

Part 1  
In the Village

Chapter 1  
A Fugitive Came

It was still pitch dark; in one place only, on the horizon, the sky appeared to have lightened slightly. The rain had only recently stopped, the drops were noiselessly gliding down from one leaf to the next and the fugitive – shaken, drenched, alert to the slightest noise – was listening to this exhausted rustle. He could cope with all kinds of noise, except for the clatter of hoofs. His pursuer was constantly appearing to him as a hallucination and, sapped of his strength, he gripped the wet branches tightly with both hands. Up to now no one had noticed him, holding his breath like that, clutching the tree; but now, at dawn, when it had become very cold and the troubled fugitive had begun to get restless, his blackened, moving silhouette clearly stood out in that fractured darkness. He desperately wanted to sleep; he barely managed to keep his heavy head upright. It was a good thing that he was at least seated: he was resting his tired, scratched feet after such a steep slope. He had climbed a tree to where dogs could not reach him, although he had not actually heard any barking. He felt slightly invigorated and there and then became hungry. He thrust his frozen fingers into his clothes and extracted a crust of bread. Slowly, unhurriedly he regained his strength. This way he prolonged his pleasure, but it was a tiny piece of bread and he couldn't help devouring it in a hurry. His craving increased, he stared at the village where he had to find food. The houses took on a slightly more definite shape, he again looked over his surroundings and an odd fear seized him: it was not the pursuit that he feared, it was something else entirely. Still, how astonishingly the dawn was breaking! Had he ever seen such odd, sharply delineated leaves, or seen such a solid palisade that was so clearly gathering its strength in that half-light... How the trees came floating from afar, how unhurriedly the rocks were emerging from the earth, had ever he seen such a dangerous breeze anywhere as was typical of the dawn, and how odd and troubling was the way the pallid shadows that followed in the wake of the breeze eked out an existence on earth...

He could no longer stay where he was; he jumped down from the tree and headed off towards a nearby house. He stopped by the gate and, his head held high, his nostrils flared, he smelt the air suspiciously. He set foot in the yard and carefully made a detour around a stable. Then he entered a small, stone building and so strangely muted did the place appear that he felt dizzy and sat down right there, directly on the floor. When he got his breath back, he looked this way and that. It was not so cold here, only they had placed dark-coloured panes of glass in the windows and it was strangely dark.

If he was very frightened, frozen needles would attack him below the elbow and on the ribs and it happened to him like this now, as if right there in the darkness someone was breathing. At first he thought it might be he himself, but after a time, when he heaved a tired sigh and for an instant fell silent, he could again hear the breathing. Fear completely gripped him, he rubbed his eyes and shouted:

“Who are you?”

“It’s me, me.”

It was a calm, soothing voice; still he dragged himself as far as the wall and leaned against it with his back. He was so tense, as if he wished to break through this solid wall; and although nothing came of it, he was still emboldened and he felt a kind of strength. This strength was not enough for him to get to his feet, but it was enough for questioning:

“You are...”

“The owner of this house.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“You’re asking me?”

The fugitive felt so ashamed, he even calmed down a little. The man was conversing with him calmly and quietly, and this touched the heart of the refuge seeker:

“I...,” the fugitive put his hand on his chest, “I have done a great wrong to come in here, but...”

“It doesn’t matter. You were probably cold.”

“Yes, sir, I was very cold and...”

“Yes, I know, I believe it.”

“You know, I... On the whole, I... I have done wrong...”

“Fine, fine,” the man spoke kindly, “Fine, calm down.”

Joy coursed through the veins of the refuge seeker, it intoxicated him and his head fell onto his shoulder. For a time he sat leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. Then he again became agitated. He wanted to hear something more, something essential, so as to finally calm down, and he crawled out towards where the voice could be heard from. His knees rubbed against the stone floor and that gravel-like

sound was beating weakly against the thick walls, but later, when silence fell, the fugitive placed the palm of his hand on the man’s knee, looked up at him and pleaded:

“I shouldn’t be afraid of anything?”

The man was watching him thoughtfully, then he placed his hand on his head and said to him:

“Don’t be afraid of anything.”

And suddenly the fugitive fell face down and clawed at the floor with his fingers. His hands and shoulders began to shake, and his back began to tremble. He was forcing back his tears, he wiped the floor with his face, he placed his cheek on it, he was tensing every muscle, he was sobbing: this was liberation, the man was waiting patiently for the fugitive to calm down. He turned towards the wall and lit a candle. When he turned back, the fugitive was blinking his eyes and was staring at the candle with a dirty face.

