


Мукhtar Ауезов


АБАИ



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Абай


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Книга вторая

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
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Mukhtar Auezov

ABAI



A Novel



Book Two

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EDITED BY H. PERHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY L. ILYINA

DESIGNED BY S. POZHARSKY

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ABAI



Before Crossing

I



HE PASSED a sleepless night. It was only at dawn that Abai lay down, but feeling wide awake he soon returned to his desk, which was heaped with open books. Volumes in old Uzbek, a language he could freely read, jostled with others in Persian and Arabic, more difficult, and still others in Russian—even harder.

These polyglot friends had not got together on his table fortuitously. Life itself demanded of him the knowledge secreted in these folios. For several days Abai had been poring over them by day and night like an obsessed scholar or a devout recluse. Glancing up from the pages from time to time, he would look about, momentarily awaking to reality.

The Uzbek works carried Abai back to the flowering gardens of Shiraz; he saw the ancient tombs of Samarkand, strolled through the orchards fringing the limpid waters of Merv and Mash-had, wandered through the fairy palaces, the madrasahs and the libraries of Herat, Ghazni and Baghdad, the land of the immortal poets. The books in Arabic and Persian conjured up scenes of the flashing scimitars with which the Arabs, Persians,

Turks and Mongols settled scores in turn throughout the centuries. The Russian books disclosed the mysteries of the seas and sandy wastes of Central Asia, Persia, Arabia and the life of the great cities of barter and trade.

Abai wanted to know how these countries lived today. He made careful notes of the caravan routes and waterways, of great cities and rich bazaars.

All such data was indispensable to a traveller about to set off on a long voyage. "What a pity it's not I who am going," Abai exclaimed again and again as he thought of all those distant lands that had filled his imagination since childhood.

The high table stood by the window. A breath of cool air came through, billowing out the weightless white of the curtain, which played with the books like a mischievous child, now concealing the pages from Abai's view, now wiping them as though to eradicate the written word. Abai looked up—the door was opening for the first time that morning.

It was Ulzhan shuffling in, heavy with years and short of breath. She was supported by two women. Abai sprang up and quickly spread a soft corpeh* on the floor. An elegant, fair-faced young woman who had entered with Ulzhan arranged the cushions. Her resemblance to Abai was striking—this was his sister Makish, who lived in Semipalatinsk. She was the daughter-in-law of Tinibai, the wealthy owner of the house in which Abai was staying. Ulzhan's other companion, her life-long friend Kalikha, who had accompanied her all the way from the aul, now set a shining brass basin before her and proceeded to pour water over her hands from a long-necked Kashgar pitcher covered with delicate chasing.

Makish unfolded a low table in the middle of the spacious room.

* Corpeh—a padded blanket.—*Ed.*

"You may set the table! Bring in the food," she called through the door.

Another of Tinibai's daughters-in-law entered. She was about the same age as Makish, a tall, fine-looking woman with shining ebony hair brushed back from the temples, wearing a black velvet jacket with an embroidered border. She spread the cloth and arranged the table for the morning tea.

Abai removed his beshmet and began to wash. It was only now that he realized how heavy his head was. Makish poured the water over his hands as attentively as for a guest.

"The water feels so good today. Pour some over my head," he begged, bending his neck. "I must freshen up."

Having dried her face and hands, Ulzhan looked at her son's desk and then at her son, at his pale face and red-rimmed eyes.

"You've been up all night again, Abai-zhan?" she reproached him.

"No, I had a nap."

"Don't you get your thoughts addled, sitting there without sleep? I remember asking Kodiga one day, 'What sort of a night watchman are you? Couldn't keep the wolf away? You must have been sleeping!' And what did he reply, 'Oh no! I couldn't have been. True, towards morning it seemed to me that the camels had twice as many humps, and the wolf slipped by me with his tail between his legs so that I took him for a cur.' What good will all that reading do, my dear, if the camels' humps are doubled by the morning?"

Their mother's joke set brother and sister laughing.

"Right you are, Apa, but time is pressing. Father will be leaving today."

Ulzhan asked whether one could really learn the routes from the books.

"I haven't found the highways yet, but can already see the byways," answered Abai and told his mother what he had memorized in the past few days. "I feel as if I'd been there myself—the books have told me so much about those places."

He spoke like a man who had unearthed a treasure.

Ulzhan knew that the journey would be long and over tea continued to question her son about the hardships of the way. Abai had never withheld anything from his mother, but his sister Makish was present.

"Yes, please tell us about it, Abai dear," she asked. Her worried look and slight pallor betrayed her anxiety, and Abai hesitated to answer.

She was the spoiled darling of a rich house, but had never ceased to love her own family and native aul and was always deeply concerned about their welfare.

Only another such as Makish herself, only another girl who had been given in marriage to strangers from afar, who saw life from the same angle as she did, could hope to understand how deep in her heart was hidden her yearning for home—a feeling that would not leave her for many long and difficult years.

Abai sensed all this and would not speak, but Makish was insistent.

"They say that nobody from our parts has ever been there. Will he ever get back?"

She said what Abai dared not say.

After a sip or two of tea, he pushed the piala* aside, ignoring the steaming pies baked in the lower kitchen by a skilful cook. Reaching for the notes he had made during the night, he answered the questions one by one.

"Father's journey will be far from easy," he conclud-

* Piala—a kind of small bowl.—*Ed.*

ed, "but there is hope. . . ." He hesitated as he saw the effect his words were having on Makish. Ulzhan came to his rescue, exhorting Makish with the words:

"Don't let Father think that his child is faint-hearted, now that he is about to leave."

Takezhan and Gabitkhan looked in at the door to announce the arrival of Kunanbai. Everyone but Ulzhan sprang up and busied themselves with spreading the floor around the table with rugs and rearranging the cushions.

Kunanbai had arrived with a large company, but the numerous retinue stayed in the next room, which was equally large and festive, and had its own table laden with food. Only Izguttu and Tinibai, the host, Makish's father-in-law and Kunanbai's old crony, followed the Ir-gizbai chief into the room. Ornate and elegant as ever, Tinibai ignored the place of honour and settled on the corpeh beside his daughter-in-law. Nor did he lean back on the cushions comfortably as might have been expected from the master of the house. He sat with his legs under him, like a pupil before his teacher at the madrasah, in a position to serve Kunanbai and offer him tea with his own hands. This had always astonished Ulzhan, though the townfolk saw nothing unusual about it. It was their manner of showing respect to the imams and khazrets, a way of being particularly polite.

Kunanbai seated himself beside Ulzhan and looked with his single eye at Abai and Makish; it was a penetrating stare which at once caught all the subtle shades of feeling among those around him. His eye was more watchful than ever, and he could see from Makish's reddened eyes and pallor that she had just been weeping.

The chill of old age had at last laid its hand on Kunanbai. He had turned grey late in life, and until seventy his hair and beard had been but lightly threaded with silver. Now, however, the grey had spread and whitened,

and the furrows on his brow had deepened. But he still looked big and solid, and bore himself as upright as ever.

The hard lines of his face showed not a trace of doubt or agitation.

A year before Kunanbai had resolved to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and without delay had begun to sell cattle that very spring to procure the means. He was not worried about that side of things, but was more troubled by the menace of his growing age and ebbing strength. After prolonged deliberation, he decided to take a trusty companion with him, and his choice had fallen upon Izguty, his constant and loyal friend. Makish had therefore sewn all Izguty's travelling things with her own hands and Izguty was now sitting there beside Kunanbai.

Although he was over forty, Izguty still looked like a djiguit of twenty-five and was gay and resourceful as ever.

Near relatives and friends entered one by one: Takezhan, Ospan, Zhakip, Maibasara and Mullah Gabitkhan, the old friend of the family. Kunanbai quietly sipped his tea, and tried the pies and cold meat. Those of his relations who had had no chance to sit at his table during the repast were pressing in to hear his last words before departure. Kunanbai had intended to speak his final words of farewell to his nearest kin alone, but soon realized that within a short time there would be an entire crowd there. He looked at Makish again, his face becoming even sterner.

"My children, friends and kinsmen," he began, sweeping the company with an imperious look. There was an instant hush; the women paused in the act of pouring tea. Kunanbai drew up his heavy body, his solitary eye fixed on a single point. "You seem to be troubled by my coming departure and regard me with anxious eyes. 'How could he, an old man, hazard such a thing,' you seem to

think. 'Shall we ever see him again? Will he come back?' It is hard to say whether it is me you seek to shield from the road or the road from me. But would it be better for me to live on into peevish senility, grumbling at my grandchildren at the fireside, at my daughters-in-law by the cauldrons and the workmen around the yurta? My journey is the final aim of my last days. And this is what I beg of you all: if you learn that death has borne down upon me during my journey, let none of you exclaim, 'Woe is him, for he died in sorrow without attaining his fondest wish.' There would be no true pity or sympathy in such words. I have passed through the time of youth which yet lies ahead of you. I have tasted the honey and gall you have yet to taste. Those days we have been destined to live through together were spent in friendship and mutual respect—whether they were many or not. I have had my fill. And though our lives have been as one, death will come to each in his own way and will remove each from his family in turn. If that is so, what matters where it overtakes me? The remnant of my days is now as short as the trail of an old arkhar,* too weak to follow the herd—from the water hole to his last lair in the gully. So do not detain me. See me off without wailing and tears. That is all I wanted to say. Now let us get down to the preparations for the journey."

Kunanbai looked at Izguty, who at once got up. He was quickly followed by the young people—Takezhan, Gabitkhan, Ospan and the others, and Abai was about to join them when he was checked by Kunanbai's restraining hand on his knee.

"Now, my son, tell us what you have learned."

Abai produced a bulky packet of papers covered with writing and handed it to Izguty.

* Arkhar—a mountain ram.—*Ed.*

"All that I have found is in this roll, Izguty-aga. Keep it safely."

Kunanbai wanted him to name the cities they would pass through on their way. Abai had more than once told him what he had learned in the books about the lands to be traversed, about their location, about the customs and occupations of their people. He did not trouble to say anything about the beginning of the journey, since he knew that the party was to be joined in Karkaralinsk by the Khalfe* Ondirbai, who knew these parts very well. As far as Tashkent they would still be travelling among the Kazakh people. Then they would go through Samarkand, Merv, Mash-had, Isfahan and Abadan. Following this they would either have to journey through the Arabian Deserts or take the sea route and land in the vicinity of Mecca. This second route which Abai had chosen after a study of the books seemed the shortest and most convenient.

The Khalfe Ondirbai had promised to accompany Kunanbai all the way to Mecca. To meet him the travellers had to ride from the banks of the Irtysh through the very heart of the Kazakh steppes. Tinibai had urged them to avail themselves of a comfortable carriage from Semipalatinsk to Karkaralinsk to conserve their strength for the rest of the journey, when they would have to move on by all modes of travel.

The big carriage and its three bays stood ready in Tinibai's courtyard. The big, deep-chested animals, fed on oats during the winter and thoroughly rested, stood snorting and champing at the bit. Whenever the middle horse shook its mane, the little bell in the shaft-bow over its head emitted a clear, cheerful tinkle. The provisions, the bedding and spare clothing had all been stowed away and Mirzakhan sat perched on the box.

* Khalfe—a clerical instructor of the madrasah.—*Ed.*

When the bright spring sun indicated that midday had come, the crowd poured out of Tinibai's hospitable house. Most of them had come from the auls and were dressed like people of the steppes, but there was a sprinkling of townsfolk among them: merchants, shakirds,* khalfes and khazrets. They emerged in order of precedence, smiling happily, replete and with full pockets—Kunanbai and Tinibai had been generous, asking them to pray for the pilgrims.

Kunanbai had not yet reached the carriage when two figures rose to meet him. One of them presented his salem as he approached from afar. It was Darkembai, his beard perceptibly whitened with age. The other was a boy of eleven, pale and thin. His chapan** was nothing more than rags; his bare feet reddened with cold were covered with dust and mud.

