

Excerpt from the book “Tales, Customs and Morals, being a description of the lands in which, with the help of God, the traveller and merchant Bartolomeo d’Aniti journeyed peacefully, narrated in detail and without embellishment by the aforementioned d’Aniti”.

As I said at the beginning of this book, I have spent a great part of my life travelling and I have journeyed in many lands, some at my own desire and some at the behest of the royal court. I so loved travelling, I could never remain at home for long. Admittedly, sometimes a great sadness would come over me whilst abroad and I would miss my homeland, but as soon as I returned, I would immediately feel drawn once again to foreign countries. Wherever I was, I acquired the local languages as best I could. At first I would learn foreign languages abroad from the local people; later, when I noticed that I easily picked up languages, I tried to master them from the outset, before setting off. I would advise all who love travelling to do the same, as knowledge of languages makes things easier for the traveller. For a start, an interpreter costs you an untold amount of time and, secondly, when you speak to a foreigner in his own language, it inspires trust and he will immediately bare his soul to you. I have noticed this everywhere. It appears that this is human nature... When I turned sixty-five, I decided to give up travelling. I was already elderly, I no longer had my old strength, and a fear had gradually crept up on me: what if death were to run into me by chance somewhere on the road and my corpse were to remain abroad? We humans always have an unconsidered desire to be buried in our own land, where our forebears lie. Besides, if I had died unexpectedly, I would have had to take with me the knowledge and experience that I had amassed during my extended travels, and the book that I am now writing would have remained unwritten. Do not think I hanker after fame and praise as many others do. No. I have endured so much danger and hardship in my travels, none of my youthful pride has remained, and fame and praise mean nothing to me. Today a simple, austere life is for me the only life. Writing this book is only an obligation, since I have always believed that if a person acquires some knowledge, he must leave it to someone, if he takes it with him it will be deemed a sin and he will be held to account for it in the next life. For these two reasons I abandoned travel. Perhaps I had even become tired and longed for rest, and this third reason was added to the first two. Whichever way it was, I left travelling behind and, to the astonishment of my relatives and those close to me, I sold my magnificent house, my friends’ favourite place, where after each journey we would gather together, often spending the nights in pleasant banter. I also sold my estates in the country. I sold all my land and houses. In exchange, in the south of the country, I bought a small sunny and wooded place by the sea and I built a house, which reinforced still further the opinion of my acquaintances, friends and relatives that I am an odd and obstinate man. The house really did prove to be unusual: not counting the spacious workroom, the small adjacent bedroom and the servants’ quarters on the lower floor, there are as many rooms here as countries I have been to. Each room brings a particular foreign country to life, and is decorated in keeping with the local custom and is adorned with local objects. For seven years now I have been living in this house with only three servants and two cooks. I almost never go beyond the courtyard, I sit and write in my workroom until midday, and at the bottom of the yard in the afternoon, I stroll by the stream in the meadow, I walk from room to room in the evening, I view the many souvenirs brought back from foreign lands, and I recall past events. They sometimes compare my life to that of a recluse. But of what kind of recluse can one speak when not a week passes without friends calling on me on two or three occasions. I usually receive my friends in one “country” or in another. I lay on a banquet for them to match. We sit, we converse, we while away the time with wine. Sometimes, when they ask me, I tell them stories of my travels. This is how I live and await God’s judgement...

Whoever wishes to write a travel book must certainly take into account people’s varied inclinations and their diverse tastes. Some are interested in the geography of countries: location, borders, climate, soil, the length of the rivers and the density of the forests; some love politics: the struggle for the throne, plots, intrigues; some

are enthusiastic about the art of construction: what type of houses do they build, do they fire bricks or not, what do they reinforce their castles with, what loads can their bridges bear; some want to hear of people's way of life: whom are they descended from, where did they originate from, when did they settle in this region, what customs and laws do they have, how do they perform their religious rites; some are entirely untroubled by scholarly research, they prefer amusing stories to everything else: various tales, mishaps, anecdotes. For this reason a travel book must be written such that, whatever the birth or character of the person who might open it, he will find within something interesting, noteworthy or amusing. I try to observe this particular rule: I describe in detail and precisely everything that I have seen with my own eyes or have heard from someone else, at the same time telling an entertaining tale here and there – sometimes funny, sometimes serious, sometimes sad. Today I shall tell the story of Antonio and David and, if the reader becomes sad and thoughtful like my guests last night, this will be a sign that I have done my task tolerably well.

