the night here on the road.

THE ELDER LADY drily: How much?

THE INNKEEPER: My ladies, you will understand that in these times, when so many fugitives, no doubt quite respectable people but not popular with the authorities, are looking for shelter, a house has to be particularly careful. Therefore . . .

THE ELDER LADY: My dear man, we aren't fugitives. We're simply moving to our summer residence in the mountains,
that's all. It would never occur to us to ask for hospitality if we needed it—all that urgently.

The Innkeeper nodding his head in agreement: Of course not. I only doubt if the tiny room at my disposal would suit the ladies. I have to charge 60 piastres per person. Are the ladies together?

Grusha: In a way. I'm also in need of shelter.

The Younger Lady: 60 piastres! That's a cut-throat price.

The Innkeeper coldly: My ladies, I have no desire to cut throats. That's why . . . He turns to go.

The Elder Lady: Must we talk about throats? Let's go in. She enters, followed by the servant.

The Younger Lady desperate: 180 piastres for one room! Glancing back at Grusha: But with the child it's impossible! What if it cries?

The Innkeeper: The room costs 180, whether it's two persons or three.

The Younger Lady changing her attitude to Grusha: On the other hand, I couldn't bear to think of you on the road, my dear. Do come in.

They enter the caravansary. From the rear on the opposite side of the stage the servant appears with some luggage. Behind him come the elder lady, the younger lady and Grusha with the child.

The Younger Lady: 180 piastres! I haven't been so upset since they brought dear Igor home.

The Elder Lady: Must you talk about Igor?

The Younger Lady: Actually, we are four persons. The child is one too, isn't it? To Grusha: Couldn't you pay half at least?

Grusha: That's impossible. I had to leave in a hurry, you see. And the Adjutant forgot to slip me enough money.

The Elder Lady: Perhaps you haven't even got the 60?

Grusha: That much I'll pay.

The Younger Lady: Where are the beds?

The Servant: There aren't any beds. Here are some sacks and blankets. You'll have to arrange them yourselves. Be
glad you’re not being put in a hole in the earth. Like lots of others. Exit.

THE YOUNGER LADY: Did you hear that? I’m going straight to the innkeeper. That man must be whipped.

THE ELDER LADY: Like your husband?

THE YOUNGER LADY: Don’t be so cruel! She weeps.

THE ELDER LADY: How are we going to arrange something to sleep on?

GRUSHI: I’ll see to that. *She puts down the child.* It’s always easier when there are several hands. You still have the carriage. *Sweeping the floor.* I was taken completely by surprise. ‘My dear Anastasia Katarinovska,’ my husband was saying before luncheon, ‘do go and lie down for a while. You know how easily you get your migraine.’ *She spreads out sacks and makes beds.* The ladies, watching her work, exchange glances. ‘Georgi’, said I to the Governor, ‘I can’t lie down when there are sixty for luncheon. And one can’t trust the servants. And Michael Georgivich won’t eat without me.’

To Michael: See, Michael? Everything’ll be all right, what did I tell you! *She suddenly realizes that the ladies are watching her strangely and whispering.* Well, there we are! At least one doesn’t have to lie on the bare floor. I’ve folded the blankets double.

THE ELDER LADY *imperiously:* You seem to be rather clever at making beds, my dear. Let’s have a look at your hands!

GRUSHI *frightened:* What?

THE YOUNGER LADY: You’re being asked to show your hands.

*Grusha shows the ladies her hands.*

THE YOUNGER LADY *triumphant:* Cracked! A servant!

THE ELDER LADY goes to the door and shouts: Service!

THE YOUNGER LADY: You’re caught! You swindler! Just confess what mischief you’re up to!

GRUSHI *confused:* I’m not up to any mischief. I just thought you might take us a little way in your carriage. Please, I ask you, don’t make a noise, I’ll go on my own.
THE YOUNGER LADY while the elder lady continues shouting for service: Yes, you'll go all right, but with the police. For the moment you'll stay. Don't you dare move, you!

