

FROM THE WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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APRICOT JAM

& OTHER STORIES



• THE CANONS

APRICOT JAM

1

... MY MIND IS all awlirl right now, and if some of the things I say don't seem quite right I want you to keep reading, you won't be wasting your time. I've heard that you're a famous writer. I got a little book of your articles out of the library. (I've been to school—the one in our village.) I had no time to read the whole book, but I did read a piece of it. You say that the foundation of happiness is our collectivized agriculture and that now even the most miserable peasant is riding around on his own bicycle. You say also that heroism is becoming a part of our everyday lives and that the purpose and meaning of life is labor in a communist society. To that I reply that there is queer small substance to this heroism and this labor because it comes from driving people like us nigh to we drop. I don't know where you saw all the things you write about. You also say a lot about other countries and how bad things are there and how often you noticed people looking at you with envy: Look, there's the Russian. Well, I'm also a Russian and I recommend me to you. My name is Fedya (Fyodor Ivanovich, if you like), and I want to tell you about myself.

As long as anyone can remember, our family lived in the village of Lebyazhy Usad in Kursk Province. But then they put an end to the way we thought to live. They called us kulaks because we had a house with a galvanized iron roof and four horses, three cows, and a fine orchard by the house. The first thing in the orchard was a spreading apricot tree, and there would be heaps of apricots on it every year. My younger brothers and I would climb all over that tree. Apricots were our most favorite fruit, and I never ever tasted any as good as ours. In the summer kitchen in the yard my mother would make us apricot jam, and my brothers and I just couldn't get enough of that sweet foam. Before they deported us as kulaks, they tried to make us tell them where we had hidden our goods. Otherwise, they said, we'll chop down your apricot tree. And they chopped it down.

They took our whole family and a few others besides to Belgorod in carts. There they shoved us into a church they had confiscated for a prison, and they brought people there from a lot of other villages. There was no room to lie down on the floor, and they didn't give us anything to eat, though a few folks had brought a bit of food with them. At night a train pulled into the station, and there was a deal of heaving and shoving while we were aboarding it, with guards rushing here and there and lanterns flickering. My father told me: "You, at least, can make a run for it." And I did manage to slip away through the huge crowd. The rest of my family went on into the taiga, where they were left to live as best they could, and I never heard from them again.

For me began a life filled with one pain atop the other. Where was I to go now? I couldn't go back to the village, and though this town wasn't small, there was no place for me here, and how could I ever hide out in it? Who would give me shelter in their house and risk grievous troubles? Though I was near to full grown, I did find a sojourning among a band of street kids—orphans and runaways. They had their own secret dwellings in abandoned houses and barns and sewer manholes. The police wouldn't

bother with these ragged, barefoot kids because they had nowhere to put them and no means to feed them all. They were all dirty, smudgy-faced, and dressed in tatters. They would go abegging from house to house. But the quicker ones would band together, and the crowd of them would run to the market, tip over the trays, and jostle the sellers so that a few of them could pick up some goods. Another might slit a woman's purse, and another grab someone's wallet right out of his hand and disappear in a flash. Or they might rush into a dining hall, running among the tables and spitting in people's plates. Some of the people didn't manage to cover their plates. Others would stop eating. And that's all these raggedy kids needed—they'd polish off whatever they could grab. They would also rob people at the railway station, and they could warm themselves by the kettles of asphalt when the streets were being paved. But I stood out for being too healthy, not ragged enough, and I wasn't a kid anymore. I could have become the boss of the whole lot, sitting in a cozy spot and sending the others out to bring back some loot, but my heart's too soft for that.