As he approached Kunanbai, Darkembai wished him a pleasant journey and at once got to the point.

"You are setting off on a holy journey, Kunekeh," he began. "You have chosen the path of humility. Listen, then, to the plea of another humble creature—this boy. In the name of Allah, he had begged me to bring his matter before you."

Kunanbai stiffened, and frowning, he checked his stride.

"I have renounced all earthly matters," he answered. "It is to others and not to me that people should talk of their needs."

"No, Kunekeh, it is to you that we must speak."

"What have I to do with that boy?"

"A great deal, I'm afraid. That's why we have come."

Kunanbai looked at the crowd out of the corner of his eye, visibly embarrassed by the presence of the merchants

* Shakird—a pupil of the madrasah.—*Ed.*

** Chapan—a kind of robe.—*Ed.*

and the mullahs in the courtyard. Maibasari realized that the old man had to be driven away at once.

"Look here, this is no time for pleas," he said, stepping nearer. "Don't get in the way of a man who is going away. Be off!"

He spoke in an undertone that held a threatening note, but Darkembai was not to be put off. He noticed that Kunanbai was ill at ease and raised his voice.

"The plea of this boy is such that you can't refuse to hear him. Of a thousand beggars and orphans, this one alone you must hear, especially now when you are setting off on a holy pilgrimage."

"Who is this boy? What does he want? Speak up." Kunanbai, scowling and obviously irritated, paused to listen.

"The boy is a nephew of that same Kodar of the Borsak," explained Darkembai. "When Kodar was killed, his only brother Kogedai was a hired hand in the distant Sibani. He was a sickly man all his life and died six years ago. This boy Kiyaspai is Kogedai's son, Kodar's only heir."

The down which generally imparts delicacy to a boy's face rather gave the impression of a sickly mildew on Kiyaspai's wan features. The skin was stretched tautly over the bones, and the throb of his pulse could be seen in the blue veins at his temples; his right eye was bound with a dirty rag. His chin trembling, the boy raised his face fearfully to Kunanbai and found his answering gaze filled with cold hatred.

"Well, what does he want from me?" Kunanbai demanded.

"What could he want from you?" echoed Darkembai looking Kunanbai fully in the face.

"Well, what can I do for you? Here, let us step aside a bit."

To let the old man speak in the presence of the crowd would have been tantamount to meekly allowing someone to hit him squarely in the face, and so Kunanbai from the outset had been herding the two away until finally he squatted down with them in a corner of the yard.

The Irgizbai, both old and young, were well dressed to a man. The townsfolk—the merchants, imams and khalfes—were especially ornately arrayed, in all their finery. Their dazzlingly white turbans, chapans and beaver-lined hats bespoke wealth and luxury. Against the background of this festive throng, Darkembai and the boy, haggard and frightful in their poverty, seemed all the more wretched. Their rags were in such a pitiful state that the man and boy looked like a couple of prisoners who had endured much beating and mishandling.

Maibasar and Takezhan followed Kunanbai out of the crowd and squatted down near the trio. Abai, too, joined the group.

“Kodar was innocent,” Darkembai was saying. “But nobody dared to say anything about kun* then. Who could have raised his voice at such a time? It was your time—a hard time.”

The words struck home.

“What sort of nonsense are you talking, Darkembai?” snarled Kunanbai. “If any of the Bokenshi or Borsak have sent you to demand a kun, then name them!”

The pious demeanour Kunanbai had maintained all day was magically gone, and now all the old hatred and enmity was seething within him. His face livid and ominous, he looked like some predatory beast about to seize its prey and tear it limb from limb.

But Darkembai was still not intimidated.

“There is no Borsak living who would dare to demand retribution from you. The time has not yet come. I am

* Kun—compensation for a murder.—*Ed.*

not concerned with kun, but with the Karashoky pastures. That land is Kodar's heritage. It belongs to this boy, but on it the aul of your eldest wife Kunkeh multiplies its droves and lives in abundance. It is to a holy place that you are wandering! Do you want to carry the burden of sin with you—your unpaid debt to a poor orphan?"

"Hold your tongue!" snapped Kunanbai.

"I have said all I have to say."

"All my life you've been the worst of my enemies! And you still won't leave me alone. Ugh! Your very eyes are bloodshot, like those of a wild beast."

"No, Kunekh. I was never one to stir up evil. All my life I have been protecting myself from evil."

"And who aimed a gun at me? Wasn't it you?"

"I aimed, but I did not fire. Remember, too, that the man who roped and strung me up is still walking about unharmed!"

Pale with fury, Darkembai stared intently at Kunanbai. His words hit home, and Kunanbai was so agitated that he began to tremble.

"At that time you did not fire. You have done it now. You have fired a shot into my coffin! He wants to be my undoing," he said, turning to Maibasars.

There was a pleading note in his voice. "Why don't you do something about it?" his words seemed to say.

Breathing heavily, Maibasars moved upon Darkembai. Screening the old man from the crowd as best he could, he swore viciously and punched him heavily in the chest.

"Hold your tongue!" he hissed. "Another word and I'll take you by the beard and slaughter you like a goat!"

Kunanbai rose to his feet, Takezhan and Maibasars meanwhile stepping on the ends of Darkembai's rags to prevent him from following suit. Little Kiyaspai burst into tears.

"The debt is on your conscience, your debt to me," he repeated.

"Yesterday, you ruled us with a high hand as Aga-Sultan and today you are trying to trample upon us as a holy hadji," Darkembai flung after the departing Kunanbai, though he was firmly held by the two djiguits. "It's not the trail of Allah you're blazing but, as always, your own! Set those wolf-cubs of yours upon us if you like!"

"Will you hold your tongue, you dog?" fumed Maibasars and Takezhan at his sides. If they could, they would have killed the old man on the spot.

Abai quickly sat down before them with his back to the throng. With a sudden movement, he tore the hands of the two from the old man's collar.

"Have you no hearts, damn you? Leave him alone," he cried, his eyes glittering in his bloodless face. "You're a pair of fools. Your hearts are blind and deaf to conscience. Isn't Father going to Mecca to account to God for the very things this old man has spoken about?"

Abai could not contain himself.

"I see that you could keep silent no longer, Darkembai," he said, eyeing the old man sombrely. "I cannot blame you. If a plea is just, then let it be made even in such an hour as this. I'll be your debtor instead. Go in peace and don't curse us any more. Your words have reached my heart, the marrow of my bones. But now you must go."

Assisting Darkembai to his feet, Abai drew a hundred-ruble note from his pocket, handed it to the boy and accompanied the two to the gate.

Kunanbai was speechless for a long time, his lips moving silently in a prayer of atonement, until he was recalled to reality by Ulzhan and Izguty, who reminded him that the hour of departure had come. After a few words of leave-taking to the townsfolk, he took his place in the carriage.

Ulzhan sat between him and Izguty; she had resolved to accompany her husband with the other kinsmen.

The smart vehicle with its three bays rumbled through the wide gate, its bells tinkling. It was followed by a train of carts and riders, headed by two brand new wagons, one carrying Makish and Abai and the other Tini-bai and his baibishe. As it strung out along the street the noisy column raised a cloud of dust. Old and young strained to see the party on its way, some standing at the gateways, others leaning from the windows.

Kunanbai's carriage soon reached the edge of the town and emerged on the westward highway. The horsemen rode on the flanks or bunched together ahead.

Knowing that his kinsmen would be with him on the first lap of the journey at any rate, Kunanbai did not look back. He could not rid himself of his ill-humour. "He's stirred it all up again," he kept muttering. "Stirred up all the dregs." He visualized deep, still waters suddenly troubled and clouded by the fall of a stone. Everything had been going so well. Had he not chosen and weighed his words and actions carefully until the very moment of his departure? Had he not kept scrupulously to his decision? His humble talk and pious conduct were designed to evoke the sincerest wishes for his happy journey. And now, Darkembai had swept it all away like a hurricane, had torn him from the tranquillity of his leave-taking, had separated him from the people. Kunanbai was bitter, but kept silent, trying to curb his anger. At last he decided to take his leave of Ulzhan, hoping that this would quell the storm raging in his soul.

Without ordering Mirzakhan to rein the horses, he turned to Ulzhan. Izguty, long accustomed to anticipating his wishes, moved up to the box to give Kunanbai an opportunity of speaking to his wife alone. With his eyes on the winding road, the djiguit struck up a conversation

with Mirzakhan about the way the trees had turned green so late this year and how long the winter had been.

Kunanbai glanced at Ulzhan.

"You've always been more than a mistress of my hearth," he said. "You've been my life-long companion, my baibishe. It's a long way we've traversed together. No matter what mountains lay between us, I have always felt your support. I may have wronged you in certain things, but for my part I can find nothing to complain of where you are concerned. May fate reward your children for your honest heart and sincere affection for me."

Deeply moved, Ulzhan turned very pale. She said nothing for a time, unable to control her feelings.

"I too have nothing to complain of, Mirza—not even the slightest reproach will go with you." She seemed to be lost in thought.

"When one is young, the bed is too small, the house and the world itself too cramped." She spoke her mind wisely and as to an equal. Something of her majestic beauty returned to her, her face shining as with an inner light. "But as one grows older, the world seems greater and oneself smaller. One feels a vast emptiness around, and one must give way to others, settle one's affairs, compose oneself and be resigned. This I have felt for a long time."

Once more she sat meditating. Kunanbai was following her words carefully, as though plumbing the depths of her thoughts with his look.

"A man protects a woman like a mare her foal," continued Ulzhan, half closing her eyes. "The wife takes both the good and bad from her husband. If there is something good in me, then there must be something good in you, too. Both my faults and merits have come from you. If you take leave of me with gratitude I am content."

Not a word would she say of the humiliations she had suffered at his hands in the long years of their married life.

Kunanbai turned the conversation to everyday matters. Izguttu joined in. They spoke of the Khalfé Ondirbai; he had always enjoyed the respect of the Mirza and by accompanying him to Mecca he had indeed become his most intimate friend, bound to him by ties stronger than any blood relationship.

Ondirbai had once expressed the desire to establish family relations with Kunanbai through the marriage of their children, and now Kunanbai felt disposed to consent, if Ulzhan did not object. Ondirbai had an eligible daughter, he pointed out. Kunanbai's youngest son Ospan, who was still wild, had been married for three years. The childlessness of the couple was a source of anxiety to both Kunanbai and Ulzhan, though not at all to Ospan. This, at any rate, was sufficient reason to marry him to yet another girl. Let Ulzhan be prepared for this; if Ondirbai should mention the matter again on the journey, Mirzakhan would let her know.

The second vehicle, drawn by a trio of dun-coloured horses, was occupied by Abai and Makish, each deep in thought. From time to time Makish would begin to weep, and Abai was unable to comfort her.

He could not dismiss Darkembai's boldness from his mind. The old man had upset the chalice of honour prepared for Kunanbai with a single kick. Kodar, Kodar! The innocent victim had come alive in that wretched orphan. Abai could not forget him: the emaciated boy with the dirty bandage hugging his head like the grip of penury itself. This child in his crying need and Darkembai's just and vehement reproach were like a sentence passed on Kunanbai by life itself. No prayers or namazes, fasts or pilgrimages could wipe them away. How different it would have been if his father had gone off after repenting his sins and crimes. But there was no repentance in him, nothing but his old harshness and anger. If that were so, then why the pilgrimage? Could Darkembai be right in this too?

That it was not the way of Allah, but his own way he was seeking? Abai smiled bitterly.

The carriage drove swiftly along the verge of the highway, on a carpet of young grass.

It was a long time since Abai had been in the country. Out here in the steppes one was more alive to the fact that it was spring. Semei Mountain looming over the horizon far to the left was veiled in a blue mist, but had already shed its cap of snow. It stood alone, a huge wave which had at some time surged madly on to the steppes and, swelling to its crest, had been petrified for all time. Or perhaps the steppes themselves, now so still, had given a mighty heave, thrown up this mountain wave from the bowels of the earth and then relapsed into humble silence.