"I'll be right back," said the man to him, "You're probably hungry."

"Yes, I'm very hungry," the fugitive nodded his head without taking his eyes off him. Before the man returned, the fugitive brought his frozen fingers close to the candle and was astonished. He saw amazingly clean fingers of a beautiful colour. Then he brought his cheek and forehead close to it. He was warmed up a little and his appetite had made him feel like stretching, he sat down by the wall and made his neck joints crack. He did not notice the man approaching, and he started when he heard his voice:

"Ah!"

"Here you are. I've brought it."

"What's... What's that..."

"It's bread and wine."

"Oh...", the fugitive reached out for the bread. "Oh, how warm it is," and once again he looked at him leadingly.

"Eat up, it's yours."

For a time the fugitive ate heartily and with a good appetite, then he grasped the flagon:

"May I drink it?"

"Please do."

"To your health," said the fugitive and again his heart was touched. "To your health, I've yet never met anyone the likes of you..."

"To your health, go on, drink up."

"To all people like you," the fugitive was looking at him pleadingly. "Do you have children?"

"I do."

"How many?"

"Two."

"Girls or boys?"

"Boys."

"To their health too," said the fugitive and he put the bowl to his lips. "Oh, what wine, what are they called?"

"Domenic and Gvegve."

"What odd names," the fugitive was amazed, "Domenic and..."

"Gvegve."

"Ah, how odd," the fugitive began to think and silently repeated it, "Domenic... and Gvegve... Domenic and..."

## CHAPTER 2

### GVEGVE

"Don't keep turning it for so long," said Bibo, the first servant. "That's how he likes it."

“But it must be grilled a little, at the very least.” “That’s enough, I say. Don’t turn it.”

The lame one waved a rabbit about, and went over towards the light. A narrow beam was descending from the roof and it made the dust particles gleam. It was to this illuminated column that he went limping, and pointed the splayed rabbit upwards towards the beam.

“Enough, you say?”

“Have you gone deaf or what?” Bibo thundered. “Put it down on the table and scarper.”

“Right away, right away,” the lame one took fright. “Is there anything else?” “Nothing, go out and stand by the door. You have chilled the watermelon, haven’t you?” “Of course.”

“Scram, scram, be off...”

The lame one had just wiped his fingers on his sleeve when suddenly an unbearable pain stabbed him in the face. Gvegve had entered the room and the door on the inside had hit the lame one in the face. The latter put his hands over his face and squatted down, he was bleeding from his nose, tears of bitterness welled up in his eyes and, afraid, he stared down at the floor, at the dark spots rolling away. Later, however, when he had stopped the bleeding, he threw his head back.

“I’m hungry,” said Gvegve.

“There you are, sir,” Bibo pointed at the table.

“I’ll leave, if I may,” requested the lame one with his head raised. “Where are you going?” Gvegve growled at him.

“To wash my face.”

“Hey, this is no time for washing faces...” And he suddenly lost his temper: “What is it you must wash, damn you and your master’s mother!”

The lame one looked into Gvegve’s eyes, blood had been dripping onto his shirt front; he looked at him for quite some time and, unexpectedly, his voice was distinctly frosty:

“Your father is my master.”

Bibo hunched. It seemed to him that they would smash the lame one’s head against the table, but Gvegve himself was frightened:

“No, no, I wasn’t thinking, I just said it... I just said it, simply, you do under-stand...”

The lame one stared up at the ceiling.

“It slipped out without thinking, unexpectedly... You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“No, who should I tell.”

“Good, good; go now and wash your hands and face, was it very painful?” “No.”

“Go, go, only... don’t let it slip out to anyone, understood?” “No, no.”

“Wait a minute! If you want, I’ll give you a little meat to eat.” “What use is it to me, it’s raw,” the lame one was emboldened.

“What’s that? He said it’s raw?” Gvege was amazed and he looked nastily at Bibo. “Won’t you roast it?”

“Of course, you don’t say, of course,” Bibo gasped. “As you like it, just so...” Gvege took a deep bite and screwed up his eyes. Then his face lit up: “It was good, what’s the problem...” He propped his chin against his chest and laughed quietly to himself into his collar.