Before long, a task force from the GPU picked me out of the gang and took me to prison. At first I didn't bewray my design—they'd picked me up, and that was that, so I spun them a few stories, but then they threatened to lock me away in a solitary cell and let me rot. I could see it was no good trying to deny it—lying is also an art and one I had not mastered, so I confessed: I was the son of a kulak. They kept me there until the beginning of winter. Then they changed their minds: Maybe they should send me away to my family, but then how could they find that family of mine they'd destroyed? I expect there was a great confusion in their paperwork. And so it was: I was to go to the town of Dergachi near Kharkov and present the local authorities with my certificate of release. The GPU people never asked how I, with ne'er a kopek to my name, was to make my way there, and all they did was make me sign a paper not to say a word to anyone about what I'd seen and heard during these months

in a GPU prison, else they would put me back in jail with no investigation and no trial.

I went out of the prison gate without a clue of what to do. Where now could I take my miserable life? How to get to Dergachi? Or should I just flee in all haste, farther away this time? Then two women came up to me from a little street forenests the prison where they must have been keeping watch: Had the GPU just let me go? They had, I replied. Had I seen such-and-such a man? He wasn't in our cell, I said, though it was more than a full with others. Then the older woman, the mother-in-law, asked if I was hungry. Living ahungered has become a habit, I said. They took me home with them. It was a damp little place in a cellar. The older woman whispered to her daughter-in-law, and she left, while the mother-in-law set about cooking three potatoes for me. I tried to refuse: "They're probably the last ones you've got." "Feeding a prisoner is the right thing to do," she said. She also put a little bottle of hemp oil on the table for me. And I have to say that I fell on those potatoes like a hungry wolf. The older woman said, "We may not have much, but at least we're not in prison, and feeding one like you is God's own command. Someday you may be able to feed one of ours." Then the young woman came back and gave me a ruble bill and two rubles in change. It's for your trip, she said, but it's all we could collect. I didn't want to take it, but the older woman shoved it in my pocket.

When I saw the food at the snack bar in the railway station my whole body ached. The minute I started eating I couldn't stop. And so I spent all the money on food. It was no matter, though—there wasn't enough for the trip anyway. That night I squeezed into the train before they could check for my ticket, but a few stations later, the ticket collector found me. Being without a ticket, I showed him my certificate of release from the GPU. He and the conductor looked at each other, and the conductor took me into his tiny room. "Any lice on you?" "Is there a prisoner who doesn't have

lice?” I said. The conductor told me to crawl under a bench and to let him know when to wake me.

Dergachi left me with no good impression, but it was not my lot to live there. I reported to the local soviet, and there they registered me and told me to go immediately to the military enlistment office, though I wasn't yet of draft age. A doctor gave me a quick look-over and then handed me a little cardboard booklet with a gray stamp and the letters “T/O” on it. That meant “Logistical Support Forces.” They sent me to another building, and sitting there was a man from the construction office of the Kharkov Locomotive Works. I told him that all our good clothes were taken away when my family was deported. All I had were some castoffs—a worn-out jacket and some homemade pants with the soles of my boots so cracked that I would soon be walking barefoot. He told me that this was no cause for evadement. “When you're serving on logistical support, they'll give you some decent used clothes and boots as well.”

I pondered it a time. It seemed easy enough: all I had to do was to prove my age, and then my sufferings would be ended. But now they had me trapped, no one would listen to me and they sent me away. They had put up some barracks for the logistical support troops near the Locomotive Works. The walls were two layers of planks with sawdust between them. The sawdust would drop out from the gaps between the planks or where a knot had fallen out, and the wind blew through the barracks. The mattresses were filled with wood shavings and the little pillows they gave us were stuffed with straw. Each barracks held what they called a platoon of the support forces. Four thousand people or more had been collected here, and that was what they called a regiment. There was ne'er a bathhouse or laundry, and no one was given any uniform. They marched us off to work straightaway. What they told us in the support force for the Locomotive Works was: “You keep going till you drop.” We dug foundation pits for three repair shops. For some reason they were built almost