Abai removed his timak.* A cool, refreshing breeze blew from the mountain and he sighed with relief and joy. The beauty of the land came fully home to him and lightened his heart. The young verdure, the spring sun and the cool breeze invigorated him; fresh melodies interwoven with fresh verses sprang from his heart. Unconsciously he burst into song. Makish could not help listening and she realized that it was his own song he was singing.

"Why, you're an akyn," she said with a look of pleasure.

Abai was startled and stopped singing. He had completely forgotten that his sister was there.

"Why do you say that?" he asked after a pause.

"Can't I hear it? Or is it a secret? But all your friends talk about it, Yerbol and the others. They say you're a real akyn, though you've never sung at the aitis. And so it's true?"

"Yes," Abai replied with a smile.

* Timak—fur hat.—*Ed.*

"What was the song about?"

"Ah, Makish, my songs are carried away with the wind."

"What do you mean?"

"I sing about love and sorrow. My sorrow is constant and near—my love far and irretrievable. What does it matter then, if the wind carries it away? To sing about these things is like singing to the winds."

"What sorrow are you talking about?" demanded Makish reproachfully. Abai's face darkened.

Under his sister's searching gaze Abai's face seemed to glow with a soft radiance. There was not a line, not a furrow. The thin line of his moustache, and his short black beard gave his roundish face a somewhat longer appearance. Abai was twenty-nine years old, a man in his prime. His eyes were bright, blazing with inner fire, his gaze so clear and penetrating that it attracted general attention. His long and delicate eyebrows seemed to stress the beauty of his youth.

Makish regarded him with silent pleasure. It seemed impossible that there should be a deep sorrow within him and she decided to draw him out.

"What was that sad song about?"

The remote dream of his youth, the beloved vision that had never left him rose before him with renewed force. Once he had hurled all his feelings into that song which was now his constant companion. It all came back to him suddenly and clearly: the night on the zhailyau Zhanibek, the swings in Suyundik's aul, the song full of the newborn secret of Togzhan and himself, and Togzhan soaring down towards him with each movement of the swing. Had their hearts not been united before everyone by that song?

The spring day evoked bitter longing for Togzhan. His heart responded to his sister's question and once more

he sang "Topai-kok." He sang in an undertone and Makish had to listen intently to catch the words, so sad and tender.

*The sun and moon shine brightly in the sky,
But full of grief and black despair am I.
Though she, my dear, may find a better lover,
No love is left for me until I die.*

*So let my sweetheart all love's words forget
And put to scorn my mute devotion—let
Her injure and offend me without mercy—
All will I bear and love her deeper yet.*

The song over, Abai looked even paler than before. He had sung about himself and her, about two lovers destined to be parted and to burn with the flame of frustrated love. The song was a sigh of pain that rent his heart.

Makish had never heard the words before.

"I don't quite understand whom you call your beloved," she asked in bewilderment.

"Beloved? She's the one who makes me sad. Don't you know what that means?" Abai answered evasively.

"I thought that's what one calls one's life's companion."

"You mean Dilda?" frowned Abai.

"Of course! Who else?"

Abai turned away from her in annoyance.

"Makish, Makish, my dear! Why bring Dilda into this?" There was a dull bitterness in his voice.

Makish was embarrassed when she noticed how her words had affected him.

"I seem to have dropped a thunderbolt, Abai!" she forced a smile. "But why blame poor Dilda?"

"Of course, she's not to blame. But nor am I to blame if my song of desire was not meant for her. Why talk about Dilda with her four children?"

"Is she guilty just because she bore you four children?"

"No, of course not. They're fine children. She's the mother of my children, a wife given me by my parents and nothing more. But what about the heart? Love? Desire? That flame has died out long ago in her. It never burned very brightly. Yes, her heart cooled long ago," Abai broke off. Nothing more was said during the rest of the journey.

Meanwhile, Takezhan had been riding alongside Mullah Gabitkhan, Zhumagul, Yerbol and Darkhan, one of his friends.

He had spoken little in town or on the way. He could not visualize the difficulties of the journey as clearly as Abai, but was assailed by doubts, which he shared with Gabitkhan as soon as they reached the steppes. His kindly companion hastened to reassure him; though the first lap of the journey would carry the travellers through desolate regions, they would still be amidst the Kazakhs and when they got further on, they would be taken care of, for it was said that people did not refuse help to pilgrims. So Takezhan grew more cheerful.

A powerful-looking man, somewhat heavy for his age, Takezhan was known for his lashing tongue. To hurt or ridicule someone was the salt of life to him. When they were together, Mullah Gabitkhan was his constant victim. Takezhan made a second Hadji Nasreddin of him, spread the most absurd stories about him in the auls, mainly about the quandaries the mullah was supposed to have found himself in, owing to his mistakes in the Kazakh language, which he often confused with his native Tartar. At times he even took advantage of the mullah's credulity for personal gain.

Two days before, Takezhan had lost his whip in the crowd in the guest room of Tinibai. Summoning Darkhan and Zhumagul, he told them to gather all the whips

so that he might pick his own from among them. A handsome whip wound with copper wire attracted his attention. It belonged to Gabitkhan—the mullah had a weakness for rare and handsome articles and whenever possible acquired a fanciful knife, whip or belt.

"That whip's going to be mine!" and Takezhan snatched it away.

"Oi-bai, Takezhan! Gabitkhan won't part with it," Zhumagul objected. "You know how partial he is to bright and pretty things, just like a girl."

Takezhan would not listen.

"Keep quiet. Do you think I'm going to ask him? I'll simply take it."

Darkhan and Zhumagul laughed.

Under Takezhan's instructions Zhumagul cut the handsome loop from Gabitkhan's whip, attached another of cheap, coarse leather and hid it in the next room. For two days Gabitkhan hunted for it, asking all the guests until he at last resigned himself to the loss. Takezhan coolly watched the mullah as he fussed helplessly about, distraught at the loss of one of his curios.

Today Takezhan had the whip with him, but he kept it out of Gabitkhan's sight by riding on the latter's right. As was inevitable, Gabitkhan finally noticed it and reined in his horse.

"Oh, Takezhan," he cried in surprise. "So it was you who took my whip! What a mean thing to do!"

Takezhan did not bat an eyelid.

"What do you mean, mullah," he said deferentially, sounding genuinely surprised. "That's my whip."

Unperturbed, he laid it across the neck of his horse for Gabitkhan to see. The mullah's eyes went from the whip to its new possessor and back again. That braiding of the whip, that handle, that yellow knob! And there was the copper wire snaking the handle. It was his whip and no other!

Losing his temper, he began to rail at Takezhan—and not for the first time.

"That good-for-nothing! Just look at him—he has stolen my whip!" Gabitkhan reached for it.

Takezhan offered no objections and even handed it over himself.

"Have a good look at it before accusing me. If it's exactly like yours and you're sure it's yours and can swear to it, then take it. But if it's not, then why disgrace a man before his friends?"

Gabitkhan took the thing into his hands, felt it carefully, alternately bringing it close to his face so nearly in fact that he seemed to sniff at it, and holding it at arm's length. Finally he shook his head, puzzled. Zhumagul, Darkhan and Takezhan watched his every movement.

"Too bad, too bad," he murmured resignedly. "I would say it were mine if not for that loop. There was no such nasty thing on mine. If not for that, it looks like it—very much so. No. It's not my whip! Here, Takezhan. No hard feelings." He returned his own whip to Takezhan, who calmly took it.

"There you are, dear mullah," he said, winking at Zhumagul, his nostrils dilated with suppressed laughter.

The moment Gabitkhan had ridden on ahead, the three rocked in their saddles. They soon neared the end of the stage and it was time to take leave of Kunanbai.

The wagons ahead had drawn up and the travellers alighted. The riders near them had dismounted too. The black skin attached to the rear of Tinibai's carriage was brought as the others came up. It was filled with kumys and all the members of the party took their places around Kunanbai and Izguty to drink a final cup. The latter urged them to hurry; Kunanbai wanted no delay and soon stood up, everyone else following suit.

"Well, my friends, you've accompanied me far enough.

Give my greetings to my land and people. Farewell, my kinsmen. If I'm destined to taste food on my own land again, let our meeting be a blessed and happy one!"

"Inshalla, inshalla, amen, amen," the elders intoned, led by Tinibai.

Kunanbai took leave of them all and embraced each one of them, starting with Ulzhan and ending with Abai.

With a tinkling of the bells, the strong, well-fed horses dashed ahead, as fresh as if they had just begun the journey. The vehicle soon vanished in a cloud of dust, but the merry peal of the bells could be heard for a long time—until there was a final tinkle of farewell. The carriage had begun to climb a hill overgrown with tall grass, and in an instant the travellers vanished beyond the hill.

At last there was a sudden stir as all turned for home.

Abai and Makish led Ulzhan to her wagon. There was no room for three and so Abai mounted and rode slowly at Yerbol's side, lagging behind the other riders.

2

Tinibai's home, which had been filled with guests who had come to take leave of Kunanbai, was soon empty. Ulzhan stayed on for a while. She came to town so rarely, and Makish, who was so homesick, was loath to let her go. Tinibai too urged Ulzhan to stay on:

"Why hurry to leave! Your daughter will miss you. She's quite alone now, with her husband away trading. You'll go when she has recovered a little."

Only a few guests remained, but these received especial attention from the host. They were Ulzhan, Abai, Takezhan and the three or four djiguits who accompanied them. All the rooms of Tinibai's spacious two-storey house were decorated anew with carpets, striped

home-made rugs, embroidered felt and ornamented kosh-mas. Everything had been dusted and cleaned.

Every day Ulzhan remembered more things to be bought before their departure and sent Abai, Takezhan, Gabitkhan and Yerbol to the market. She was the mother of a large aul of many families and everybody would be expecting presents from her. Furthermore, the aul was soon to wander to zhailyau, far from the town. Many things were needed: summer clothes for the children and daughters-in-law and tea and sugar for the whole aul and some store of it in the event of guests.

Abai more and more often brought home piles of books along with his purchases. He had spent the entire winter in town and though busy with the preparations for his father's journey, he resumed his study of Russian since the day of his arrival. He had been interested in the language for a long time and though he had never learned it properly he took every opportunity to draw what knowledge he could from this fresh source. But the better he knew Russian, the more he despaired of learning it to perfection. "What a pity I had no opportunity to learn the language as a child," he kept saying. "That was a real loss."

But the long vigils of the winter had already borne fruit. Abai could read entire pages in simple language without much difficulty. Poetry was harder. Still, the Russian books had become his inseparable friends and he collected them diligently in order to continue his studies in the aul. He crammed a long coffer with books to be sent home with his mother.

Ulzhan had asked him to accompany her, but Abai had not yet finished with certain matters entrusted to him by Kunanbai. He decided to intercept his aul on its way to zhailyau with Yerbol.

Though Ulzhan was in no hurry to go, the day finally came when she was to leave with Takezhan, Gabitkhan,

Darkhan and Zhumagul. The wagon occupied by Ulzhan and Kalikha was driven by Masakpai, who was so good at breaking in wild horses.

"You haven't seen your native aul for half a year. You'll be just like a wanderer returned from a far country," said Ulzhan to Abai as she took her place in the wagon. "Your wife is longing for you, my son. The children are waiting for you like motherless chicks. 'Ata, ata will come,' that's all I heard from them. Not even once have you asked me about them—about Abish and Magash, my little lambs! Whenever I think about them at night, my sleep fades away like mist in the sun. How can you be so patient?"

"I miss them too, Apa. Especially the youngest, the first that made me feel like a father. But you know why I can't come."