“What did you say? It’s raw? Is this raw? Hey, look, what did he say? ‘It’s raw, he said’. Did you hear, Bibo?”

“Hey!”

“Go, go, pour water over your face,” and he followed him with his eye. When he had closed the door, he sat down at the table, he bent towards a plate. He chewed the meat with relish, greedily, he nibbled at the bones, and he gradually stood up straight. Then he leaned against the back of his chair, unbent his knee and rested a large chunk of watermelon like a drinking horn on his lips. Now he, too, like the lame one, looked up at the ceiling and sucked the cool, sugared watermelon, a bright red line ran down his chin, and Bibo, salivating, stubbornly stared down at the floor.

Gvege wiped his chin and let his eyelids droop. He took pleasure in dozing off while still looking severe.

“Your father has given shelter to some fugitive or other.”

Gvege opened his eyes. For a time he stared at him inanely, then he suddenly got angry:

“When?”

“Today.”

“Who’s the outcast?” “I don’t know...”

“He’s all right by me! We’ll have one more freeloader... Still, who is he, what kind of man is he?”

“I know nothing.”

“Damn you... Where is he now?” “He’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping?”

“They apparently took something from him,” he blushed... But suddenly he lost his colour. He had had his fill. He could barely stand up; stupefied, he went out into the yard, he sprawled face down on some rush matting at the foot of an apple tree and fell asleep.

It was snowing when Gvege was born. The midwife was surprized at one thing: “I have never seen it happen that a child didn’t cry when being born,” and she went off to the next village. Gvege lay in his cradle and was breathing very fast and deeply. Nothing troubled him. If he wasn’t asleep he had his eyes wide open, if he was sleeping he was absolutely great. He was a very healthy child, but he was late in learning to walk. He started to talk

when he was three years old. Up to then he only said “ghgh, ghgh”, and that only when he was hungry. He turned out to be small in size, but from the beginning he had long, strong hands. He was always watching the servants and how they were working. He was especially glad when they felled a big tree. Two servants would go to the tree, shower it with axe blows and Gvegve was overcome by expectation. Then the servants would push hard against the tree and the diligent Gvegve took great pleasure in hearing first the screeching, then the hurrying whoosh coming from above. He would rush to the felled tree and would walk about on it. When he turned six years of age he found a rusty knife. With the knife he used to hack trees and slash the wood. When he came across watermelons in the garden he would look this way and that and, if there was no one about, he would thrust his knife in up to the hilt.

He didn't like celebrations. The noise, the loud pleading and the shouts frightened him. He simply didn't enjoy seeing the villagers together. They did have some strange celebrations in their village, they pleaded with Nature for everything: for rain, for sun and for fertility. With their heads held high towards the sky, they roared their request for all of these, and Gvegve used to go into the forest. He would throw a stone and he would gouge out with his knife whatever tree it hit.

He was eight years of age when his younger brother was born. After this, his heart was no longer at home. The women bustled over the screaming baby and such attention annoyed him. Without further ado he would go for a swim in the lake at the edge of the village. He wasn't a fast swimmer, but on the other hand he could cope with being in the water the longest.

He was twelve years old when his mother died. Women dressed in black were tearing at their hair, were clawing at their cheeks, and were shrieking. His father was also dressed in black and plunged into the deepest thoughts and standing listlessly by the wall. His younger brother was shedding tears. Gvegve tried a lot, but he still couldn't cry.

He was very deferential to his father, but he didn't love him even in the slightest. At first he was somehow afraid, not once did he look his father in the eye, but rather regarded him furtively. His father was only ever once angry with him. Gvegve would have been fourteen years of age when his father came across his younger brother having dropped unexpectedly in a clump of ferns. The child was trembling violently all over, and father picked him up, turned his face up, and looked into his eyes.

“Father, Daddy, Father,” the trembling child was calling, “Gvegve killed a dog.” “Which dog?”

“The brown one, the stray...” “Why?”

“I don't know, he killed him... Father, tell me, tell me please, why did he kill him...”

That dog prowled about from door to door and servants fed it bread. He was a funny dog, he would stand on his hind legs and beg for food like that. He was afraid of no one, except Gvegve. The latter wouldn't miss an opportunity to kick him in the sides and, once, when he was bathing together with his brother, he noticed the dog asleep in the shade, he sneaked up on it, he raised a heavy rock with difficulty and dropped it on the dog. The younger brother, lying in the sun, saw nothing, but he jumped up when he heard the yelping, he ran over and saw the dog with his paws strangely crossed and his head crushed and Gvegve, his brother, with blood smeared on his kneecaps and an evil smile playing on his lips.