entirely underground so that when they were finished you could see naught but the roofs. We carried the earth in barrows, one man at each end, and walked along the whole line like a living conveyor belt. We'd march along the foundation pit, one pair after another, and as we went, each digger would toss on a spadeful of earth. A whole row of diggers would throw so much earth on your barrow that it was too heavy to carry. Still, we had to sweat and strain and learn to live with it. They were digging twenty-four hours a day so that the earth wouldn't freeze overnight, and sometimes they made people work longer shifts. It was like being in the army: reveille, lights-out, form up for work, and they'd blow a bugle just like they did in the army. The mess hall held 600 people, but they served the thousand free employees first and the 4000 in the support force later. There was no breakfast in the morning, and lunchtime didn't come until near to supper. They'd herd off our group for lunch and some other group would be eating, so we'd stand outside the mess hall stamping our feet to keep them from freezing, sometimes in a blizzard, and all this for a bit of lukewarm soup. When you came back from working the cold and into the barracks, the lice would all come right lively and we'd spend some time squashing them. And there was not a scrap of industriosity left in our lives. A fellow who wasn't used to this would fall to pieces very quickly.

Apart from the torment of the work, there were the political officers always harping on how we mustn't slacken off. In the evening, or sometimes on our day off, they'd come to the platoon and start filling our heads with all sorts of ideological gas to make us understand the essence of productive labor so that we would finish the Five-Year Plan in four years. The head of all these political officers was the commissar of the work camp, Mamaev, a fellow who wore a badge with the words "Member of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee" and three bars on his collar tabs.

There were also some sons of NEP-men among the workers. They had arrived with big suitcases and were warmly dressed and well seen with

food parcels from home. Then there were some proper criminals, but the court had deprived them of their voting rights. There were also some local folk, and they would be let home on the days off. But most of us were sons of kulaks, almost all of us dressed in rags after we'd worn out our clothes, though the bosses seemed to pay no heed to this. There were holes through the elbows of my shirt and my jacket, one knee had been torn in my pants, and the toes of my boots were so worn that you could see my foot wraps, such was the beggar I was.

Because of that tormenting life I broke out in boils, though the camp doctor just painted them with iodine and sent me back to work. I began to weaken and was already beginning not to care what would happen to me, my own body having become bereft of feelings, as if it belonged to someone else. My hair grew out, I stopped shaving.

Suddenly one evening the bugle called us out to form up. We all formed ranks on the snowy field behind the barracks. The commissar came up with his pistol on his hip, along with a few political officers and a clerk with a paper. The commissar roared out a fearsome speech telling about what was going on in the country and saying that from now on there would be no mercy for those shirking work and there would even be trials and executions. Then he began moving down the ranks pointing at people here and there while the clerk took down the man's name, company, and platoon. He also pointed at me: "This man as well." The clerk wrote it down. Then we were dismissed. That evening the platoon commander came to the barracks: "The commissar has put you down to work on your day off for malingering. I don't know who reported you. I told HQ that no one had come to me about it. No one can countermand the commissar's order. Just go to work tomorrow, and we'll get you the next day off, on the quiet."

This was in February. A powerful blizzard blew in that night, then it rained, but by morning frost had set in. That morning I wrapped some rags around my feet and went to work. Eleven of us were sent to work in

the timber yard. There was a stack of long, thin poles there, and we were ordered to shift it to a different spot about forty meters away. "If you finish the job early you can go back to the barracks, if you don't you'll be working into the night." I said not a word because I was well past caring. The others, though, were all sons of NEP-men, city kids, well fed and warmly dressed. They made out that since this was a day off, they weren't going to do any work. A platoon commander, not my own, went off to report this to HQ, but it was some distance away. There was only one path that had been trodden down across the snowy field, and it was no easy job to navigate it.

In my rags and tatters, the icy wind was blowing right through me. "Listen, boys," I said, "you do what you please, but if I don't go to work I'll soon freeze." One smart fellow jumped up and said: "You're a provocateur! You're undermining our solidarity." "You swap me your clothes for mine and I won't work," I told him. Then the others spoke up: "Let him be. Let him work if he likes. When the platoon commander comes back he'll think we've all been working." I picked up a stake and pried up the top layer of the frozen logs. I set them up to make a ramp and began rolling the poles down it. They were frozen and rolled down nicely. I went on working and even got myself warm.