"Do I really? I rather think you're looking for excuses to go on living here. You've grown used to the dust of the town. If you go on that way, I'm afraid you won't care whether you are at home or not. You're like a young kulan who has broken away from the herd. Oi, Abaizhan, please come home soon, my dear!"

In these words she expressed all her doubts.

Sensitive and observant, Ulzhan had been watching her son carefully ever since she had come to town. Abai had not visited his aul all winter. The subtle rift in his feelings had not escaped her; he had not asked about anyone, had shown no signs of tenderness when his family was mentioned. No, he had been quite different a few years ago. And probably, too, Makish had hinted that her brother's feelings for Dilda had cooled.

Ulzhan's words were simple and tender, but they implied much that was left unsaid. She felt that this was not the time to speak frankly. Nor did Abai say anything on the subject, although he understood his mother's

doubts, and he evaded further talk with affectionate words of farewell.

"God willing, we'll overtake you as you cross the Chinghis. Give my love to the children. Happy journey! May you get home in good health and spirits."

Takezhan and the other djiguits had already taken leave of Makish and Tinibai and stood waiting at the wide open gate. Masakpai lashed the horses and the heavy wagon drawn by a team of duns lumbered into motion with creaking axles.

About three weeks later Abai and Yerbol set off after them. Starting at sunrise, they covered a goodly distance on that long spring day. Both were men of endurance and used to fast riding. No matter how hard the going, or whether it were winter or summer, neither the one nor the other ever complained. On the contrary, they always tried to conceal their exhaustion from one another after a hard day's jolting, just as though they were undergoing an endurance test.

Now they were travelling over a rarely frequented route, Abai having chosen the way across Orda Mountain in order to reach the Bakanas River along which his aul was then wandering. Even Karabas and Zhumagul, the messengers, preferred not to ride in these parts, accustomed though they were to galloping over any terrain.

By sunset the djiguits reached the part of Orda Mountain known as Chiliktinsk Hill. Most of the auls had wandered off and they found nowhere to spend the night. Chiliktinsk Hill seemed to be the most likely place, since a few of the poorer auls of the Baishor of the Mamai tribe were wont to set off later than the others.

It was some one hundred and thirty versts from the town to Chiliktinsk. Abai was riding Kurentobel, the blazed-faced bay well known for its stamina on long journeys. Yerbol's well-groomed skewbald had not been sufficiently rested and could not keep pace; by sunset it had to

be livened up a bit with the lash. Abai suggested that his friend change to the dapple grey they were leading on the rein, a stallion he had bought as a sire for his drove, attracted by the animal's marble colouring and fine limbs.

Yerbol had long changed his mount, but Kurentobel was still setting the pace. The sun was dipping behind a sombre cloud which had appeared beyond the mountain. There were rumbles of thunder, and the wind was blowing straight into their faces. Abai quickened the pace, in the hope of reaching an aul before dark. Galloping into the wind, Kurentobel seemed to have gained fresh strength. At times, Abai was sure that the horse would weaken, but Kurentobel went on faster and faster, as if to give him the lie. Straining at the bit, he snorted and tossed his mane, and if Abai had let him, he would have been off with the speed of a steppe fire.

Yerbol had been watching his friend's horse for a long time. When Abai had shot ahead, Yerbol spurred his own animal to overtake him, and getting ahead for an instant, he looked back at Kurentobel.

"Damn him!" he exclaimed delightedly. "There's no keeping up with such a pacer. The lather has dried on his chest. And the distance he has covered!"

Abai was no less pleased than Yerbol. "Yes, such a horse is a good friend. It really is strange," he agreed, "he doesn't seem at all tired—it's as if we had just started. Distance means nothing to him if his rider can stand it."

In the foothills, the travellers were caught in a sudden downpour. But the wind soon dropped and the rain dwindled to a warm drizzle. The slopes of Orda were alive with the undulating green of feather-grass and wormwood. The spring shower came down with a cheerful rustle and on all sides rose the pungent odour of wormwood. The travellers rode along a stony road, through a

veil of rain which suddenly grew heavier. The sky darkened once more, blotting out the sun except for a yellow haze far away at the horizon. Was this merely the afterglow of the day or were the dying rays of the sun reflected in the clouds like failing hopes? In a moment, this wisp of light was also gone. The rosy haze thickened to a scarlet pall, only to lose the last of its colour and give way to a leaden grey already tinged with the darkness of night.

The horses thundered up a small hill. Dogs could be heard baying in the distance and a few lights flickered in the growing dusk. Seven or eight yurtas of a small aul stood dimly silhouetted on the bank of a nearby river. A small flock of sheep, and a few cows and camels were trying to find shelter from the rain, while the finicky goats stood huddled on the lee side of the yurtas. About a dozen horses were grazing near the settlement, some of them hobbled and others tethered with long ropes. Approaching the aul, the riders checked their pace, trying to choose the best yurta. The dogs grew so frantic that the mountains rang with their barking. The nearer the djiguits approached, the more dogs joined the hellish concert and the more desperate their baying became.

After their long ride over the mute steppes, these canine voices had at first cheered Abai like heralds of warm and cosy dwellings, but now that he was closer they evoked quite other feelings. Abai regarded them quizzically. The curs yapping behind the horses seemed to be bursting with fury. These were shaggy bitches with curling tails, dwarfish, narrow-backed, lop-eared dogs, shrilling pups, puny and ugly—the usual motley pack of mongrels, either too vicious or too cowardly. Abai laughed inwardly. What else did this pack of stupid and clumsy animals deserve but contempt. “Get away! Move on! There’s no shelter for you here,” the dogs seemed to snap. “Rain? What of it? Get under your horses’ bellies.

Be off! Grrr. . . . Go while you still can. Away, away, away!" the puppies shrillingly reiterated.

Yerbol had been inspecting the yurtas without dismounting, choosing one in which to spend the night. Of the eight tents, it was the central, pentagonal yurta which seemed the largest and the sturdiest. He urged his horse towards it, passing Abai. As Abai joined him, the bearded host of the tent, a beshmet thrown loosely over his shoulders, came out to meet them. He seemed to be limping slightly. Yerbol exchanged greetings with him, introduced himself and asked for shelter.

"Splendid, djiguits, you're welcome! We'll share what we have with you," the host beamed, as he tethered the horses.

"You must have heard about the two brothers of the Baishor who live near the Orda—Bekei and Shekei?" whispered Yerbol to Abai as they entered the yurta. "It's Bekei who lives here."

The djiguits had never been in this aul before.

A fire was blazing inside. The guests looked round and greeted each member of the small family in turn. On their right an old woman sat on a rug dandling a baby. A thin woman of about forty was busy over the fire. Still erect and tall, fair-haired and hazel-eyed, it was obvious that she had been a beauty in her youth.

Abai now had a good look at the host: grey eyes, a straight, prominent nose, a reddish wavy beard, a healthy ruddy face and a confident, impressive manner. In a deep, manly voice Bekei asked whence they had come, whither they were going and to which tribe they belonged.

The dancing flames of the kizyak* made the yurta seem especially cosy and hospitable. A large blackened pot hung from a tall tripod over the fire.

* Kizyak—dry droppings used as fuel.—*Ed.*

Satisfied with the answers he received, Bekei turned to the old mother, and said something to her in an undertone.

"Don't waste kizyak. There's very little dry fuel," he admonished his wife as he arose. "Is there enough water for the pot? I'll take the boy with me and we'll see about some lamb."

The wife tacitly agreed.

"Naimantai, Naimantai! Come here, my son!"

The tea was barely ready and served to Abai and Yerbol when the felt flap of the door was drawn back to admit Bekei and a young djiguit who carried a slaughtered lamb. The fair-haired hostess had tucked up her calico skirt, set a smaller tripod over the fire with a round rim and a pot of water on it. Seating himself beside his guests, Bekei handed round tea, while Naimantai quickly carved the meat. The head was already being singed over the fire.

"Where is Shukiman?" Bekei asked his wife from time to time. "She should help."

"What for? She's in the other yurta with her brother-in-law. Leave them alone! Let them make merry," she answered.

At the mention of Shukiman, Yerbol thought to himself, "There must be a grown daughter in the family," and he looked about. In addition to Bekei's wooden bed, there was another bed covered with a bright spread and vivid cushions—no doubt a girl's—on the left side of the yurta.

Bekei's wife was putting the meat into the pot, her husband handing her choice pieces and saying: "Put that in too. Let there be plenty." She glanced at him questioningly, as if to say, "Isn't that too much? Won't this be enough?" But Bekei was not satisfied.

"Let's have more of it. We haven't fed the brother-in-law and his friends. Shukiman has already hinted that

they could do with it. There are not many guests, most of them of her age. Let them have supper with us."

"Go and tell Shukiman to bring her guests when everything is ready," the mistress of the tent instructed Naimantai.

Fuel was now ungrudgingly added and the yurta quickly warmed up. The rain had abated and the night grew windless and warm under lowering clouds.

Yerbol fell asleep, while Abai sat thinking. The stuffy tent made him sleepy and he too decided to have a nap until the evening meal.

He did not know whether he had slept long or not when he started up. He must have been talking in his sleep, for the words were still on his lips. Yes, he had just said, "Come here, my darling." Had he spoken loudly? Had anyone heard him in the yurta? What was the matter with him?

Yerbol had also raised his head, and stared at Abai who was listening intently. He too could hear a woman singing in the neighbouring yurta.

Abai was trembling all over. Yerbol thought that his friend was in a trance, about to run off somewhere; his face pale, his wide-open eyes filled with tears, his shoulders quaking, he seemed possessed with a vision visible to him alone. He caught Yerbol by the hand.

"Get up, Yerbol!"

"What's the matter with you, Abai?" his friend exclaimed.

Had he lost his mind? How his face had changed! Or was he ill? What had happened? Yerbol was completely bewildered.

Not noticing how he had startled his friend, Abai seized his timak, threw his chapan over his shoulders and hurried to the door.

"Come, follow me!"

The hosts seemed to have noticed nothing. The old

woman was asleep, and Bekei too sat drowsing at the fire, his back to the guests.

Abai was glad they had not noticed him; he still could not control his agitation, and not only his ears but his entire being strained towards the singer. His knees shook and Yerbol had to steady him. The song could still be heard and nothing else mattered for Abai, who hardly noticed how he reached the door. Barely across the threshold, he took off his timak and stood still, as if waiting for the singer to appear at his side.

The song floating over the yurtas was "Topai-kok." The moment it was over, Abai rushed to Yerbol.

"Togzhan! My God, that was Togzhan! That's her voice, her singing, that's her! How can it be, Yerbol? Where am I? That's Togzhan, I tell you. She's calling me from that yurta!"

His voice faltered as he was swept with a fresh wave of emotion.

Yerbol, too, was surprised. The voice seemed familiar to him, and he racked his brains to remember where he had heard it before. Suddenly he realized why Abai had made for the door, dragging him along like an impatient child.

Yerbol well realized the deep wound in Abai's heart—his love for Togzhan, but he had never seen his friend in such a state. Abai seemed to be desperate, ready to say and do something rash.

"Hold on, Abai!" he interjected. "What's the matter with you? Shall we jump headlong into the fire? Pull yourself together!" He tried to draw Abai back into the tent.

"Leave me alone! Togzhan is in that yurta! It is she! Isn't that so? I want to make sure! Or will you go and find out?"

Yerbol reflected, while Abai continued to plead. "Very well. Only be patient. I'll go alone."

"Go quickly then! Take a look and come back. I'm sure it's Togzhan."

"You're mad, Abai! How could Togzhan be here?"

"Don't argue," Abai cut in. "She has just come, she has let me know that she is here."

Yerbol was dumbfounded. He was afraid for his friend. Full of pity, he put his arms round Abai, led him behind Bekei's yurt, coaxing him as he would a child.