Today it has been raining since morning and a cold autumn wind is blowing. At such times – when the wind blows and the monotonous rain beats at a slant against the windows and the roof – sad thoughts always overpower me and lead me so astray that I cannot escape. It was like this again yesterday. All day long it rained non-stop and I could not put my heart into my work. I sat at my writing desk to no avail, I tried in vain to take up my writing from where I had broken off. For a long time I sat looking steadily out of the window. A thick mist lay on the sea and it rained so wearisomely, you might have thought it was never going to stop. Small puddles formed here and there in the courtyard. The last leaves were falling from the trees. All around an oppressive bleakness had settled, which soaked every object. Since I sensed that I could make no headway with my task, I abandoned my work and began to pace to and fro in the rooms. A groundless sadness weighed down on my heart, and I could not relax in one place. When I had gone round almost all the “countries” and in the end had entered that room called “Colchis”, in my body the sadness gradually precipitated out and congealed, and suddenly David appeared before my mind's eye. Then I sat down by the fireplace, began to stare at the cold ashes, and surrendered to my invasive thoughts...

At noon my guests came to visit and my sadness vanished. I have many friends, thank God, and these are people who, once they have made plans to visit, would not be dissuaded by any kind of weather. As I said, they visited me at noon. A path as straight as a die heads from my courtyard gate towards a tree-lined avenue, and the servants had noticed the carriage from afar. Although all of them had been here before, my guests wished to look over the house once more. I showed them round myself. I took them into each room, finally leading them into “Colchis” and I gave them their supper there. My friends like “Colchis” very much, they always inspect the objects there with delight and each time they see them they have new questions for me. With pleasure I satisfy their curiosity, I give full answers to all their queries, I explain in detail the purpose of this or that object and at the same time I routinely tell them their Georgian names which, when I say them aloud, so it seems to me, emit a bittersweet fragrance. Yesterday they had an especially good look around and they praised a silver belt and dagger a lot, and this pleased me very much for it had once belonged to David. As evening approached, we lit the fire, pulled up our low three-legged chairs and sat down round the low table. A servant brought in supper: beans in a clay pot, hot maize bread, freshly-made cheese, green herbs and pitchers of wine. For a time we enjoyed our supper, and our conversation was constantly changing from one subject to another, as usually happens when a close circle of friends are relaxing. Then they asked me to tell them a tale. I stood up and told them the story of Antonio and David. When I reached the end, silence descended and for a long time nothing broke this silence except the patter of the rain. Dejection had come and settled on my guests, and they gave themselves over to thought. In the end, the wine again loosened our sealed lips. They left at midnight. I begged them earnestly to stay, but they would not heed me, they were tipsy when they got into their carriage and set off. I saw them off as far as the gate, then I came back, again entered the room where we had spent the evening, sat down by the fireplace and fixed my gaze on the dying embers. My

thoughts were flitting through distant Colchis, stirring up my sad recollections even more.

Today the autumn wind is blowing once more, and again it is raining incessantly, wearisomely. For this reason I have decided for the time being to abandon my description of the Ethiopians' national costume, and in its stead to tell you the adventure of Antonio and David.

## ANTONIO

It was like this. It happened forty years ago. I was thirty-two at the time, and Antonio – may God have mercy on his immaculate soul! – was five years my elder. One day a high official at the royal court, who at the time oversaw matters regarding travel to foreign countries, summoned me to the palace and told me that I was to go to Colchis together with seventeen others. That region which is known to us by the name of “Colchis” and which, as the ancient authors tell us, once was a strong and united state, had by that time broken up into many small principalities. The ruling princes, who out of pride sometimes also called themselves kings, were engaged in endless feuds and rivalry with each other, on account of which they were unable to adequately resist their foreign enemies. And now one such king-prince had sent a diplomatic mission to our state and had asked for help in the uneven struggle his people were waging against the Muslims in the defence of their freedom and their Christian faith. This ruling prince, in particular, was asking for a loan to hire a mercenary army from the nomadic highland tribes, as well as craftsmen, especially artisans skilled in weapon-making and working ore, and priests who by their preaching and example would consolidate the Christian faith among the local population. At the palace they reached the decision that, before deciding to grant a loan, they would first study that country well. With pleasure they committed to sending the craftsmen and the priests, adding on their part a merchant, and their choice fell on me. By that time I had already visited several countries and was very well versed in trade, and it was no surprise that they decided to send me in particular. Politics, as we know, does not recognise selflessness and unalloyed philanthropy. For the State, its own advantage is paramount, and the basic aim of our journey was to establish what benefit would accrue to our country if we were to provide assistance to that ruling prince. It was with pleasure that I agreed to go, for to travel to that country which is mentioned with such delight by the ancient authors had long been my desire, and I asked when we were to set off. The official could not tell me an exact time (but it is possible that he was concealing it from me, as he was concealing from me the identities of my fellow travellers for the time being), he only let me know that I had six months at my disposal, after six months I should be in a position to embark on whatever day he told me.