GRUSHA: But I was ready to pay the 60 piastres. Here. She shows her purse. Look for yourself. I have them. Here are four tens, and here's a five—no, that's another ten, and ten, makes 60. All I want is to get the child on to the carriage. That's the truth.

THE YOUNGER LADY: Aha, so that's what you want. On to the carriage! Now it's come out.

GRUSHA: Madam, I confess, I am from a humble family. Please don't call the police. The child is of noble birth, look at the linen. It's fleeing like yourself.

THE YOUNGER LADY: Of noble birth! We know that one. The father's a prince, eh?

GRUSHA to the elder lady, fiercely: Stop shouting! Have you no heart at all?

THE YOUNGER LADY to the elder lady: Look out! She'll attack you! She's dangerous! Help! Murder!

THE SERVANT entering: What's going on here?

THE ELDER LADY: This person here has smuggled herself in by playing the lady. She's probably a thief.

THE YOUNGER LADY: And a dangerous one, too. She wanted to murder us. It's a case for the police. Oh God, I can feel my migraine coming on!

THE SERVANT: There aren't any police at the moment. To Grusha: Pack up your things, sister, and make yourself scarce.

GRUSHa angrily picking up the child: You monsters! And they're already nailing your heads to the wall!

THE SERVANT pushing her out: Shut your trap. Or you'll have the Old Man here. And there's no trifling with him.

THE ELDER LADY to the younger lady: Just see if she hasn't stolen something already!

While the ladies, right, look feverishly to see whether something has been stolen, the servant and Grusha go out through the door, left.
THE SERVANT: Look before you leap, I say. Another time have a good look at people before you get mixed up with them.

GRUSHA: I thought they’d be more likely to treat their own kind better.

THE SERVANT: Not them! Believe me, nothing’s harder than aping a lazy useless person. Once they suspect you can wipe your own arse, or that your hands have ever touched a broom, the game’s up. Just wait a minute, I’ll get you a corn cake and a few apples.

GRUSHA: Better not. I must get out before the Old Man comes. And if I walk all night I’ll be out of danger, I think. She walks away.

THE SERVANT calling after her in a low voice: At the next crossroads, turn right.

She disappears.

THE SINGER:

As Grusha Vachnadze wandered northwards
She was followed by the Prince’s Ironshirts.

THE MUSICIANS

How will the barefooted girl escape the Ironshirts
The bloodhounds, the trappers?
They are hunting even by night.
Pursuers don’t get tired.
Butchers sleep little.

Two Ironshirts are trudging along the highway.

THE CORPORAL: Blockhead, you’ll never amount to anything. Why? Because your heart’s not in it. Your superior sees it in little things. Yesterday when I laid that fat woman, I admit you collared her husband as I commanded. And you did kick him in the stomach. But did you enjoy it like a good soldier? Or did you just do it from a sense of duty? I’ve kept my eyes on you, blockhead. You’re like a hollow reed or a tinkling cymbal. You’ll never get promoted. They walk awhile in silence. Don’t you get the idea I don’t notice how insubordinate you are in every way. I forbid you to limp! You do it simply because I sold the horses, and I
sold them because I'd never have got that price again. I know you: you limp just to show me you don't like marching. But that won't help you. It'll go against you. Sing!

**THE TWO IRONSHIRTS** **singing:**
- O sadly one morning, one morning in May
- I kissed my darling and rode far away.
- Protect her, dear friends, until home from the wars
- I come riding in triumph, alive on my horse.

**THE CORPORAL:** Louder!

**THE TWO IRONSHIRTS:**
- When I lie in my grave and my sword turns to rust
- My darling shall bring me a handful of dust.
- For the feet that so gaily ran up to her door
- And the arms that went round her shall please her no more.

*They begin to walk again in silence.*

**THE CORPORAL:** A good soldier has his heart and soul in it. He lets himself be hacked to pieces by his superiors, and even while dying he's aware of his Corporal nodding approval. For him that's reward enough. That's all he wants. But you won't get a nod. And you'll croak just the same. Christ, how am I to lay my hands on the Governor's bastard with an ass like you!

*They trudge on.*

**THE SINGER**
- When Grusha Vachnadze came to the River Sirra
- The flight grew too much for her, the helpless child too heavy.