"There now. She'll be here in a minute—the singer. Just wait a while. She'll come to the yurt. But tell me, what does it mean?" he said more sternly. "You said she has let you know she's here. How can this be? Keep still, can't you? You're acting like a child. Tell me all about it."

Abai returned to earth; how wild he must have seemed to his friend.

"You may call me a child and think me mad," he said, trying to pull himself together, "I can't understand it myself. I've never experienced anything like it in all my life. I'll tell you all about it, but first you must promise this. I can't wait. Give me your word that as soon as I have told you about it you'll go to that yurt and come back at once. Otherwise I'll say nothing."

Abai put his hands on Yerbol's shoulders, hugged him, pleaded, and began in a faltering voice:

"It was a strange, queer thing. It was not a dream. I am sure I was awake, it must have been a vision. Ah, Yerbol! It was the same little beaver hat, the same silver sholpy in her hair, and the same black velvet jacket as I saw at the Zhanibek River. Only then we met secretly—only when we had a chance to. But now she approached so boldly—she seemed not to care. She appeared like a flame to me—I remember her warm words: 'I have missed you so. I've been suffering. Once you taught me a song, remember? I sing it day and night. Listen!' After singing the first verse she said, 'Come nearer—we'll be

close to each other—all alone.' I rushed to her, saying, 'Come to me, my darling!'—and woke up."

"That's true, that's what you said when you woke up." Yerbol was surprised.

"But wait a minute. That's not the strangest thing! When I opened my eyes I realized it was a dream, but the song went on and the voice was the same—Togzhan's voice. If all this had been a dream—then what was happening afterwards? But I am sure it was her voice, I heard it, and it was not a dream."

Abai would have rushed to the neighbouring yurta himself if Yerbol had not held him.

"Didn't I promise I'd go there? Just wait here. I'll soon be back."

He returned very soon and no less staggered than Abai.

"My God! It wasn't a dream after all, it's she and no one else." His voice was shaking.

"Is it true? Can it really be Togzhan? Of course! I knew it all along!" Abai rushed to the yurta.

"Just a minute—it's not Togzhan at all."

Abai turned on him angrily. "What are you talking about?"

"It's not she. It must be her double. My God, isn't she like Togzhan? Her very image and just as young and fresh as on the Zhanibek! Has time stood still all these years? Or is it a second Togzhan?"

"What do you mean? Is it a miracle? Who sang that song?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask—I didn't know what to say."

"But that must have been Togzhan, it was her voice!"

"That's it. I didn't ask because it was enough to look at her face. But what about you? How could you have known? You were fast asleep! You are not a seer by any chance? Foretelling things like a sybil? Or perhaps both

of us are asleep and dreaming?" Yerbol was utterly perplexed.

Again and again Abai repeated his friend's words "her very image." His heart struggled like a wild colt, but then came his doubts: what if she were not like Togzhan at all? What if it were only a dream, a vision that would dissolve like mist at sunrise? He was determined to see for himself. Even if it were a flame, he was ready to plunge headlong into its fiery embrace.

At that point the door of the Young Yurta flew open and with a shaft of light came the hubbub of voices.

"Here they are, they are going to Bekei for supper."

Yerbol took Abai by the hand and drew him quickly on ahead of the company. They entered the master's yurta and seated themselves at the place of honour as before. Yerbol began to rake the smouldering kizyak. "Perhaps it will burn brighter in my hands," he said jokingly.

Abai was impatient. The young people were playful, exchanging banter, and apparently in no hurry to enter. While Bekei and Naimantai prepared the pitchers of water for ablution, the fair-haired mistress of the yurta woke the mother and went to the hearth to remove the pot.

The door opened, admitting the guests. The first to enter were two djiguits dressed in simple robes, timaks, and high-topped boots. Respectfully they presented their salems without raising their eyes. Next came several youngsters and two young women. Abai, in a fever of impatience, did not take his eyes off the door. Another young woman with a silver-embroidered robe thrown loosely over her head and concealing half of her dusky face appeared at the door. This must have been Bekei's married daughter.

The last to enter was a girl bearing an astonishing resemblance to Togzhan. Silver sholpy tinkled in her braids and the rosy tint of her cheeks emphasized the fairness of

her skin. She was smiling as she entered, a reserved and yet playful smile, revealing an even row of teeth. She greeted the guests and her slight flush of embarrassment was to Abai like a long-awaited dawn. Unable to return her greetings, he only muttered a few words and sat stock-still, his eyes fixed upon her. She reddened still more.

The girl was of medium height, just like Togzhan. Yes, Yerbol was right, she was the very image of Togzhan—the same features, the same fair skin, the same rosy apple of a chin, light and delicate, the same black silky hair—all that he had longed for. There was the same nose, slightly upturned in such a provocative and charming way. The red of her lips, daintily outlined and somewhat childish, the dark eyebrows, long, and rising to the temples like the wings of a swallow. And that half smile of complete serenity. Yes, it was another Togzhan, Abai's one and only love—young and fresh as he had seen her in his dream—in the bloom of her beauty which had so struck him on that far-away happy evening in Suyundik's house. She was like a rising young moon—ever new, yet ever the same. She, the only and incomparable one, was now ascending the sky of his life.

The newcomer had approached and seated herself beside him. Abai was lost in a dream, oblivious to everything, aware only of the beating of his heart. He was caught in a whirl of emotion—his dream, it seemed, had passed into reality. Had she not whispered, "I am coming?" And here she was. It was no delusion, she had come indeed—in the pure bloom of her youth.

Abai was still looking at her with unwavering eyes, his face bloodless and his pupils dilated. He was like a man who whispers as he fastens all his hope on a falling star. Yerbol tactfully made conversation to distract the attention from Abai's unnatural appearance. The bridegroom and his friends belonged to the Yeleman clan of the

Mamai tribe—Yerbol knew the aul and was acquainted with their elders. He plied them with questions—where was the aul now, was it wandering and to which zhailyau?

From their conversation Abai understood only one thing—that Shukiman was the host's daughter.

"Will you help your mother, Shukiman, my dear? Give the towel to the guests and lay the cloth," Bekei said to her when the guests were seated.

The girl moved about the yurt, a gentle, supple figure, her jacket and white dress emphasizing the slender waist. But the beaver hat, rusty with age, spoiled the effect. "If she would only take it off!" thought Abai. He did not like her name either.

Yerbol and a dark-faced, narrow-bearded djiguit, one of the suitor's friends, continued their conversation at supper as well.

Shukiman had heard something about Abai. A year before there had been rumours that Kunanbai's son, a young djiguit, had become the ruler of Konir-Koksha Volost. Then people had said that he had resigned the post last winter. There had been nothing in this talk that did Abai credit or discredit; nor did she care about it. A certain Mirza Kunanbai, grim and formidable like a snow-capped mountain, lived somewhere and his son was a volost ruler. But what did the small peaceful aul care about them? What did it matter whether he was called Mirza or volost ruler? It certainly meant nothing to Shukiman herself, with her songs and young free life.

When the news of Abai's arrival reached her, she was not eager to see him. But when he apparently neglected her salem, her pride was wounded; she decided that the haughty Mirza of the rich aul thought it beneath his dignity to speak to her.

After supper the huge smoky pot once more made its appearance over the tripod and the fire burnt cheer-

fully again. Naimantai reached for an old dombra and handed it to the bridegroom's friend.

"Be merry, my children," said Bekei to the djiguit good-naturedly. "You were singing in that other yurta, so why not sing here?"

Abai had liked Bekei from the first and these words now strengthened his feeling.

"Yes, why should we interrupt your singing?" Abai agreed. "We've just heard a beautiful song. Don't be bashful, please!"

"Yes, it was a wonderful song," agreed Yerbol, looking at Shukiman.

Shukiman smiled shyly.

"Do we alone sing songs?" she said in her surprisingly clear, soft voice and laughed. "You've heard and seen more than we—and so you must know more songs," she laughed again and, glancing at Abai, slyly added, "It's the guests who must pay the first penalty, you know!"

Her laughter, clear and true to her voice, was more remarkable even than Togzhan's. It was a song in itself and unforgettable.

Abai was not disconcerted.

"Well, if I must pay, I'll pay with a song, a poor one perhaps, but still a song."

Everybody smiled. He took the dombra and ran his fingers over the strings.

He sang in an undertone. It was the same sad and gentle tune as Shukiman had sung before; only the words were different, full of passion and longing.

*The sun and moon shine brightly in the sky,
But full of grief and black despair am I.
Though she, my dear, may find a better lover,
No love is left for me until I die.*

The note of sadness faded as he sang. Hope flamed anew. The song seemed to be addressed to someone for

whom he had been looking in vain, but had found at last. Both the voice of the dombra and that of the singer reached out towards the shores of fresh hope.

Abai had to repeat it three times, so pleased were his listeners.

"Debt is made pleasant in repayment," said Abai, quoting an old saying. "Yerbol and I heard someone singing 'Topai-kok' in the next yurta. The song is still with us! There is no need to ask who was singing. Please sing it again." His eyes pleaded with Shukiman.

"That was my aunt singing. She's still there, shall we call her?" The others laughed with Shukiman and likewise began to tease Abai and Yerbol.

"But that's not true," the two continued to insist. "We know it was you who were singing."

Shukiman had to give in.

Her voice, so pleasant in conversation, was irresistible in melody. Its silvery ripples stirred Abai more than anything he had ever heard. Never had the meaning of the song been brought out so clearly. He listened as if it were a prayer and only once dared to raise his eyes. All her shyness was gone. Oblivious to everything, she was enthralled, her eyebrows rising and falling with the melody. It was a song from a heart that was young, deep and unfathomed. One vision came after another; her voice was now the crest of a transparent wave heading for happiness, now a murmuring brook sparkling with moonbeams.

The guests listened enraptured. When Shukiman had finished, Abai sighed deeply, his heart overflowing. He looked at Shukiman and lowered his eyes.

"What a song! No one else could have sung it like that," Yerbol exclaimed.

Abai thought so too, but said nothing. His heart was filled with a light strong enough to flood the world. What was there to say? Any words would have been a

mockery of his feelings. But this much he knew: a new sun had arisen in his heart, his lost joy had returned, happiness itself had sought him out, filled with pity and tenderness.

A firm and inflexible decision matured within him. Once, when still young and unsure of himself, he had had to renounce his happiness. This time he would not lose sight of his star. Let all the world come tumbling down, let his father and mother renounce him, his kith and kin condemn and drive him away! Come what might, he would not and could not renounce the beauty of this girl or yield her to anyone. Without her life would not be worth living.

When the young people moved to go, Abai could only say "Thank you" to Shukiman again and again. No other words occurred to him, but his pallor and shaking voice told her what he could not express. Blushing gently, she smiled at him warmly. He was no longer the overbearing Mirza she had seen when entering the yurta earlier that evening. This was a man to whom one might be drawn, one who felt deeply. He could indeed arouse affection, abandoning himself so completely to his feelings as he did. Unexpectedly to herself, Shukiman caught a glimpse of something she had never encountered before. Abai suddenly seemed very dear to her. Her eyes unwavering, she took leave of him with especial warmth.

Everybody was retiring for the night. Shukiman, who was to stay with her sister-in-law, went off with her brother-in-law and the others and did not return to the yurta.

Abai and Yerbol had scarcely ridden across the Chiliktinsk Hill the next morning when their talk turned upon Shukiman.

"She's a real korim,*" Abai said again and again.

* Korim—a beauty.—*Ed.*

"Ai, a korim, ai, a real korim!" Yerbol enthusiastically agreed.

"What's that you say?" Abai looked up, then laughed and added, "Do you know what I think, Yerbol? Shukiman is such an ugly name and doesn't suit her at all. Let's give her a name of our own. You've just found the name; we'll call her Aikorim. . . . Or still better—Aigerim!"