Suddenly I heard a shout and some strong cursing coming from the other end of the yard. It was the commissar, who had sneaked up from behind using a roundabout way; plowing along behind him were the platoon commander and some people from HQ. The lads were expecting them by the path and hadn't seen them coming.

The commissar had drawn his pistol and was waving it around, kicking up a row and cursing: "I'll have you all arrested, you bourgeois scum! Off to the guardhouse! You're going on trial!" And they were herded off. To me he said, "Why are you looking like such a beggar?" "I'm the son of a kulak, Citizen Commissar." He poked at my bare knee with his black leather glove: "What's the matter, don't you have any proper underwear?"

“I do, Citizen Commissar, but only one pair. There’s nowhere to wash clothes, and my underwear’s dirty. Wearing it all the time makes my whole body ache. My undershirt is as stiff as rubber. So I bury my underwear in the snow by the barracks for a day to disinfect it and then I put it on again for the night.” “Have you got a blanket?” “No, Citizen Commissar.” “Well, I’m giving you three days’ rest.”

They issued me a blanket, two pairs of long underwear, some worn, padded pants and new boots with wooden soles that didn’t bend—it was hard to walk over icy places in them.

But I’d already suffered so much, and I was covered with boils as well. A few days later, I fell down in a faint at work. When I came to, I was in the city hospital, and I’m writing you from there. The doctor took me to the boss’s office: “This man is so exhausted and emaciated that if we can’t improve his living conditions, I can guarantee he’ll die within two weeks.” The boss just said, “You know we have no room for patients like him.”

But they still haven’t released me. And so I’m explaining my situation to you—who else can I write to? I have no family, no support from anyone, and I’ve got no way to set myself right on my own. I’m a prisoner here, near hand to dying and trapped in a life that brings one hurt after the other. Would it cost too much for you to send me a food parcel? Please take pity on me . . .

2

VASILY KIPRIANOVICH, a professor of cinema studies, had been invited to advise a famous Writer on types of screenplays and techniques used in writing them. The Writer, evidently, was considering writing something in this genre and wanted to borrow from someone else’s experience. The professor was flattered by the invitation, and one sunny day, in an excellent mood, he set off on a Moscow suburban train. He was well prepared to

make an impression on the Writer with his knowledge of the latest developments in writing for the screen, and he was curious to see the Writer's well-appointed dacha, a house even equipped for year-round living. (He himself dreamed of having at least a small summer place, but his earnings were still insufficient for that; he had to save his family from Moscow's summer heat by renting a tiny place somewhere as distant as Tarusa, 130 kilometers away. In these times of food shortages everywhere, he would have to take with him suitcases and baskets of sugar, tea, pastries, smoked sausage, and brisket purchased from Yeliseev's.)

In his heart of hearts, Vasily Kiprianovich had little respect for this Writer; he had a huge talent, to be sure, and weighty, meaty turns of phrase, but what a cynic he was! Apart from his novels, tales, and a dozen or more plays—weak things though they were (he also had some silly farces in which abandoned elderly ladies recovered their lost youth)—he managed to keep churning out newspaper articles, each one of them filled with lies. When he spoke in public, as he did quite frequently, he displayed an amazing panache in extemporizing—eloquently and smoothly—the propaganda demanded of him, but always in his own distinctively individual manner. One could imagine that he wrote his newspaper articles in the same way: someone from the Central Committee would phone him, and within half an hour he would be dictating a passionate article over the telephone. It might be an open letter to the workers of America: What lies were spreading there about forced labor in timber cutting in the USSR? Or he would roar like a lion: “Set free our black comrades!” (Eight American Negroes had been condemned to death for murders.) Then there were his fantasies: we will grow apricots under the open sky in Leningrad and Abyssinian wheat in the marshes of Karelia. He was always being allowed to travel in Europe, and he wrote of various abominations in Berlin and Paris, always with convincing details. His trip into industrial London was boldly entitled “Orpheus in the Underworld.” (Vasily Kiprianovich could