**THE MUSICIANS**
- The rosy dawn in the cornfields
- Is nothing but cold to the sleepless.
- The gay clatter of the milk cans in the farmyard
- Where the smoke rises is nothing but a threat to the fugitives.
- She who drags the child feels nothing but its weight.

*Grusha stops in front of a farm.*
GRUSHA: Now you’ve wetted yourself again, and you know I’ve no nappies. Michael, we’ve got to part. This is far enough from the city. They won’t want you so badly, little squirt, that they’ll follow you all this way. The woman looks kind, and just you smell the milk! So farewell, little Michael. I’ll forget how you kicked me in the back all night to make me go faster. And you—you forget the meagre fare. It was meant well. I’d love to have kept you, because your nose is so small, but it can’t be done. I’d have shown you your first rabbit and—how not to wet yourself, but I must turn back, because my sweetheart the soldier might soon return, and suppose he didn’t find me? You can’t ask that of me, Michael.

A fat peasant woman carries a milk can to the door. Grusha waits until she has gone in, then gingerly approaches the house. She tiptoes to the door and lays the child on the threshold. Then, hiding behind a tree, she waits until the peasant woman opens the door and sees the bundle.

THE PEASANT WOMAN: Jesus Christ, what’s this? Husband!
THE PEASANT: What’s up? Let me have my soup.
THE PEASANT WOMAN to the child: Where’s your mother? Haven’t you got one? It’s a boy. And the linen is fine; it’s from a good family. And they just leave him on our doorstep. Oh, what times we live in!
THE PEASANT: If they think we’re going to feed it, they’re mistaken. You take it to the priest in the village. That’s all we can do.

THE PEASANT WOMAN: What will the priest do with it? It needs a mother. There, it’s waking up. Don’t you think we could keep it?
THE PEASANT shouting: No!
THE PEASANT WOMAN: I could lay it in the corner, next to the armchair. I only need a crib for it. And I can take it into the fields with me. Look how it’s smiling! Husband, we have a roof over our heads and we can do it. I won’t hear another word.

She carries the child into the house. The peasant follows, protesting.
Grusha steps out from behind the tree, laughs, and hurries away in the opposite direction.

THE SINGER

Why so gay, you, making for home?

THE MUSICIANS

Because with a smile the child
Has won new parents for himself, that’s why I’m gay.
Because I am rid of the loved one
That’s why I’m happy.

THE SINGER

And why are you sad?

THE MUSICIANS

I’m sad because I’m single and free
Of the little burden in whom a heart was beating:
Like one robbed, like one impoverished I’m going.

Grusha walks for a short while, then meets the two Ironshirts, who hold her up at the point of a lance.

THE CORPORAL: Young lady, you’re running into the Armed Forces. Where are you coming from? When are you coming? Are you entertaining illegal relations with the enemy? Where is he hiding? What sort of movements is he making in your rear? What about the hills? What about the valley? How are your stockings fastened?

Grusha stands there frightened.

Grusha: They are strongly fastened; you’d better withdraw.

THE CORPORAL: I always withdraw. In that respect I’m reliable. Why are you staring like that at the lance? In the field a soldier never loses control of his lance. That’s an order. Learn it by heart, blockhead. Now then, young lady, where are you off to?

Grusha: To my intended, one Simon Chachava, of the Palace Guard in Nukha. Wait till I write to him; he’ll break your bones for you.

THE CORPORAL: Simon Chachava? Indeed! I know him. He gave me the key so I could keep an eye on you once in a while. Blockhead, we’re getting unpopular. We must make her realize we have honourable intentions. Young lady, my
apparent flippancy hides a serious nature. So I’ll tell you officially: I want a child from you.

*Grusha utters a little scream.*

Blockhead, she has understood. Ooh, isn’t that a sweet fright! ‘But first I must take the bread out of the oven, Officer! But first I must change my torn chemise, Colonell!’ But joking apart. Listen, young lady, we are looking for a certain child in these parts. Have you heard of a child from the city, of good family, dressed in fine linen?