They recollected Abai's dream, marvelling at the way it had come true. They were lost in conjectures until Abai expressed his view:

"An odd idea has just come to my mind. Only magicians and witch-doctors can tell the future by dreams, or else a sage or a saint, as is described in the books. But I'm none of these, I don't tell fortunes or make magic. Still, there are people who differ from others by the sharp way they feel things, by their sensitivity and perception of life—the akyns. Perhaps I'm one of them?"

To Yerbol, Abai had long been an akyn. Unable to understand his friend fully, however, he kept silent. But Abai was elated with his discovery and filled with fresh inspiration.

Beyond the ridge the road dipped to the northern slope of the Orda Mountain. The two were galloping against the wind blowing from the Chinghis Range. Far away they could see the miracle of the steppes—a mirage. There were innumerable images, strange and capricious, constantly changing, extending skywards, clinging to the earth or rising in green vapours, now resembling hills, now shanties, high mazars* or dense woods. Beyond them loomed the Chinghis heights, wrapped in a bluish haze.

The surrounding steppes were carpeted with the delicate green of feather-grass spangled with the pink of strange blossoms, while chi y shrubs grew beside the

* Mazar—a high tombstone on a burial vault of a special kind of brick.—*Ed.*

Yes, he had regained his youth, replete with happiness, and was thrilled to find that the gift which had been slumbering in his heart was unfolding its powerful wings. Happiness had awakened him and his verses flew forth like birds released from captivity. They were soaring, circling, playing, overwhelmed with a feeling of space and freedom. Snatches of melodies overtook them, merged with them and returned with them.

It was during that long and wonderful journey over the desolate steppes that he had found that perhaps "he was one of them," as he had said to Yerbol.

Till midday, as they rode from the Orda Mountain and as far as the Karaul, Abai kept singing, and ever fresh rhythms came to his mind. He forgot where he was going and why, and came to himself only when they began the descent to the River Karaul.

He had missed his aul and native places all winter and the Karaul always awakened in him an especially warm feeling. Now, too, he was deep in reverie. There, up the Karaul on Camel Humps, bluish in the distance, he had first seen Togzhan. There he had first embraced her, when the river was rushing headlong, foaming and bursting its banks, and today the faraway, inaccessible Togzhan had come back to him through the years of sorrow and despair to say, "It is not true, I am as bright and youthful as ever, and will give you happiness at last." This morning of songs and reveries had cemented his decision.

With warmth and passion, Abai explained his thoughts to Yerbol, telling him that he had made up his mind that night. This seemed a sudden decision, but it was justified by all that he had felt the day before. He told his friend about the hopes that had filled him since the morning.

"Do not blame me, Yerbol, but try to understand how I feel," he pleaded.

Those were familiar words, words that Yerbol always heard when his friend had decided upon something sudden and wished to win him over. He smiled, his eyes crinkling up at the corners—he well understood Abai's feelings.

"The future—unknown, untried and even, perhaps, forbidden—is alluring me," Abai went on without noticing his friend's amusement. "All my thoughts, all my being, reach out to the future. I am in love with Aigerim and want to marry her."

His friend's passion was no surprise to Yerbol. But this talk of marriage was like a bolt from the blue, and he looked at Abai in astonishment. For the rest of the journey the two of them could talk of nothing else. They even halted on the Chinghis and did not begin their descent to Shalkar where Ulzhan's aul stood until they had talked themselves out.

This broad and even zhailyau in the foothills, with its river and icy springs, was famous for its abundant grass. Its vast expanses, known as Shalkar, that is, boundless, were one mass of green. A cool breeze, the constant, invigorating and fragrant guest of spring from Sary-Arka,* swept over the grass in soft green waves.

Riding towards their own aul, the friends had to pass several other auls in the valley. Besides the Bokenshi and the Borsak, the masters of the zhailyau, the Zhigitek too had settled here. Past quarrels had been forgotten. Their neighbours were the Irgizbai, Zhuantayak and Karabatir, who had wandered alongside Ulzhan's aul, and several caravans of the Kokshe clan. In peaceful years, when there were no quarrels or mutual recriminations, the zhailyau seemed to become so spacious that

* Sary-Arka (Yellow Back), the Kazakh name of the Aral-Irtysh water-line.—*Ed.*

none had cause for complaint. The auls then arranged feasts for the newcomers and the kinsmen visited each other with sibaga—viands brought as a mark of respect.

As the two friends approached Ulzhan's aul, they perceived that guests had already been here with sibaga and had left a short time before. Women of all ages were heading for Suyundik's stay in a number of carts. Others were moving westward. They were well dressed, their horses strong and well fed, and their saddles and bridles ornamented with silver. They must have been the baibishes of the Zhigitek, who had settled near Sarkol.

Ulzhan stood by the Great Yurta after she had seen her guests on their way. A happy crowd of women, young zhengehs, djiguits, and boys greeted Abai and Yerbol.

The yurtas stood amid the verdant grass, still fresh because the settlement was new, and the people, from Ulzhan herself, everyone, young and old, was in festive array, as though to be in tune with the spirit of the zhailyau, given new life by the spring. The immaculately white shawls, and women's dresses and jackets stood out like bright splashes against the white of the yurtas and the green of the steppes.

The aul welcomed Abai joyfully. Ulzhan was the first to embrace her son, pressing him to her heart with a happy smile as though she would never let him go. Then she brought her smallest grandson, three-year-old Magash, a thin fair child with delicately arched brows and dark shining eyes. Abai bent over his son and the child clasped his father's neck, his face pressed to Abai's cheek. He was not shy at all when Abai lifted and kissed him and called him by name, and obviously remembered his father, though the latter had been away the whole

winter. Caressing Abai's face with his small hands, he laughed, revealing tiny white teeth.

"You've forgotten us, Aga. I am Abish, not Magash."

Who had put him up to it? The words of his pet touched Abai to the quick, but he could see that this was not Ulzhan's doing. She noticed the look on her son's face and admonished the little boy:

"What are you talking about, you silly! Daddy has come from afar and has missed you so all this time. Is that the way to greet him?"

But Abai's mind was not at rest. He greeted everybody kindly but bitterly observed as he entered the yurta with her:

"What was that your grandson said, Apa? It was a stupid thing to teach him whoever did it."

A joyful crowd burst into the yurta after him and the tent was filled with talk and laughter.

Everybody asked about Kunanbai. What was the news from the road? Was he in good health? Abai told them what he knew; Kunanbai had only sent word that he had reached Karkaralinsk and there met Ondirbai.

Dilda had also entered the yurta with Abai. It was she who had prompted little Magash's rebuke, and seeing that Abai was hurt was not at all sorry; she even smiled spitefully as if to say, "Serves you right." How many times had she heaped curses on her absent husband that long winter! Could he not have come home once in half a year? There must be another woman there, she thought. He was out of his mind. For whose sake had he deserted his home and his family? Suffocating with anger and wounded pride she wished him ill with all her heart.

Akilbai, Abai's eldest son, was twelve and had been brought up by Nurganim, the youngest wife of Kunanbai, while six-year-old Gulbadan, four-year-old Abdrakhman and little Magash were being reared by Dilda herself.

Ulzhan and Aigiz, her two mothers-in-law, and the entire aul held Dilda in great esteem and her children were petted by young and old. In time the daughter of a rich aul who bears many sons is apt to become spoilt, wilful, and headstrong in speech and behaviour, and this was exactly what had happened to Dilda. The resentment she bore against Abai had served to intensify these traits; she had become cold, callous and inordinately proud.

The tension between Abai and Dilda was fully apparent at their first meeting. Their rupture had long been imminent, and the tenuous thread that had kept them together had evidently snapped at last. The two exchanged not a single warm word during the evening nor afterwards when the guests had gone.

But the more coldly he treated his wife, the more tender he was to his children, whom he had so badly missed. Ulzhan for the first time noticed him caressing and hugging Gulbadan, Abish and Magash, and saw that he seemed to be doing his best to be a fond and attentive father. Nevertheless he had no intention of giving up the plans he had formed during his journey.

That evening he informed Ulzhan and Aigiz of a decision which astonished and terrified them. It was a matter in which he sought no advice and admitted no argument; he had decided for himself that Abish and Gulbadan would study at a Russian school in town.

But Abish was so little and weak. Let him stay with her for a time, Ulzhan pleaded, and Abai did not press—the matter could wait.

"I'll make real men of your grandchildren, Apa. I'll give them an education. Perhaps Abish is too little just now, but both of them shall have a city education. That's what our times demand and my mind is made up!"

The three children cuddled up to him delighted.

"We're going to study! Take us to town soon."

It was long afterwards that Abai told his family of the decision he had taken on the slopes of Orda. Could his desire be fulfilled? How should he broach the subject? Aigerim was said to be betrothed. To whom? What would her attitude be? What would her aul and her parents say? He had better make thorough inquiries. He must look before leaping—rashness could spoil everything.

Yerbol alone had been trusted with the secret, but on his advice Abai decided to take another friend into his confidence. His choice fell on Zhirenshe, whom he had known intimately for years. The latter was quick-witted and a good talker. Active and resourceful, he had once been singled out among the numerous tribe of the Kotibak by Baisal, who had trusted him implicitly.

In recent years, too, Abai had been inseparable from him on all his journeys. When he had become the Konir-Koksha volost ruler, he had set him up as a bii, and when Abai had resigned from his post, Zhirenshe had continued to hold office as judge in the same volost.

Abai sent Yerbol for Zhirenshe, and when the latter arrived at Ulzhan's aul he told him about his problem in great detail. After much reflection Zhirenshe agreed to be his friend's mediator.

"Zhirenshe, I would like you to represent me in this matter," Abai had said. "First become acquainted with her and see how the land lies. Find out what she thinks about it and then try to learn the opinion of her parents and kinsmen. There's just one thing you must be careful of: that the fact that I am Kunanbai's son and we are a famous and powerful aul does not influence their decision. Let them not be afraid of reprisals should they refuse. As Allah is my witness, I shall not be offended if the girl does not want me. If I gain their consent through the force of my father's name and my aul, I shall know no happiness, but only disgrace. Try to

understand and remember this. You'll tell me the truth when you come back, no matter what it is."

Abai sent Yerbol with Zhirenshe, exhorting him to follow his instructions closely. Abai had not long to wait, for in three days his friends were back from the Mamai tribe.

Zhirenshe had spoken to Aigerim herself. He had been struck by her beauty, but even more so by her intelligence and courtesy. Aigerim, he said, was in fact betrothed to a djiguit of the same tribe. Her bridegroom had died, but according to custom his rights were transferred to his elder brother, an elderly man who had long been married. A part of the kalim had been paid and when the girl had grown up the brother of the deceased had refused to restore her freedom, declaring that he would marry her himself. Bekei's daughter was thus tied without a rope, as the saying goes. The girl's family had more than once begged this bridegroom to annul the betrothal, but he would not agree, arguing that since the bride had been promised to him by God, he was obliged to marry her. While depriving the poor girl of her freedom, he could not, however, contribute the rest of the kalim and had never visited her. His wife, too, was opposed to the marriage.

Zhirenshe had gathered all this from his conversations with Bekel and Shekei. Asked about her own inclinations, Aigerim had said that she did not want to lose her freedom by marrying her brother-in-law.

But there were other difficulties. Abai was also bound by strong ties. Neither his parents nor his kinsmen knew of his decision. Then there was Dilda—he had yet to see how she would take the news.

Considering all this, the cautious Zhirenshe advised Bekei and Aigerim to keep their conversation secret. He had the friendliest feeling for Bekei's aul and he wanted them to understand him well. He was more con-

cerned for Aigerim than for Abai. If the plan were to fail, Aigerim's reputation might suffer, and if the kinsmen of her brother-in-law were to get wind of the matter there would be no end of bitter strife between the two clans.

He did not tell Bekei of what troubled him most: rumours might get abroad that he, Zhirenshe, had tempted a bride of the Mamai tribe into marriage with Abai. Fresh enmity might spring up and dishonour Zhirenshe himself.