Six months was sufficient time. To speak frankly, I needed no time whatsoever for what is customarily called preparation. I was a traveller in heart and soul and, if you warned me in the morning that I was to depart for a distant land, I would have everything ready by that afternoon. By preparation I had something else in mind, and I needed those six months to collect information about that country for which I was to depart so as to lose no time there on what I could have learnt here. Before setting off, there is no doubt they would pass information on to us at the royal court and give us advice and guidance, but this information is collected by spies and would be chiefly of a political and military character: exact, reliable and authentic, it is true, but short-lived and mutable, more appropriate to such circumstances that are one way today but might turn out to be very different tomorrow. I needed more fundamental information: I wanted to understand the nature of the people, their character, their customs and laws, in a word, what has formed over centuries and endures (or is long-standing at worst).

As soon as I left the palace I immediately set about putting my plan into action. At that time two Georgian men were working at the palace, both occupying very senior posts, which in itself is testimony to their people's honour. I decided to get to know these men and to this end I asked to visit them, while letting them know the purpose of my call. To my surprise, both declined firmly but politely. I was a well-regarded man at the palace on numerous grounds, including my distinguished family, my ancestry, my grandfather's and especially my father's great services to the royal court, as well as my widely known travels, and for these reasons their refusal surprised me. When I shared my astonishment with several of my friends who knew these men well, they laughed and told me that I should not have let them know in advance the reason for my visit. Apparently these men were constantly taking care lest their foreign origins should catch anyone's eye unnecessarily, their families spoke in our language and they behaved as if they no longer knew their own. They conducted themselves in that way so that their origins would not be open to exploitation and so as not to lose their posts should any undesirable political situation develop at the court. That a salaried man cares for his position is entirely natural and will not be held against anyone, but to deny one's national origin because of this is, in my opinion, unseemly conduct that neither God nor man can condone. But then I did yet not know what I was to learn in my travels, in particular, that among these people some kind of incomprehensible power holds in its fist such contrary qualities as self-sacrifice and treachery, love and hatred, courage and cowardice, good and evil. I spoke in detail of this above where I described the customs and morals of Colchis and Iberia, and recalling these two high officials now is only to reinforce the view I expressed there with a further example. These two men are one pole of this view, while the opposite pole is that small stunted coffin-maker whom I came to know after this. An acquaintance of mine showed me the way to his place when he heard that I was searching for a Georgian who remembered his country and who knew his native language. The coffin-maker had set up his workshop in a large, semi-dark cellar in the heart of the city. As soon as I crossed the threshold, the coffin-maker – a slim, bald, long-nosed man with a long moustache – came over quickly to meet me. "Please enter, sir. You are welcome to my abode," he said to me, spreading both hands and bowing deferentially, then before I could manage to say anything and without pausing for breath, he started to praise his wares. "The very best material", he asserted, tapping a finger on the coffins to support his words, "reliable, an heirloom." When I interrupted him saying that I needed no coffin, his face suddenly changed, the light went out in his eyes, he became sad and he started to complain that no one was dying anymore, that customers had become very hard to find, that God had given up entirely on our city, that for so long now there had not been even mention of an epidemic, that people were multiplying dangerously and if it was to continue like this there would soon be no standing room left on the land... I interrupted him again and told him that this did not interest me, that I wanted to hear news of his country and, if he knew anything, to tell it to me. He immediately fell silent on hearing this, as if lost for words, glancing strangely at me and looking me in the eye for an instant. Then he exploded with feeling: "My country...", but was unable to continue, having burst into tears. He wept, beating himself on the chest and occasionally muttering "my country" or "my beloved homeland" from the heart. I was surprised at what might be keeping him here if he loved his country so much. I understood that later, when I got to know him well: he had arrived when he was young ("I had no sense then," he told me), later he married a local woman and stayed on and on. "If just one small epidemic were to break out," he once wistfully confessed to me, his face at the time happy and kind, "I could sell off all my coffins, lay my hands on the money for the journey, and steal away from my family. I am already getting old," he explained to me at the same time, "I want to be buried in my native soil, I would prefer one handful of my native soil to my own family." At the outset I could understand nothing of this man, but eventually, when I had become quite close to him and had seen into his heart, I realised many things. The main thing is that I learned to extract some true and genuine threads from his tangled emotions. In the end I became sufficiently skilled to glean some useful pieces of information about his revered homeland, although it must be said that this was an extremely difficult task, because, as soon as we started to talk on the subject, he would immediately begin to beat his chest with

his clenched fists and he would content himself with such general words as “soil”, “spring”, “meadow”, “forefathers”, “bones” and others that are common to all countries and all homelands. Those several insignificant pieces of information that he passed on were clearly of no great use to me, but that man was beneficial to me in another way: I learned the language from him. In this he truly did display great craftsmanship and sharp-wittedness. He invented some special rules, the likes of which I have not read in books, nor heard from anyone, and he was an excellent teacher. I paid him good money in exchange. I do not know whether this money was sufficient or not for him to get away from his family and to leave for the homeland that had become the object of his desire or, if it did suffice, whether or not he dared to take this dangerous and, in my opinion, senseless step. In any case, I never saw this man afterwards, nor did I hear anything of his whereabouts.