only dream of being allowed a week's trip into any such hell-on-earth.) The Writer might publish an article entitled "I Call Upon You to Hate!" And he often replied to questions from the newspapers with the same obviously insincere intellectual poverty. He wrote on a wealth of literary topics, always treating them in terms of the Marxist view of history, something that was his elixir of life. We writers, he might say, now know less than the upper level of the working intelligentsia. But then he might also say: Until now, only sabotage has prevented our literature from attaining a world-class level, while the American novelists are no better than the pickpockets of an obsolescent culture.

Still, when you think seriously about it, is there anyone today who isn't something of a son of a bitch? All ideology and all art are based on that. Vasily Kiprianovich had made similar comments in his lectures—what else could you do? Particularly if you had even one little dark spot in your background. The Writer, in fact, had a very large dark spot, one known to everyone: he had made a major blunder during the Civil War when he emigrated and published some anti-Soviet things over there, but he came to his senses in time and then worked energetically to earn the right to return to the USSR. Vasily Kiprianovich's own dark spot had almost been rubbed clean, though a little stain remained: he came from the Don region. He was able to cover it up when he filled out some questionnaire, though he had never had any connections with the White Guardists and was even a sincere liberal (and his father, in tsarist times, had also been a liberal, though he was a judge). Still, the very word "Don" was enough to frighten people. And so he could understand the Writer in political terms but not in esthetic terms: How could a man with such talent keep pounding with his sledgehammer and doing it in such inspired language, as if carried away in a rush of sincerity?

The Writer's dacha was surrounded by a tall wooden fence painted dark green, unobtrusive among the natural greenery; the dacha itself, set well back on the property, could not be seen above the fence. Vasily

Kiprianovich rang the bell at the gate. After a time, it was opened by a watchman, a robust old fellow with a magnificent, forked, graying beard who might have stepped from some nineteenth-century painting (wherever could you find someone like that?). He had been informed of the guest and led him along a sandy path past the flowerbeds filled with red, white, and yellow roses. A little farther back was a dense grove of pines with bronze trunks and towering crowns. Deeper into the grounds were some dark spruce with a garden bench beneath them.

The air was scented with pine resin. There was absolute silence. Yes, this is the way to live! (And people say that he also has an intricately decorated old mansion in Tsarskoe Selo.)

The Writer himself descended the staircase from the second floor into the hallway. He was very gracious, and from his first words and gestures he showed cordiality—a particular Russian, expansive cordiality without the least affectation. He was not yet fat but had a very fleshy, broad body with a large face and large ears. The buttonhole of his jacket carried the badge of a member of the Central Executive Committee.

This was a man who, after marking the passing of his fiftieth year with a lavish party, had obviously tasted enough success and fame and behaved with an almost aristocratic simplicity. He led Vasily Kiprianovich up to his spacious, sunlit office. The stove with its large tiles must give off a lot of heat, and it would be cozy here in winter, looking out on the snowy forest. The huge oak desk was not stacked with books and papers; it held a massive writing set—a model of the Kremlin, evidently one of his birthday presents. On a pull-out shelf sat an uncovered typewriter with a sheet of paper in it. (The Writer explained that he always composed his work directly on the typewriter, without any preliminary manuscript. It was odd that given his massive body, his voice was a reedy tenor.)

They sat in armchairs by a small, round table. An open veranda could be seen through the broad glass door. The Writer smoked a pipe filled with

expensive, fragrant tobacco. His fair, sleek hair had not yet turned gray, though he had a touch of gray at his temples and a large bald spot. His thick brows seemed to weigh down on his eyes, and the lines of his jowls and chin had lost their sharpness and were beginning to sag.

Their conversation went on in a very friendly though serious manner. The Writer took no notes, and he had a quick grasp of the subject and asked germane and intelligent questions.