**Grusha:** No. I’ve heard nothing.

**The Singer**

Run, kind heart! The killers are coming!
Help the helpless child, helpless girl! And so she runs.

*Suddenly, panic-stricken, she turns round and runs. The Ironshirts glance at each other, then follow her, cursing.*

**The Musicians**

In the bloodiest times
There are still good people.

*As Grusha enters the cottage, the peasant woman is bending over the child’s crib.*

**Grusha:** Hide it! Quick! The Ironshirts are coming! It was I who laid it on your doorstep. But it isn’t mine. It’s of a noble family.

**The Peasant Woman:** Who’s coming? What sort of Ironshirts?

**Grusha:** Don’t ask questions. The Ironshirts who are looking for it.

**The Peasant Woman:** They’ve no business in my house. But it seems I must have a word with you.

**Grusha:** Take off the fine linen. That will give us away.

**The Peasant Woman:** Oh, you and your linen! In this house I decide. And don’t you mess up my room. But why did you abandon it? That’s a sin.

**Grusha looking out of the window:** There, they’re coming from behind the trees. I shouldn’t have run away. That gave them ideas. What on earth shall I do?
THE PEASANT WOMAN looking out of the window and suddenly starting with fear: Jesus and Mary! Ironshirts!
GRUSHKA: They’re after the child!
THE PEASANT WOMAN: But suppose they come in!
GRUSHKA: You mustn’t give it to them. Say it’s yours.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: Yes.
GRUSHKA: They’ll run it through if you let them have it.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: But suppose they demand it? The money for the harvest is in the house.
GRUSHKA: If you let them have it, they’ll run it through, here in your room! You’ve got to say it’s yours.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: Yes, but suppose they don’t believe me?
GRUSHKA: You must speak firmly.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: They’ll burn the roof over our head.
GRUSHKA: That’s why you’ve got to say it’s yours. His name’s Michael. I shouldn’t have told you that.
The peasant woman nods.
Don’t nod your head like that. And don’t tremble; they’ll notice.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: Yes.
GRUSHKA: Stop saying yes. I can’t stand it any longer. She shakes her. Haven’t you got a child?
THE PEASANT WOMAN muttering: In the war.
GRUSHKA: Then perhaps he’s an Ironshirt, too, by now? And what if he ran children through? You’d give him a fine piece of your mind! ‘Stop waving that lance in my room! Is that what I’ve reared you for? Go and wash your neck before you speak to your mother.’
THE PEASANT WOMAN: That’s true, I wouldn’t let him behave like that.
GRUSHKA: Promise me you’ll say it’s yours.
THE PEASANT WOMAN: Yes
GRUSHKA: There! They’re coming!
There is a knocking at the door. The women don’t answer. Enter the Ironshirts. The peasant woman bows deeply.
THE CORPORAL: Well, there she is. What did I tell you? My nose. I smelled her. Young lady, I have a question to ask you: Why did you run away? What did you think I would do to you? I'll bet it was something lewd. Confess!

GRUSHA while the peasant woman continues to bow: I'd left the milk on the stove. Then I suddenly remembered it.

THE CORPORAL: I thought it was because you imagined I'd looked at you in a lewd way—as if I were thinking there could be something between us. A lustful glance, know what I mean?

GRUSHA: I didn't see that.

THE CORPORAL: But it could have been, eh? You must admit that. After all, I could be a swine. I'm quite frank with you: I could think of all sorts of things if we were alone. To the peasant woman: Haven't you got something to do in the yard? The chickens to feed?

THE PEASANT WOMAN falling suddenly to her knees: Soldier, I didn't known anything about it. Please don't set my house on fire.

THE CORPORAL: What are you talking about?

THE PEASANT WOMAN: I have nothing to do with it. She left it on the doorstep, I swear.

THE CORPORAL suddenly sees the child and whistles: Ah, there's a little one in the crib! Blockhead, I smell a thousand piastres. Take the old girl out and hold on to her. It looks as though I'll have to do some cross-examining.

The peasant woman lets herself be led out by the soldier, without a word.

Well, there's the child I wanted to have from you. He walks towards the crib.

