On the Road to Splenoba

Roger Zelazny

Babakov pulled his car to the side of the goat trail that was the village street. The ancient buildings leaned at dangerous angles. Peasants, like so many wooden posts, stood beside the road.

“You there!” He leaned from the window and addressed a man in shaggy trousers. “I’m going to Splenoba. Is there a place along the road where I can stop overnight?”

The man did not stir. His face remained expressionless. He said nothing.

Babakov got out of his car and crossed the street. He repeated the question in Serbo-Croatian.

The man stared at him. Finally, his lips moved.

“No.”

Babakov ran his hand through his graying hair. His mouth twitched.

“I must go on, if I am to be in Splenoba tomorrow⁠—and I can’t drive all night. I’m not well.”

He looked about and sniffed disapprovingly, wiping moist palms on his trouser legs.

“Isn’t there any lodging before Splenoba? I can’t stay here.”

“No,” the man repeated.

Babakov reached inside his baggy jacket and withdrew a map. He unfolded it and pointed.

“There is an old castle marked. Does anyone live there?”

“No!” An expression finally changed the wooden face. Muscles twitched. “No one lives there!”

Was it fear that he read, or simply annoyance at an outsider’s questions?

“I will stop there,” he ventured.

“No! He is evil!”

“Who?”

“The Baron. Clementowicz.” The man crossed himself as he said the name. “He is evil.”

Babakov frowned at the gesture. But it was not his job to educate the peasants, he decided, and the man was stupid⁠—too stupid even to notice he had been caught in a lie.

“Nevertheless,” Babakov insisted, “I will stop there. He will be honored to shelter an official of the People’s Party.”

“He will shelter you,” the peasant said, “and may God preserve you.”

“Thank you,” Babakov replied, uncertain why he had said it. Perhaps his own peasant blood had spoken, he reasoned. It was nothing to be ashamed of, it was good to be of the proletariat.

He made his way back to the car.

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The grayness shaded through twilight into blackness. Peaks and crests of the distant ridges seemed to draw nearer, to bend over the road like gnarled old men leaning toward the fire of his headlight beams. The bright-faced moon rustled aside a curtain of cloud, peered down a moment, then withdrew. Babakov depressed the accelerator as the road began an upward winding.

Steadily he climbed, the transmission groaning and muttering.

Ahead, a mass of blackness shrugged, setting itself apart from the mountains. He drew nearer and its lights became distinguishable from the stars; finally, they were windows.

It was a massive sprawl, a jag-tooth of parapet and tower, set atop a dark island of stones.

He slowed; the road forked abruptly, the trail to the left clearly heading toward the castle.

Nosing the ancient vehicle about, he headed in that direction.

The trail had not been intended for automobiles. He slowed to a crawl, bumping through pot-holes and ruts.

Finally, the road ran into a pair of iron gates, set ajar.

Careful not to scrape a fender, he drove between them, and into a darkened courtyard.

When he had finished parking, a light appeared. A torch bobbed across the courtyard in his direction.

As the man approached, Babakov made out his features.

Goodness! Ugly, short, and misshapen! he thought. Like figures recalled from the stories of his boyhood⁠—told about the hearth by equally ugly old women.

“Good evening,” he addressed the nightmare. “I am Babakov, an official of the People’s Party. I am going to Splenoba, but would like to spend the night here.”

The gnome bowed, and the torch in his right hand did awful things to the ridges of his brow, his beard.

“Come with me,” he flickered, “I will take you to the Baron.”

Babakov pursed his lips and followed:

“Comrade,” he said, “there are no Barons, no Counts or Dukes. We are a free people, and all are equal.”

The gnome chuckled.

“The Baron has no equal,” he said, entering into a great doorway.

Babakov did not reply. It would not do to denigrate his host, and what did the opinions of a senile dwarf matter? In his youth he would have argued with anyone, anywhere, but he was requesting hospitality, and if Clementowicz was an eccentric, all right, so were many members of the Party.

He entered, pausing to gaze about the shrouded hall. Again, a feeling from his boyhood seized him, involuntarily. The great ones live in such places, his uncle had said. They are not for such as we.