Zhirenshe nonetheless had helped matters considerably. He had understood and approved Abai's decision, had conducted the negotiations cleverly and concluded by enjoining all concerned to keep the matter strictly secret. The three friends then reached a common decision. Delighted with Zhirenshe's resourcefulness, Abai requested yet another thing of him.

"Frankly speaking, I should have handled the matter myself. But since you have taken it up, I beg you to see it through to the end. Father is far away, but Mother does not deserve to be neglected. Speak to her and obtain her consent."

Ulzhan did not approve of Abai's decision. She listened to Zhirenshe's lengthy explanation with distaste.

"If Abai is going to do what he wants to, let him do it openly. Why these roundabout methods? Why send you as a mediator? Let him come himself and we'll talk it over together."

When Abai came, she greeted him without her usual friendliness. Her voice was firm and inflexible.

"Abai-zhan, your decision is clear to me, my son. Zhirenshe has told me whom you have chosen and has asked for my advice. You want to know whether I think it is the right thing you are doing or not. Well, I think it is not right at all and will tell you why. You have

seen a great deal yourself. I have been one of your father's wives—haven't you been one of the many sons of one of the many wives? We have shared the same hard lot, the same hardships. Was it a pleasant life for me? Was it an easy life for you? I have only one wish—that our children should not suffer in the same way. I am afraid you will repent this step which you think will bring you so much joy. The step itself is not difficult to take, but the consequences will be bitter. You will be sorry, my child. Of course, it's for you to decide; both the joy and the gall will be yours, while we, that is your friends, Zhirenshe and myself, will remain mere onlookers. But I felt impelled to tell you my doubts. Think twice before you make up your mind, my son. That's all I wanted to say to you."

Abai left without replying. This was the first time they had ever failed to understand each other and had wanted different things. There was a good deal he could have said to his mother but she would not have understood him—to do so she would have had to feel what he felt. Did he not know himself that his decision was unreasonable? She need not have told him this. But what of his feelings? He had spared her his thoughts—hadn't his parents done great harm by uniting him with Dilda against his will? They had not consulted his feelings and had mercilessly separated him from Togzhan. But could he have said this to Ulzhan, his kind mother who had never suspected her guilt and had indeed been sure that she had always been solicitous for him? And so Abai went away without saying a word.

But he would not let the matter rest. Zhirenshe was again sent to the auls of Mamai; in two weeks he had obtained the necessary consent and brought the negotiations to a successful conclusion. He had also visited the aul of Aigerim's former bridegroom and settled everything there.

The tangle had been unravelled. Abai had only to give a considerable number of cattle to Bekei and the former bridegroom in compensation.

Ospan, who was in charge of Kunanbai's property, grudged Abai nothing. Without delay he counted off the animals required and drove the large herd off as a part of the kalim. Zhirenshe, Zhakip, Ospan and Gabitkhan were dispatched to Bekei's aul as matchmakers and were generously rewarded for their services. More cattle was then sent as the last portion of the kalim and the wedding gift from the bridegroom's parents.

At last Abai went to call upon his bride accompanied by Yerbol, Ospan, Gabitkhan and Zhirenshe, the latter, as at Dilda's wedding, playing the role of senior matchmaker. So Abai brought Aigerim to his home for ever.

On Zhailyau.

I

THE WHITE spacious yurtas of the Great Aul, far removed from the sheep pen with its noise and smells, occupied the right side of an enormous meadow. The left side of it, near the pen, was dotted with wretched shanties and grey tents, decrepit and weather-beaten, drab and smoky. Here lived the poor neighbours who served Kunanbai's numerous family, old herdsmen, shepherd boys, milkmaids and shepherds.

A song came from the direction of the white yurtas. A man's powerful voice had risen over the hushed aul at midday and soared into the cloudless blue. The inhabitants of the yurtas and shanties had been listening eagerly—young people free of their daily toil, elderly women with spindles in their hands, and ancient crones. They would all have liked to come nearer to the singing, but only one bent old woman with her grandson on her back ventured to hobble over. Freeing an ear from under her kerchief, she stumbled on, her face upturned, her deep-set bleary eyes narrowed and the wrinkles, of her old face wreathed in smiles.

"May God send you many children, our dear akyn. May Allah give you joy as you give it to us," her toothless, protruding jaw moved as she murmured.

Kalikha, Aigiz's housekeeper, who stood in the middle of the kotan, regarded the old woman with venomous mirth.

"Hurry up, or you'll be late. It's just for you, old hag, that he's singing," she flung after her.

Old Iys was hurt but did not stop. She went on towards the four white Guest Yurtas, set somewhat apart from the other tents.

The aul's guest of honour, the famous singer, had been away for several days, and had returned only the evening before. Everybody knew that he was to leave for good on the following day and they were all anxious to hear him sing for the last time. But those who lived at this end of the aul, the servants, herdsmen and shepherds, were deprived of the pleasure.

There were two women in the work yurtas of Aigiz—the pale hook-nosed Esbikke and thin, dusky Bayan. Esbikke stood by the huge blackened pot where the kurt was cooking over the fire. Bayan had been churning sour milk in a large vessel since daybreak. The faces of both were lined and weary, their dresses were tattered and sorely in need of a wash. Bayan, the wife of the herdsman Kashke, and of the same age as Esbikke, often shared her unhappy thoughts with her crony.

"It's not for such as us to enjoy life and make merry," she sighed. "Aigiz has ordered Kalikha: 'Tell them not to go anywhere, but to keep churning irkit and boiling kurt.'"

Esbikke was frowning so hard that her eyebrows almost came together on her pale face.

"Would Kalikha let us listen to a song? Or Aigiz? All we can hear from her is 'Milk the cows, milk the sheep, churn the irkit, boil the kurt, and as soon as you've finished, go into the steppes to gather kizyak.'"

"It's a wonder we are still alive," echoed Bayan.

"I get home when everybody's asleep and have no strength to do the cleaning. The moment my foot's across the threshold, I drop down like an empty sack, fit for nothing."

"She's always shouting and ordering one about—now it's plaiting a noose, now it's twining a rope and all the time she's nagging at you, 'You want to loaf about all day. Do you forget you're my slave? Wasn't it you whom they brought as a wedding gift to our aul? Isn't your husband Bashibek a slave with a torn ear?' Every word of hers hits me like a stick, but what can I answer if Allah has created me a slave?"

The tears ran down Esbikke's cheeks as she raked the kizyak in the hearth.

"We wear ourselves to the bone and get nothing for our pains. 'Apa, dear, may I go to hear the song?' my daughter asked me. 'Why not, my sunshine, run along,' I said, but then I happened to look at her and knew that I could not let her out of doors for strange eyes to see! She's a bride almost, but her rags are worse than mine; you'd think they'd been torn by the dogs—all patches and nothing else."

Without leaving her irkit, Bayan stooped to Esbikke and whispered, as if she were afraid that Aigiz or Kalikha might overhear.

"Is my life any better? I get up with the birds at day-break and never sit still until the baibishe is in bed and the tunduk is closed. Do you know the riddle: 'When everyone's asleep who is awake?—Old mother.' Yes, it's the same in summer and winter. We are just what Aigiz

calls us—dirty slaves. That song over there is not for the likes of us!”

Sakish, Esbikke's daughter, was sitting on a heap of old rags in the neighbouring hut, crying silently as she tried to patch her frock. At times she would drop her curly head, listening. It was so little she wanted: just to go there like old Iys, to put her ear to the tent and peer through a crevice, but only yesterday Kalikha had strictly ordered her not to show herself anywhere near the white yurtas. “Let her stay at home. She can do without songs.”

And the song was floating over the aul. They were listening to it everywhere. Muttering on and on, old Burkitbai who milked the mares all day long was listening too.

“He sings day and night. He has been here all the summer but I've never seen him and how could I—fifty mares and each to be milked ten times a day. I'm tethered like this foal here. I struggle about like a hobbled horse. ‘See that Ulzhan's yurta has enough kumys, that Aigiz has her saba brimful, that the Guest Yurtas have two sabas ready and that Kalikha gets her share too!’ The foals are tethered till dark and I have hardly the strength left to get home at night.”

It was only for a few seconds as Burkitbai went from one mare to another that he could listen to the distant song. His helpmate Baimagambet, a youth with piercing blue eyes under heavy brows, also had a chance to catch a few faint sounds as he brought the next foal to its mare. But most of the time he could hear only the muttering of Burkitbai, as he dropped on one knee and milked the mares.

“For twenty years... for twenty years on end Burkitbai has been milking mares, but what has he got for it? Whenever Aigiz or Kalikha happen to offer me a piala of kumys, they never miss the chance to

reproach me, 'You wretched glutton, may you choke on it! You drink more than you milk.' It's the same thing every day. My knees have grown shaky and my fingers have swollen like a dead sheep. At night my bones ache so that I can't get a wink of sleep."

Baimagambet had heard this many times before.

"Then drop it!" he exclaimed impulsively, ever ready with helpful advice. "Drop this cursed milking! You'd better do something else, Bukke!"

Burkitbai smiled, but it was a bitter, miserable smile.

"My dear boy, wouldn't I have dropped it, if I'd known where to go? But what kind of work am I fit for—lame and helpless as I am?"

And the song was still floating over the aul. Now it was soaring skywards, to be lost in space, now it swept over the zhailyau and could be distinctly heard by the most distant yurtas where the mares were being milked, even as far as the spring, where Baisugur, a thin, large-nosed shepherd boy was listening. He was mounted on a lame two-year-old, which stood with its head facing the aul. He had brought the lambs there at dawn, and had had nothing to eat all day, but still he listened to the song, his head bowed over the animal's mane, forgetful of his hunger. He could not ride to the aul because the sheep still stood by the work yurtas, their heads tied to one another. He saw his mother rising and sitting down again, milking them. If he got to the aul, the lambs would rush to the sheep and then.... The lambs had broken loose from him twice that summer and he would never forget Maibasars's beating. But now the lambs seemed to be dozing peacefully by the river and, reassured, the boy drew nearer to the aul as if pulled by invisible strings. For a long time he stood still, lulled by the sounds, and then he rode nearer to the white yurtas, unaware of what was happening behind him.

Suddenly he was brought to himself by an angry shout: "May you all croak on that song! You have to listen to it too, you scum! I'll show you!"

Maibasars was galloping towards him on a well-groomed horse, his whip raised threateningly. Scared out of his wits, the boy nearly tumbled from his saddle. He looked back and saw that the lambs, which had been lying about so peacefully a few moments before, were rushing forward in a frightened bleating mob, and there was a many-voiced chorus from the tethered sheep. That was what had enraged Maibasars. A shower of stinging blows from the long whip descended on the boy's half-naked back.

"You'll kill me, Agatai, you'll kill me."

He slipped to the ground, but Maibasars kept lashing on, cursing, his horse prancing under him.

Since Kunanbai's departure, the management of the aul had devolved on Aigiz and the "rule from horse-back" on his younger brother Maibasars. Afraid that the tribesmen would get out of hand in Kunanbai's absence, Maibasars severely punished even the most trifling negligence, administering beatings to herdsman, shepherds and those who helped them or did the milking.

The lambs had reached the tethered sheep. Baisugur's mother rushed to her son, screaming, a pail of milk still in her hands.

Meanwhile old Baitory was tossing on the koshma in their yurt.

"That cursed Maibasars! That blood-sucker is torturing my little one again," he groaned.

Old Baitory had heard everything. The sheep were milked not in the middle of the aul but at the very edge, near the poor yurts, to keep the bleating and smells from the masters of the white yurts.

The drubbing of the lambs' hoofs had at once reached the keen ear of the old man. "The little devil has let them go," he thought at first. "He didn't sleep well last night and must have dozed off in the fields. Or perhaps he's fallen off his horse?" Then he heard the cries of his wife hurrying to her child's rescue. Confined to his sooty and tattered koshma by chronic illness, Baitory could only curse his impotence.