GRUSHA: Officer, it's mine. It's not the one you're after.

THE CORPORAL: I'll just have a look at it. He bends over the crib. Grusha looks round in despair.

GRUSHA: It's mine! It's mine!

THE CORPORAL: Nice linen!

Grusha jumps at him to pull him away. He throws her off and again bends over the crib. Looking round in despair, she suddenly
sees a big log of wood, seizes it in panic, and hits the Corporal over the head from behind. She quickly picks up the child and dashes off

THE SINGER
After her escape from the Ironshirts
After twenty-two days of wandering
At the foot of the Janga-Tau glacier
From this moment Grusha Vachnadze decided to be the child’s mother.

THE MUSICIANS
The helpless girl
Became the mother of the helpless child.

Grusha squats over a half-frozen stream to ladle some water in her hand for the child.

GRUSHKA
Nobody wants to take you
So I shall have to take you
There is no-one else but me, my dear
On this black day in a meagre year
Who will not forsake you.

Since I’ve carried you too long
And with sore feet
Since the milk was too dear
I grew fond of you.
(I wouldn’t be without you any more.)

I’ll throw your fine little shirt away
And wrap you in rags
I’ll wash you and christen you
With glacier water.
(You’ll have to bear it.)

She has taken off the child’s fine linen and wrapped it in a rag.

THE SINGER
When Grusha Vachnadze, pursued by the Ironshirts
Came to the narrow footbridge of the Eastern slope
She sang the song of the rotten bridge
And risked two lives.
A wind has risen. The bridge on the glacier is visible in the semi-darkness. One rope is broken, and half the bridge is hanging down the precipice. Merchants, two men and a woman, stand undecided before the bridge as Grusha and the child arrive. One man is trying to retrieve a hanging rope with a stick.

The first man: Take your time, young woman. You won’t get over that pass anyway.

Grusha: But I simply have to get my child over to the east side. To my brother.

The merchant woman: Have to? What d’you mean by have to? I have to get there, too—because I have to buy two carpets in Atum—carpets a woman had to sell because her husband had to die. But can I do what I have to; can she? Andrei has been fishing for two hours for that rope. And I ask you, how are we to fasten it, even if he gets it?

The first man listening: Shush, I think I hear something.

Grusha: The bridge is not quite rotten. I think I’ll try and cross it.

The merchant woman: I wouldn’t try that even if the devil himself were after me. It’s suicide.

The first man shouting: Hi!

Grusha: Don’t shout! To the merchant woman. Tell him not to shout.

The first man: But someone down there’s calling. Perhaps they’ve lost their way.

The merchant woman: And why shouldn’t he shout? Is there something wrong with you? Are they after you?

Grusha: Well, I’ll have to tell you. Ironshirts are after me. I knocked one down.

The second man: Hide our merchandise!

The woman hides a sack behind a rock.

The first man: Why didn’t you tell us that at once? To the other: If they catch her they’ll make mincemeat out of her!

Grusha: Get out of my way. I’ve got to cross that bridge.

The second man: You can’t. There’s a precipice of two thousand feet.
THE FIRST MAN: Even if we could get the rope it wouldn’t make sense. We could hold it with our hands, but then the Ironshirts could get across in the same way.

GRUSHA: Out of my way.

Shouts from a distance: ‘Let’s get up there!’

THE MERCHANT WOMAN: They’re getting near. But you can’t take the child across that bridge. It’s sure to break. Just look down!

Grusha looks down the precipice. The Ironshirts are heard shouting below.

THE SECOND MAN: Two thousand feet!

GRUSHA: But those men are worse.

THE FIRST MAN: Anyway you can’t do it with the child. Risk your own life if they are after you, but not the child’s.

THE SECOND MAN: She’s even heavier with the child.

THE MERCHANT WOMAN: Perhaps she’s really got to go. Give it to me. I’ll hide it and you cross the bridge alone.

GRUSHA: I won’t. We belong together. To the child: Live together, die together. She sings:

If the gulf is deep
And the rotten bridge sways
It is not for us, son
To choose our ways.

The way that I know
Is the one for your feet
The bread that I find
Is all you will eat.