And he felt that way now. He did not belong here. It was too fine, too majestic, even in shadow and dilapidation. But he thought of the Revolution, of the blood of aristocratic exploiters flowing in gutters, and he lighted a Sobranie. He forced a smile, but put the burnt-out match into his pocket.

They wound through corridors, deep within the stony recesses of the building; then stopped.

“Baron Clementowicz is in there,” said the gnome, and Babakov looked at the massive oaken door.

He exhaled smoke and knocked.

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After a moment the door opened.

The Baron was tall, at least six feet, dwarfing the stocky Babakov. The light from behind him was dim, and his face hard to make out. Realizing this, Babakov suddenly looked about. The servant was gone.

“Good evening, Mister Clementowicz,” he said. “I am Babakov. I am on my way to Splenoba, and I would like to rest here for the night.”

“Of course, Mister Babakov,” the Baron bowed. “I should be delighted to have you as a guest. Won’t you come in?”

He stood aside and held open the door.

Babakov entered the room.

“Won’t you sit down?”

He settled into a large chair and looked about him. The walls were lined with books. Something across the room, either a painting or a mirror, was covered with black cloth. There was one small window.

The Baron seated himself in a chair opposite Babakov. He retrieved a cigarette from an ornate ashtray stand and puffed on it, looking up into the smoke. The light from the two oil lamps, one on the desk, one on a table, showed his face.

He is young, thought Babakov, with the same dissipated, weak features we use in the pamphlets. But he may also be strong, with those lines about the eyes, with those high cheekbones... He is an intellectual... And what sharp teeth he has!

“So you are going to Splenoba.”

“Yes, I have an appointment there tomorrow, and your castle was the only place between it and the village.”

Clementowicz laughed.

“The village! Yes! It has no name. A very dreary, provincial place⁠—almost primeval! They hate me there.”

Babakov had been wondering how to broach the subject, how to satisfy his curiosity.

“So I noticed,” he said. “The villagers warned me not to stop here.”

The Baron flicked off an ash which had fallen onto his dark dressing gown.

“Yes,” he said, “they all think that I am a vampire.”

Babakov snorted.

“Petty bourgeois romanticism!”

“That is precisely what I have told them. But whenever anyone develops anemia they look to the castle,” he smiled, “⁠—and I do have bats in the belfry, but they’re only the ordinary kind.”

Babakov laughed. He wasn’t a bad fellow at that!

“I keep a guest bedroom, upstairs, prepared for travelers through here. It is all made up, and I’m sure you will find it adequate.”

Babakov nodded.

“I’m certain I will.”

“Would you care for a bit of brandy? Or some wine?” Clementowicz offered.

“Thank you. Yes, I could use a drink.”

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The Baron was on his feet. He crossed to a wall shelf which, amidst books, held numerous bottles, glasses, swizzles, openers, and measures.

“How about Hine?”

“Excellent.”

Clementowicz smiled again, and poured him a large snifter from the bottle with the deer on the label.

“Aren’t you drinking?”

“Gracious, no. I’ve had my fill for this evening, and I can’t drink when I smoke.”

Babakov accepted the balloon and snuffed out his cigarette. He remembered noticing that the nobility had never smoked when drinking.

“Thank you.”

He sniffed it, just as he had seen them do, when he had served at their tables as a boy.

Late apples and a cool, hillside night. He rolled it about his mouth and smiled.

“Delicious.”

“Thank you. Had I known you were coming I should have sent to my cellars for something better.”

“This is fine enough for me.”

He looked at the shelves.

“I see you read Engels, and Lenin. That is good.”

“Yes,” Clementowicz replied, “also Proust, Kafka, and Faulkner.”

“Hm. They smack of the decadent.”

“True,” said the Baron, “But one must know of these things.”

“I suppose so.”

Clementowicz yawned, politely.

“For that matter, so is Cognac.”

Babakov laughed.

“Yes, but life is short.”

“How certain that is! And it has been long since I have talked with men.⁠—As I understand it, the People’s Party now rules half the world.”