"Where is he?" His father's face darkened. "There, at the bathing spot."

Gvegve didn't notice his father's arrival. He was wielding a knife and, lost in thought, he was stabbing the dog. Then he felt such a pain in his wrist that he was temporarily blinded; Father picked him up, turned him round and slapped him hard. Gvegve's knees bent and the dog collapsed. Father picked up the knife, waved it about and threw it into the water, then he picked up Gvegve, went into the lake and washed off the blood. Gvegve opened his eyes and then rapidly closed them, hoping not to be slapped again. Father took his sons home, and the next day he awoke Gvegve before daybreak and ordered him to go to the cornfield. First he made him wash his hands and face, he gave him breakfast, then he thrust a rope into his hands and they set off for the cornfield. Father went in front and Gvegve, in a fit of yawning, followed behind. Dawn was breaking. The coolness of the dawn tugged pleasantly at the body, cocks were crowing, servants doffed their hats to Father on the road, and when he entered the big cornfield, he turned to Gvegve and looked him in the eye for some time, then he made a sign to follow him and he set about hoeing. The corn was still low, reaching up to Father's chest. Gvegve handled the hoe clumsily, although he did try very hard. By midday blisters had swelled up on his fingers and on the palms of his hands, the pain distorted his face; Father looked at him and ordered him to sit in the shade; Father continued hoe-ing. Gvegve sat and sat, he got bored and right there, at his feet, he reached out for a fluttering butterfly, but immediately he changed his mind and looked fearfully at his father. He was standing with his back turned and was working unhurriedly, without a break. Father worked every day and all were surprised that he was so rich and wondered what compelled him, exhausted, to return home in the evenings when the lengthened shadows of the houses and trees got noticeably lighter. Three seasons of the year passed working like this, and in winter, when the pure snow would be trampled down in an ugly manner on the village streets, and in the mountains it sparkled softly in the sun, Father sat by the round stove and, with his eyes screwed up, he would think for a long time. The servants would often visit Fa-

ther, some asked for advice, sometimes they would ask him this, sometimes that, from time to time they would confess to crimes and, if they had fallen on hard times, they would ask for flour in a low voice, and there was no one in the whole village who was ungrateful to father.

The next day Father took Gvegve with him, but he ordered him to sit in the shade as his palms and fingers were chafed. On the fifth day, when the places that were paining Gvegve had grown hard, he ordered him to take a hoe and after that he followed him every day to work. Gvegve quickly became accustomed to work, but it angered him that his father's servants and he had to work the same. Gvegve spent several years constantly in the cornfield and several times, when he was alone, he decided to announce to his father that he had worked enough, for once raising that stone he had done a thousand times more work to redeem himself, and he now had enough of work, especially since his younger brother still hadn't lifted a finger. Gvegve would search for the necessary words, he drew up several plans for how to say all this to his father and when, overjoyed, he had repeated the best sentences a thousand times in his heart, they would scatter in his mind on seeing Father and he would handle his hoe diligently. It meant nothing that he had to work alone, but now and then his younger brother, bored out of his mind, would drop in to see him in the cornfield and would lie in the shade. Salty sweat would fall from Gvegve's forehead, it would flow down into his eyes, it would drop from his cheeks onto the ground, and his younger brother lay in the shade, yawned from boredom and didn't know how to amuse himself.

Gvegve enjoyed mowing more than any other work. With a mixture of pleasure and anger he waved his gleaming scythe in the sun and stubbornly moved forward, and to the left long scythed grass remained. If no one was looking at him, he would wave his hands more angrily and wheeze more loudly, and later, exhausted, he would look back proudly.

Father liked the battle against the stony soil. He would split rocks buried in the soil, he would collect the fragments and later, together with Gvegve, he would take them out on a dray cart. This work wasn't too bad, the stones fell heavily into the ravine, but the hoeing, the hoeing...

The only things that really gladdened Gvegve were the roasted rabbit and chilled watermelon – or watermelon jam – which waited for him in the evening. That's how it was, Gvegve didn't do anything deliberately harmful, but he began to loathe his younger brother Domenic like the plague.