Of every four morsels
You shall have three.
I would that I knew
How big they will be!

I’ll try it.

THE MERCHANT WOMAN: That’s tempting God.

Shouts from beneath.
GRUSHKA: I beg you, throw that stick away, or they'll get the rope and follow me.

She starts off on to the swinging bridge. The merchant woman screams when the bridge looks like breaking. But Grusha walks on and reaches the far side.

THE FIRST MAN: She's done it!

THE MERCHANT WOMAN who has fallen on her knees and begun to pray, angrily: But I still think it was a sin.

The Ironshirts appear, the Corporal's head bandaged.

THE CORPORAL: Have you seen a woman with a child?

THE FIRST MAN while the second throws away his stick: Yes, there she is! But the bridge won't carry you!

THE CORPORAL: Blockhead, you'll suffer for this!

Grusha, from the far bank, laughs and shows the child to the Ironshirts. She walks on. The bridge is left behind. Wind.

GRUSHKA to the child: You mustn't mind the wind. It's only a poor wretch, too. It has to push the clouds, and it feels the cold more than any of us. Snow starts falling. And the snow isn't the worst, Michael. It covers the little fir trees, so that they won't die in winter. And now I'll sing you a little song. Listen! She sings:

Your father's a thief
Your mother's a whore:
All the nice people
Will love you therefore.

The son of the tiger
Brings the foals their feed
The snake-child milk
To mothers in need.
IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

THE SINGER

Seven days the sister wandered.
Across the glacier, down the hills she wandered.
‘When I enter my brother’s house’, she thought to herself
‘He will rise and embrace me’.
‘Is that you, sister?’ he will say
‘I have been expecting you for so long. This here is my
dear wife.
And this is my farm, come to me by marriage.
With eleven horses and thirty-one cows. Sit down.
Sit down with your child at our table and eat.’
The brother’s house was in a lovely valley.
When the sister came to the brother she was ill from her
wanderings.
The brother rose from the table.

A fat peasant couple who have just sat down to a meal. Lavrenti
Vachnadze already has a napkin round his neck, as Grusha, pale
and supported by a stableman, enters with the child.

LAVRENTI: Where do you come from, Grusha?
GRUSHASHebly: I’ve walked across the Janga-Tau Pass,
Lavrenti.

STABLEMAN: I found her in front of the hay barn. She has a
child with her.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Go and groom the roan. Exit stable-
man.

LAVRENTI: This is my wife, Aniko.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: We thought you were in service in
Nukha.

GRUSHABarely able to stand: Yes, I was there.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Wasn’t it a good job? We were told it
was a good one.

GRUSHASHA: The Governor has been killed.
LAVRENTI: Yes, we heard there were riots. Your aunt told us about it. Remember, Aniko?

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Here, with us, it’s quiet. City people always need some kind of excitement. She walks towards the door and shouts: Sosso, Sosso, take the flat cake out of the oven, d’you hear? Where are you? Exit, shouting.

LAVRENTI quietly, quickly: Has it got a father? As she shakes her head: I thought so. We must think up something. She’s very pious.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW returning: These servants! To Grusha: You have a child?

GRUSHA: It’s mine. She collapses. Lavrenti helps her up.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Mary and Joseph, she’s ill—what are we to do?

Lavrenti tries to lead Grusha to the bench by the stove. Aniko waves her away in horror and points to the sack by the wall.

LAVRENTI escorting her to the wall: Sit down, sit down. I think it’s just weakness.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: As long as it’s not scarlet fever.

LAVRENTI: Then she’d have spots. I’m sure it’s only weakness. Don’t worry, Aniko. To Grusha: Do you feel better sitting?

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Is the child hers?

GRUSHA: It’s mine.

LAVRENTI: She’s on her way to her husband.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Really? Your meat’s getting cold. Lavrenti sits down and begins to eat. Cold food’s not good for you. At least the fat parts mustn’t get cold; you know your stomach’s your weak spot. To Grusha: If your husband’s not in town, where is he then?

LAVRENTI: She got married on the other side of the mountain, she says.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Oh, on the other side. She also sits down to eat.