Vasily Kiprianovich spoke of the various ways a screenplay could be written: the concise synopsis that allowed the director complete freedom; the emotional, whose main aim was merely to instill a mood in the director and cinematographer; the detailed scenic type in which the writer sets out each scene and even specifies whether the scenes should change using long takes or montage. It was obvious that the Writer was taking this all in and that he particularly liked the idea that a screenplay must always be coordinated with *gesture*.

“Absolutely true!” he agreed, with passion. “That’s virtually the most important thing. In fact, I believe that *every* sentence has a gesture to go with it, and sometimes even every word. A person is constantly gesturing—if not physically, then always emotionally. And above all we must find gestures appropriate to whatever social environment we are depicting.”

It was already getting on to five o’clock, and the Writer invited the professor to go downstairs for tea. They went back to the ground floor and passed through the living room, filled with antique furniture—a fretwork sofa, some armchairs, a mirror with an intricately modeled frame. There were copies of Serov’s *Girl with Peaches* and a Monet landscape with a pink-sailed boat; just as upstairs, there was a huge, white-tiled stove. Obviously they did not spare the firewood in this house.

The Writer led him around the corner from the dining room, not failing to boast artlessly about a remarkable new appliance—an electric refrigerator he had brought from Paris.

At this point—had he known that this was the time for sitting and chatting?—his dacha neighbor, Yefim Martynovich, dropped in. Alongside the massive thoroughbred body of the Writer, he seemed a puny figure, little more than a gnome, yet he behaved with no less importance than the master of the house.

He was about forty, somewhat younger than Vasily Kiprianovich, but what a success he had made of himself! His name was pronounced with awe in Soviet literature, though only until recently and not at the moment. A militant Marxist critic, he was famous for his devastating attacks on some writers and his fulsome praise of others. In all cases he demanded a militant class-based approach from writers, and he was having some success in achieving it. He was everywhere: he taught in the Institute of Red Professors, headed the literary department in the State Publishing House (in other words, it was he who determined which writers would be published and which would not), and he was also the head of the Fine Art Publishing House as well as the editor of two literary journals. In short, he held the reins of the whole of literature in his hands, and it would be dangerous to have him as an enemy. When he was in RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, he was responsible for the rout of Voronsky's group and the school of Pereverzev; and after the recent dissolution of RAPP he had taken up with lightning speed "the consolidation of communist forces on the literary front." All these things he did with such great success that now he too had acquired a fine dacha, right next door and very likely not a bit worse than this one.

Vasily Kiprianovich had heard a great deal about him, of course, and was now seeing him for the first time. He had an unintelligent face, eyes that were very alert, and hair with a touch of red in it. Had you met such a person socially, even one wearing a good suit, you would never have guessed that he was a Servant of the Muses but would take him for a successful manager of a manufactured goods depot or, at best, the chief accountant of a complex of enterprises. Dealing with him, however, was like handling

a newly sharpened razor. Their paths had not crossed, though one never knew what the future might hold, and Vasily Kiprianovich found it useful to meet the Critic in the home of the Writer, especially when the latter was looking at him favorably.

The Writer's wife was not at home, but on the ground floor veranda, facing the rays of the late afternoon sun; tea had already been served by an elderly maid with a peasant's face. They sat down in comfortable wicker chairs. Some soft white bread had already been sliced for the butter and cheese, while there were dishes with two types of pastry and two types of jam—cherry and apricot.

There was no breeze. The cap-like crowns of the pine trees towered high above their bronze trunks, and every needle on their branches was motionless. As before, not a sound came from anywhere.

The pleasant aroma of pine resin, the peace, and the silence all accentuated their total isolation from the world outside.

Fresh tea, deep brick red in color, was poured into glasses with filigree holders. The conversation, naturally, turned to literary topics.

"Ah, yes," sighed the Writer, admitting even his imperfections. "How we ought to write! How powerfully we ought to write! We are given the esteem of all the people, we are given the attention of the party, the government, and the particular attention of Comrade Stalin himself . . ."