“Yes,” answered Babakov, “and soon the other half will be free, when the workers throw off their chains and smash their exploiters.”

He finished his drink.

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Clementowicz rose and fetched the bottle. He refilled the baloon halfway.

“Yes, I suppose so. But do you really think it is good to destroy their religion, their superstitions⁠—?”

“Opium!” Babakov answered. “Drugs to palliate slavery!”

“Is not a certain amount of slavery what makes life bearable for men?”

“Man must be free!” cried Babakov, realizing he had spoken too loudly for this polite atmosphere. Still, the man must know where he stood. He was no bootlicker, no toady to the upper classes, in whatever archaic pocket of the country they survived. In fact, he should file a report on this when he returned to Titograd.

“Perhaps you are right,” said the Baron. “Will men all be like you if they are freed?”

“Yes.”

Babakov downed his drink.

Then Clementowicz yawned once more, and Babakov suddenly realized that it might be a hint.

“Perhaps, if you would show me my room⁠—”

“But certainly.”

The Baron rose and crossed to the door, which he again held open.

Babakov went through it. He followed Clementowicz up the long hall.

They climbed a high flight of stairs, and the Baron opened a door at the head of the stairway.

“My man found a suitcase on the front seat of your vehicle,” he said, “it is beside the dresser. The room should contain everything you need⁠—if not, pull that cord for a servant.” He pointed at a purple cord hanging beside the ancient dresser.

“Thank you, and good night.”

“Good night.”

Babakov entered. A lamp flickered on the dresser, and his suitcase stood on the floor.

The door closed behind him.

He crossed to the bed. The covers had been turned back.

Opening his suitcase, he found his pajamas, his pills.

As he undressed he wondered: How had Clementowicz known his suitcase was here?

\* \* \*

Sleep came almost instantly. The brandy, he reflected, as he drowsed off. I must buy some Hine when I get back to civilization...

How long he had slept he did not know, when the nightmare came burning through the fogs of sleep.

Suddenly, it was as if he was not alone. For an unknown reason he was shaking all over, trying desperately to move.

An attack! he thought. But there was no pain in his chest. His muscles would not obey him, but they shook of their own accord, and he felt his face twitching.

It seemed as if a shadow had detached itself from the wall and was flowing toward him.

It coalesced beside the bed, and hovered over him.

It is mad! he told himself. Shadows do not walk! The ignorant and the decadent frighten themselves with such things!

And the Baron’s laugh, like the trumpet of a dark Judgment, seemed to roll about him.

Then all was tar and satin and the inside of a closet, a chimney... He felt a pain in his throat, and a soothing fire swept through him.

“Comrade!” he cried. “Tovarisch Marx! God...! Do not⁠—”

\* \* \*

He awakened to the pre-dawn tittering of a bird, laughing its song through the mothy curtains.

He moaned softly.

No!⁠—Two drinks do not do that to a man!

He was desperately ill, he realized. He had waited too long. But his duties!⁠—His duties to the Party⁠—to the People...

He rolled from the bed and fell to his knees beside it.

Crawling, he crossed the room to the dresser. With feeble hands he groped for his pills.

Shakily, he opened the bottle.

Better take three!

He gulped them, then rolled over onto his back.

⁠—It will pass, it will pass. I will ring for help in a minute.

He crawled again, reaching for the bell-pull. He dragged heavily upon it, and then collapsed once more.

How long! he wondered, after an interminable time. How long?

Finally, he arose, staggered to the door. For a long while he leaned against it.

Then he pulled it open and walked to the head of the stairs. Tottering, he looked down. It was then that he noticed the dried blood on his pajama tops.

He felt his throat. It was numb, anesthetized, and tingling weakly, as though shot full of novocaine.

Leaning against the great banister, he descended, a step at a time.

No! he thought. We destroyed you with Easter and Christmas, with serfdom and witchery. We killed you along with the fat, pig-eyed bourgeoisie, and the lean, depraved aristocrat. We drove a stake through your unholy heart when we tattooed walls with their brains⁠—you are dead! You never lived at all, save in the stories of old crones, in the wide-eyed imagination of children! You do not exist!