GRUSHA: I think I’ll have to lie down somewhere, Lavrenti.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW goes on questioning her: If it’s consumption we’ll all get it. Has your husband a farm?
GRUSHA: He’s a soldier.
LAVRENTI: But he’s coming into a farm—a small farm from his father.
THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Isn’t he in the war? Why not?
GRUSHA wearily: Yes, he’s in the war.
THE SISTER-IN-LAW: Then why d’you want to go to the farm?
LAVRENTI: When he comes back from the war, he’ll come to his farm.
THE SISTER-IN-LAW: But you’re going there now?
LAVRENTI: Yes, to wait for him.
THE SISTER-IN-LAW shrilly: Sosso, the cake!
GRUSHA murmurs in fever: A farm—a soldier—waiting—sit down—eat.
THE SISTER-IN-LAW: That’s scarlet fever.
GRUSHA starting up: Yes, he has a farm!
LAVRENTI: I think it must be weakness, Aniko. Wouldn’t you like to go and look after the cake yourself, my dear?
THE SISTER-IN-LAW: But when will he come back if the war, as they say, has broken out again? Waddling away, shouting: Sosso! Where are you? Sosso!
LAVRENTI getting up quickly and going to Grusha: You’ll get a bed in a moment. She has a good heart. But only after supper.
GRUSHA holding out the child to him: Take it. He takes it, looking anxiously round.
LAVRENTI: But you can’t stay here long. You must realize she’s very pious.
Grusha collapses. Lavreni takes hold of her.

THE SINGER
The sister was too ill.
The cowardly brother had to give her shelter.
The autumn passed, the winter came.
The winter was long
The winter was short.
The people mustn’t know.
The rats mustn’t bite
The spring mustn’t come.
Grusha sits bent at the weaving loom in the scullery. She and the child, who squats on the floor, are wrapped in blankets.

Grusha sings while weaving:
Then the lover started to leave
Then his girl ran pleading after him
Pleading and crying, crying and pleading:
Dearest mine, dearest mine
As you now go into battle
As you now have to fight the enemy
Don't throw yourself into the front line
And don't push with the rear line.
In front is red fire
In the rear is red smoke.
Stay wisely in between
Keep near the standard bearer.
The first ones always die
The last ones are also hit
Those in the centre come home.

Michael, we must be clever. If we make ourselves really small, like cockroaches, our sister-in-law will forget we're in the house. Then we can stay here till the snow melts. And don't cry because of the cold. Being poor and cold as well puts people off.

Enter Lavrenti. He sits down beside Grusha.

Lavrenti: Why are you two sitting there muffled up like coachmen? Perhaps it's too cold in the room?

Grusha hastily removing her shawl: It's not too cold, Lavrenti.

Lavrenti: If it's too cold, you oughtn't to sit here with the child. Aniko would blame herself. Pause. I hope the priest didn't question you about the child.

Grusha: He did, but I didn't tell him anything.

Lavrenti: That's good. I wanted to talk to you about Aniko. She has a good heart—but she's very, very sensitive. People only have to mention our farm and she's worried. She takes everything to heart, you know. Our milkmaid once went to church with a hole in her stocking. Ever since then my
dear Aniko has always worn two pairs of stockings to church. It's hard to believe, but it's the old family in her. 

He listens. Are you sure there are no rats here? If so, you couldn't stay here. Sounds of drops from the roof. What's that dripping?

GRUSHA: Must be a barrel leaking.

LAVRENTI: Yes, it must be a barrel. Now you've already been here six months, haven't you? Was I talking about Aniko? Of course I didn't mention the Ironshirt. She has a weak heart. That's why she doesn't know you can't look for work. And that's why she made those remarks yesterday. They listen again to the melting snow. Can you believe it? She's worrying about your soldier. 'Suppose he comes back and doesn't find her!' she says, and lies awake. 'He can't come before the spring,' I tell her. The dear woman! The drops begin to fall faster. When d'you think he'll come? What's your idea? Grusha is silent. Not before the spring. That's what you think, too? Grusha is silent. I see you no longer believe he'll come back. Grusha does not answer. But when spring comes and the snow is melting on the passes you must leave here. Because then they can come and look for you. People are already talking about a child with an unmarried mother.