Was this last little phrase really appropriate for a tea table? But no, it had now become the fashion to speak this way in private gatherings. And the Writer, as everyone could see, was in Stalin's personal favor, to say nothing of his close relationship with Gorky.

"Creating an art of world significance—that is the task of the writer today. The world is waiting for examples, for architectonics from our literature."

His arms, not powerful and even a bit plump but still flexible and free of rheumatism in the hands and fingers, extended to show the scale on

which he was prepared to work. (Surely he was not hungry? Yet he had fallen upon the sandwiches almost at once, one after another. People told of how he could give entire lectures, off the cuff, on the kulebyaka or the sturgeon . . .)

The Critic, of course, had to have his say on a topic like this!

“Indeed, they are expecting monumental realism from us. This is an entirely new type and genre of art, the epic of a classless society—literature with a positive hero.”

God knows, Vasily Kiprianovich was of two minds. Even though this sounded crude and clumsy, it might well be what was needed. Though this seemed like nonsense, the literature of the past truly could not be brought back. It was a fact that an entirely new epoch was unfolding in a process that was evidently irreversible.

Here on this veranda, at this table, in this warm and peaceful light playing in the vivid colors of the jam, it certainly looked as if everything had now been settled and would go on for centuries. The common life that still lagged behind would be raised up to this level and polished by it. None of life’s harshness could penetrate here; there were no days and nights of working to fulfill the Five-Year Plan, one that in fact had now been completed in four years and three months.

In any case, what was wrong with the elevated striving to create epic forms in art?

“Take the tragedy of Anna Karenina, now,” said the Writer, making an expansive gesture. “That’s no more than an empty spot today; it can’t be the basis for anything in our art. The wheel of a locomotive can’t resolve the contradictions between romantic passion and social censure.”

But the Critic, that guardian who had administered so many public reprimands, now seemed to have much less of the assurance and intransigence he had displayed in his earlier articles. In fact he had none of the bold, persuasive manner of the Writer. He stood up for *How the Steel Was*

Tempered: there was no question about that; it was the high point of the new literature; it was the new epoch.

It was obvious that the Writer did not care for this Critic at all; it was simply that he was a neighbor and he could not tell him what he thought right to his face.

He did not dispute *How the Steel Was Tempered*, though he did parry by saying that not everything new shows us the way forward. Take RAPP itself, for instance: it presented itself as something entirely new, yet it turned out not to be the tribune of the broad masses and in fact was isolated from them behind a wall of dogmatism.

Now that shot hit the mark! And it seemed that it had been carefully aimed at a spot still tender and vulnerable. The Critic shrank like a mushroom near a flame. How this would have infuriated him only a year ago! But as he retreated, he could only say in his high-pitched voice: "Yet RAPP did contribute many valuable things to proletarian culture. It gave it a solidly established center."

"Nothing of the kind! Not a bit of it!" the Writer said, totally sweeping aside the Critic's remarks and almost laughing aloud at the change that had now taken place. "Those who voiced their suspicions that the RAPP leadership was edging into the ranks of the 'wreckers' weren't just making idle chatter."

Indeed! What do you think of that?

"They were trying to find some crafty means of discrediting our literature. They defamed me by calling me reactionary and bourgeois and even claiming that I had scarcely any talent. Yet the critic . . ." he paused, gazing intently at the Critic and, it seemed, considering whether to deliver a final blow. But no, he still had his humor and went on, sounding even inspired: ". . . the critic should be a *friend* to the writer. It is important to know that you have a friend like that when you write. You don't want some Robespierre in a National Convention trying to use his proscriptive

gaze to penetrate every convolution of a writer's brain simply to devise a class-based label for him without caring whether you write with a pen or a piece of chalk."

The bit about Robespierre was a shot right to the head. Yes, the epoch had broken in two in quite a disgusting way, and this Writer had managed to shift from being a suspicious Fellow Traveler to someone more reliable. He now had a mysterious aura of independence about him.