He reeled down the corridor, suppressing his stomach’s demand to retch. Reaching the library door, he scratched and scrabbled at it until it swung inward.

Then he fell again, and lay there panting.

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Clementowicz regarded him through a steeple of fingers, but he did not rise from the desk.

“I’m ill!” Babakov croaked. “Please! I must be driven to the hospital at Splenoba for a transfusion, I’m overdue!”

“I should say so,” replied the Baron, “You are very sick. I, of course, am dying. So I am afraid I cannot be of much assistance.”

Through bloodshot eyes Babakov regarded him. ⁠—Dying? “What’s wrong with you?”

“Tell me what is wrong with you,” Clementowicz replied, “and perhaps I can answer your question.”

“I have leukemia,” Babakov answered, crawling to a chair. “I need another blood transfusion⁠—soon!”

“Leukemia is a blood disease?”

“Yes, cancer of the blood.”

Clementowicz rose, poured out a drink.

“Have some Cognac.”

“I don’t know if I should.”

“Go ahead. It will be your last.”

Babakov gulped the caramel fires, his stomach came alive.

“Your blood is foul, Babakov,” said the Baron. “Foul! It is unclean, and it has poisoned me.”

He seated himself again, looking off into the distance.

“In a way, it is well,” he said after a long time. “If all men who become free also become men like you, then my time is past.

“When men no longer taste like men, when my only prey has become less than the beasts of the field,” he went on, “then my time, too, has come.”

Babakov struggled to remain conscious. Accepting the drink had been a mistake.

“I pity the world of men,” Clementowicz continued. “I am not of it, but I have been in it. Soon the sun will rise upon that world, and I shall sit here to welcome it. It will be the first sunrise I have seen in many centuries⁠—and the last.

“But if that sun will always shine upon men of your blood, then it were better that all men died now,” he pronounced. “I hope that your Engels and your Lenins never replace the religion that I hate, or the superstitions I have battened upon. You Babakovs have more blood on your hands than I have ever drunk. In destroying the gods of light you are also destroying the Dark Ones. We shall be avenged!”

Babakov tried to scream, but his throat was a piece of wood. A fog crossed before his eyes, and, in the distance, he heard Clementowicz’ voice:

“I’ll see you in hell, Commissar.”

A Word from Zelazny

Zelazny would later refer to the story “Dayblood” as “my modest contribution to the canon of the undead,”[[1]](#footnote-1) but he had evidently forgotten about this earlier story. Its appearance prompted a letter to the editor which noted the story to be “particularly excellent, as it takes up an all too familiar subject which is timeworn, and makes quite a new thing out of it. Very well done.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Notes

In Marxist theory, Proletariat means the working class, especially those who earn their living through manual labor. Sobranie are expensive cigarettes made in Europe; the Black Russian is one of its premium varieties. Friedrich Engels was a German social scientist and philosopher who developed communist theory alongside his well-known collaborator, Karl Marx. Lenin was the alias of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the Russian revolutionary who led the October Revolution and became the first head of the Soviet Union and the primary theorist of Leninism, which was a variant of Marxism. Marcel Proust was a French novelist, essayist and critic best known for the work In Search of Lost Time. Franz Kafka was German author who wrote many surrealistic and influential novels such as The Trial and The Judgement. William Faulkner was an American author who heavily used such literary techniques as symbolism, allegory, multiple narrators and points of view, and stream of consciousness; As I Lay Dying and The Sound and the Fury are among his works.

Baloon snifters are used to serve Cognac, a type of brandy named after the town of Cognac in France. Hine is a brand of blended Cognac or brandy. Tovarisch means comrade. Karl Marx was a Prussian philosopher who expounded his theories about capitalism, socialism, communism, and economics in his book Communist Manifesto. The Bourgeoisie is the social class concerned with property values and which opposes the proletariat in Marxist theory.

1. Frost & Fire, William Morrow 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amazing, April 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)