The beat of the falling drops has grown faster and steadier.

Grusha, the snow is melting on the roof and spring is here.

GRUSHA: Yes.

LAVRENTI eagerly: Let me tell you what we'll do. You need a place to go to. And because of the child—he sighs—you must have a husband, to stop people talking. I've made cautious inquiries about how we can get a husband for you, Grusha, and I've found one. I talked to a woman who has a son, just over the mountain, a little farm. She's willing.

GRUSHA: But I can't marry another man! I must wait for Simon Chachava.

LAVRENTI: Of course. That's all been considered. You don't need a man in bed, but a man on paper. And that's the very
man I've found. The son of the woman I spoke to is dying. Isn't that wonderful? He's just at his last gasp. And everything's as we have said: A man just over the mountain! And when you reached him he died, and so you're a widow. What do you say?

GRUSHA: I could do with a document with seals for Michael.

LAVRENTI: A seal makes all the difference. Without a seal even the Shah of Persia couldn't prove he is the Shah. And you'll have a roof over your head.

GRUSHA: How much does she want for it?

LAVRENTI: 400 piastres.

GRUSHA: Where will you find the money?

LAVRENTI guiltily: Aniko's milk money.

GRUSHA: No-one will know us over there. I'll do it.

LAVRENTI gets up: I'll tell the woman at once. Exit quickly.

GRUSHA: Michael, you cause a lot of trouble. I came by you as the pear tree comes by the sparrows. And because a Christian bends down and picks up a crust of bread so it won't go to waste. Michael, I ought to have walked away quickly on that Easter Sunday in Nukha. Now I'm the fool.

THE SINGER

The bridegroom was lying on his deathbed, when the bride arrived.

The bridegroom's mother was waiting at the door, bidding them hurry.

The bride brought along a child, the witness hid it during the wedding.

A space divided by a partition. On one side a bed. Under the mosquito net lies a very sick man. On the other side the mother-in-law rushes in pulling Grusha after her. They are followed by Lavrenti and the child.

THE MOTHER-IN-LAW: Quick! Quick! Or he'll die on us before the wedding. To Lavrenti: But I was never told she already had a child.

LAVRENTI: What's it matter? Pointing towards the dying man:

It's all the same to him in his condition.
The mother-in-law: Him? But I won't survive the shame. We're honest people. She begins to weep. My Yussup doesn't have to marry someone who already has a child.

Lavrenti: All right, I'll add another 200 piastres. You have it in writing that the farm will go to you; but she has the right to live here for two years.

The mother-in-law drying her tears: It will hardly cover the funeral expenses. I hope she will really lend me a hand with the work. And now what's happened to the monk? He must have slipped out by the kitchen window. When they get wind in the village that Yussup's end is near, they'll all be round our necks. Oh dear! I'll go and get the monk. But he mustn't see the child.

Lavrenti: I'll take care he doesn't see it. But why a monk? Why not a priest?

The mother-in-law: Oh, he's just as good. I made one mistake: I paid him half his fee in advance. Now he'll have gone to the tavern. I hope... She runs off.

Lavrenti: She saved on the priest, the wretch! She's hired a cheap monk.

Grusha: Send Simon Chachava to me if he turns up.

Lavrenti: Yes. Glancing at the sick man: Won't you have a look at him?

Grusha, taking Michael to her, shakes her head.

He's not moving an eyelid. I hope we aren't too late. They listen. On the opposite side enter neighbours, who look round and take up positions against the walls. They start muttering prayers. Enter the mother-in-law with the monk.

The mother-in-law surprised and angry, to the monk: Now we're for it! She bows to the guests. I must ask you to wait a few moments. My son's bride has just arrived from town and we've got to have an emergency wedding. She goes with the monk into the bedchamber. I knew you'd spread it about. To Grusha: The wedding can start at once. Here's the licence. I and the bride's brother—Lavrenti tries to hide in the background, after having quickly taken Michael away from Grusha.