Yefim Martynovich blinked his lashless eyes and shrank even more. But was he not a *friend*? He had come, after all, to inquire about the Writer's current work and his plans for things to come. The Writer, with his delightfully expansive nature, no longer bore him any malice, however. He revealed that he was now reworking the second part of his trilogy on the Civil War: "I haven't adequately shown the organizing role of the Party in it. I also have to come up with a courageous and disciplined Bolshevik to include. But how can you go against your heart? Yes, I also love the old Russia. And because of that I was slow to understand all that had happened and didn't come to terms with the October Revolution immediately. That was a serious mistake. And I spent some difficult years there in Europe."

All of this he said easily, in his tremulous tenor voice and with the captivating sincerity of a generous nature. And the strength of his solid position at the center of Soviet literature radiated from him all the more tangibly. (After all, even Gorky had made the same serious mistake by emigrating for a time.)

"And who dares speak of our writers' lack of freedom? When I write, I feel the same free sweep of a mowing peasant from one of Koltsov's poems. My hands are simply itching to get to work!"

What he said had to be believed. It came straight from his heart. Yes, what a fine fellow he was.

Even the bald spot on his venerable head shone honestly and impressively.

But one could never accept that he regarded the upper level of the working intelligentsia as better informed than he.

“Invention in literature is sometimes superior to truth. Literary characters may say things they would never have said in real life, and this can be a greater revelation than the naked truth. It can be a regular festival for art. When I write, I can comprehend my reader through my imagination, and I can see *exactly* what he needs.”

He warmed to his topic and said as if addressing only Vasily Kiprianovich, and with fondness: “The *language* of a work of art is simply *everything!* Had Leo Tolstoy been able to think as clearly as Comrade Stalin he would not have tangled himself in long sentences. How can one approach the language of the common people? Even Turgenev, that Frenchman in Russian garb, and the Symbolists are simply seduced by the French syntax. I have to admit that in 1917, when I was still living the bohemian life, with an outrageous haircut though terribly shy, I had a literary crisis. I realized that, in fact, I didn’t really know Russian. I didn’t have a feeling for what mode of expression to use in a sentence. And do you know what set me on the right path? Studying legal documents from the seventeenth century and earlier. When an accused was being questioned and tortured, the scribes would record precisely and concisely what he said. While someone was being flogged, stretched on the rack, or burned with a hot iron, the most unadorned speech, coming from his very bowels, would burst forth from him. And this is something absolutely new! It’s the language Russians have been speaking for a thousand years, but none of our writers have used it. Now this,” he said, dripping some of the thick apricot jam from a teaspoon onto a small glass dish, “this very amber transparency, this surprising color and light should be present in the literary language as well.”

And, indeed, every single apricot lay like a condensed fragment of sunlight in the crystal bowl. The cherry jam also had its own mysterious

color, imperceptibly different from a dark claret, yet it was not the right color and could not be compared with the apricot.

“Now and again these days a letter surfaces from some reader who writes in the primordial language. I had one not long ago from a workman building a factory in Kharkov. His language doesn’t follow today’s rules, yet it had such compelling combinations and use of grammatical cases! I envy the writer! ‘I didn’t bewray my design,’ ‘There was no cause for evadement,’ or, ‘There’s queer small substance to this heroism.’ What do you think? Only an ear that hasn’t been intimidated by book learning can come up with something like that. And his vocabulary! It makes your mouth water. ‘I found myself a sojourning,’ ‘We sweated and strained and learned to live with it,’ ‘forenenst the prison,’ ‘I became entirely bereft of feelings.’ Things like that you can’t invent, even if you swallow your pen, as Nekrasov said. And if someone offers you such turns of phrase, you absolutely have to pick them up . . .”

“Are you planning to reply in the same fashion?” asked Vasily Kiprianovich.

“What can I say to him? The point isn’t in the answer. The point is in discovering a language.”