"If I am ill, it's because I have herded your damned sheep too long. How many long autumn nights have I spent sleeping in the snow when I guarded the flocks in your kotan, cursed Maibasari! You've brought me to the grave and now you're trying to do the same to that youngster. You've made life a hell for me and have handed it over to my son. You think you're the hand of Allah. May you burn in hell yourself."

The old man's chin quivered as, his eyes closed, he struck his head with feeble fists until he collapsed in impotent rage.

The song still floated over the aul.

Old Iys had finally reached the four white yurtas festively set up at a distance as though for some special gathering or toi. The tethering posts stood between them. A pile of saddles and horse blankets lay near the outer yurtas surrounding the central hexagonal tent. They were mostly women's saddles, cushioned and ornamented, or the saddles of girls, ornate with silver and mother-of-pearl. The animals had evidently been herded into the steppes to graze since none of the horses were about. The guests had apparently been here for a considerable time.

The song which had attracted so many guests was coming from the central yurt, where both hosts and guests were gathered. There was no one in the outer yurtas and only a few women and several men in rags could be seen pottering about the brass tea-urns and

cauldrons suspended over hearths improvised in the hollows.

Old Iys approached the cooks and spoke to a dusky young woman who kept the fire going under the tea-urn with chips of wood.

"Will the young kelin sing today?"

"She will, they say. She won't be afraid. Not her. Everybody wants her to sing."

The old woman sucked her lips and clicked her tongue unbelievably.

"How can that be? It's not to her mothers-in-law's liking. They say she has simply been forbidden to sing. She's not to sing, but to behave decently."

"They've forbidden it in the Great Yurta, but not here. They even make her sing here!"

"So she'll sing, won't she? God bless her heart, she is a good singer."

"A very good singer," exclaimed the women at the hearth. "And she's a good woman too. As lithe as a thread of silk, so soft and gentle that you can't help loving her."

"And the way she treats us too. She's so friendly and polite."

The dusky young woman Zlikha, the young kelin's maid, expressed her raptures in a whisper as though afraid of being overheard.

"She's so simple in her ways and so obliging too. Why does the Great Yurta dislike her so? Why do they say, 'Let her not forget herself. Let her look up and see whose shanrak is overhead and what house she has come to.'"

"Is that what they say already? Oh, those rivals. She's a good daughter-in-law though." The women were sympathetic.

"But here, nobody cares about their backbiting," Zlikha went on. "Why, they coax her to sing by day and

night. Sing on! Let those who envy you try to do better. Don't be afraid." Zlikha laughed with pleasure.

Snatches of song could again be heard from the yurta and the women quickly gathered near the door to listen. Old Iys hobbled behind with her grandson on her back.

The young kelin, the singing kelin, whom the poor neighbours were so fond of, was none other than Aigerim, and the festive yurta where the guests were gathered was her otau, the Young Yurta. Her marriage to Abai had taken place three months before.

Aigerim sat next to Abai, a bright silk shawl over her shoulders. They had unusual guests that day. Among the slender girls, cheerful young women and spruce djiguits, there were several guests who commanded general respect. They sat in the best places on rugs, their elbows supported by downy cushions. These were the guests of honour, sals and seris,* famous for their wit and talent. They had come from afar. All eyes, however, were on one of them, the illustrious Birzhan-sal, a handsome djiguit in the prime of life, whose incomparable voice and beautiful songs were talked of all over Sary-Arka. He was a man of medium stature with a high pale forehead which seemed to shed a light of its own.

This famous singer, otherwise known as seri Birzhan, was a rare, welcome guest who had come to the Tobikty from faraway Kokchetau. A light chapán of black velvet thrown loosely over his shoulders, he sat facing the company, plucking the dombra with skilful fingers. A gold-embroidered jacket of Chinese silk gave a glimpse of the white of his shirt, unfastened at the collar. His hat was festooned with braid and ornamented with a tassel that trembled at every movement of his head. The whole company was moved by the melody of his song.

* Sals and seris, professional singers and akyns who travel about the auls dressed in their bright-coloured costumes.—*Ed.*

They sat listening; their faces flushed and their eyes shining with rapture. It was a song about himself.

*I, Birzhan-sal, Kozhagul's son,
Will never do wrong to my native folk.
A singer, a free akyn and seri,
I bend my neck unto no one's yoke.*

too, listened with delight. His boyishly clear eyes, their long slits alight with black fire, were fastened on the singer. Still it was not the man that he saw before him, but the images conjured up by the melody and words. Stirring music or a song always threw Abai into a reverie. Scenes of nature, events and faces passed before his mind's eye, a sea of visions in which he submerged himself entirely. This time, too, the inspired song tore him away from his surroundings. It seemed to him that the broad-shouldered figure before him had grown to the proportions of a vast giant of the steppes, rising to the very Kokshe peak of his native Sary-Arka, and scanning the boundless spaces, the hilly steppes and the cool shores of the lakes. It seemed to him that the singer looked down on the people inhabiting the land beneath and hurled his challenge where the mighty reigned untrammelled, where the high-born ruled arrogantly and the people groaned in despair. It was a free song that burst from his powerful breast like a war-cry: "I am coming with a song. What treasure is more precious. Does it not penetrate to the marrow of one's bones? Does it not set your blood afire? Try to ignore it, if you can!"

These were not words but sparks in flight. The song was a whirlwind purifying the air, a clear stream sweeping the mud from the slopes of Sary-Arka. The huge pines on the hills of Kokshe inclined their tops to listen as their branches swayed—in time to the swaying of Birzhan's tassel. The night over Sary-Arka was as dark

and soft as the velvet of the singer's chapán. A smile hovered on his lips—and the faces of his listeners lit up like lakes under the moon, whose beams seemed to have penetrated the yurta. A storm of acclamation followed. The song was over, but not so Abai's dreams. He still looked at Birzhan with wide-open, blazing eyes.

Aigerim was the first to notice Abai's strange tension and, pretending to lean her shoulder against his, nudged him gently. Abai recovered with a start and smiled; he was still pale and breathing hard. Thanking his tactful wife with a nod, he turned to Birzhan:

"What shall I say to you, Birzhan-aga," he began, looking at his guest as if he had never seen him before. "There are akyns who have won the acclaim of all, but they have profaned their songs by concealing their emptiness with frills or by selling their souls for the gifts of the rich. There are akyns who are ready to associate with all and sundry and run errands for any rich mirza. A song means no more to them than a pinch of tobacco. But you—you have lifted the song from the threshold to the place of honour and I am proud of this."

Birzhan listened with deep satisfaction.

"I wish things could always be thus; I would do the singing and you the explaining, my dear," said Birzhan with a smile.

There was a gust of laughter from the young people.

The kumys stirred by the servants for the guests since morning had remained untouched. It was only now that Yerbol, Murzagul and Ospan mixed it again and proceeded to pour it into the vividly painted pialas and set them before the guests. The conversation grew livelier; everyone talked at once and there were frequent bursts of laughter. Abai spoke to Birzhan again, wanting to finish his train of thought.

"The merit of a djiguit lies not in his high birth or wealth. Poverty and low birth are no vices if a man is

endowed with talent. But even talent is not everything. As you know, there is an apt saying: 'The talents of Allah should not be debased.' If a gifted akyn is able to express the grief of the people and dry their tears, there is nobody higher or more honourable than he." Abai looked at Aigerim and his nephew Amir, as though what he was saying was particularly for their ears.

The eldest of the young Tobikty present was Bazaraly, who sat in a prominent place with the guests of honour.

"The thought does you credit, Abai," he cut in, half jokingly. "The djiguit's merit indeed lies in his gifts, but wasn't it I who told you so? Haven't I tried to convince all the Tobikty of this? 'Why reproach me for my poverty?' I used to say. 'You would do better to see what sort of a person I am.' Did Birzhan have to come all the way from Kokchetau to make you understand this." He looked quizzically at Abai and laughed. The jest caused a new burst of merriment, led by Birzhan.

"You're right, Bazekeh, as always," Abai replied laughing. "If not for your poverty, who would be the best man among the Tobikty if not you? But it is not of this that we are talking now," he added seriously. "The flower of the Tobikty youth are gathered here. Let's have a look at ourselves. Are we talented or not? What have we created that is lasting, that can be valued by the people. What have we done for our fellow-men?"

Abai spoke with deliberate vehemence, his gaze sweeping the company. Amid general silence, he turned to Bazaraly.

"Seriously, Bazekeh, our tribe expects a lot of us. They say that our generation will show the way in song. But let us face the truth."

"Speak up!" Bazaraly caught him up. "Let's have your verdict." He smiled, half rising in anticipation of the answer.

Abai drained his kumys and regarded Bazaraly gravely.

"Bazekeh, we've only promised to create something new, but have not really. We are either drudge horses or spoilt mares, fiery enough, but idle and sterile. That's my verdict."

Bazaraly clicked his tongue and shook his head. "I can't join you in that game," he said. "I have not promised to create anything. I am neither an akyn nor a singer. Don't expect the impossible from me." He leaned back with satisfied amusement while the rest laughed in sympathy.

This interlude had stirred something within Birzhan, who reached for his dombra and gently played a few chords. While praising Birzhan's skill and extolling him before the young people, Abai had expressed his feelings without a shade of false tribal pride and as though in answer, Birzhan sang his famous song, "Zhanbota."

Everybody knew its history. It was a song of humiliation and accusation against the high and mighty of whom Abai had just spoken.

*Zhanbota, the haughty son of Karpik,
Is too fond of wielding his power and his stick.
His friend Aznabai sent this man to wring
From my hands the dombra with which I sing.
He flogged me, that man, all the folk before.
Though the bard did not die of that insult sore,
Yet is it not death to endure such shame?
Can Birzhan survive such a blot on his name?
Where, Zhanbota, such a law have you found,
That a man may be whipped like the vilest hound?*

Birzhan sang of his grief and resentment. "You who have extolled me here," he seemed to say, "must see how low I have been brought. The whip of the rascals

with power hovers over my head. You may see perfection in me, but think of my lot."

The confession was bitter, and Abai was sorry for the singer.

"To think that this Zhanbota and the other one—Az-nabai, wasn't it?—are men of renown and rulers of destiny," he said as soon as the song was over. "They have the power and the honours and do as they please. They have been upset only by Birzhan-aga's song. The Aznabais shout for all the world to hear, 'We are Gods on earth,'" he went on gravely, "But where are they tomorrow? Not a speck of dust is left of them. But in the steppes of Sary-Arka, the story-tellers and singers will preserve your name, Birzhan-aga, among the tribes of Karaul, Kerei and Uak. Only that which you have created will survive." The young people failed to grasp Abai's idea completely, but the older folk chorussed support for him.

"You, young people, are yourselves a pledge that Birzhan's name will be handed down through the centuries. You all dream of becoming singers and have been learning Birzhan's songs for more than two months. Is it likely that you will ever forget that which you have committed to your memory? The songs will live and the name of their author too." He pointed to Amir. "Take Amir, here. There is no singer better for him than Birzhan. All eyes turned to Amir, who was playing the tune of "Zhirma-bes," a song he had learned from Birzhan.

"Suppose you sing to us," Birzhan asked, prompted by the ecstatic expression of the young man.

Amir was not perturbed, though his dusky features grew slightly paler. He confidently launched into the introduction in his clear and pleasant voice, and did his best to preserve all the nuances as he had been taught by Birzhan. "Zhirma-bes," a song but recently composed by Zilkara, had not been sung by the Tobikty before Bir-

zhan's arrival. Its moving melody had kindled the hearts of young people, and Amir, captivated, had learned it at once. It was a song in which a girl addressed a djiguit:

*Give that ring to me, my darling, though of
copper it may be,
Let that frost outside be bitter—'tis a happy
day for me.
Bare your feet and enter softly; kiss me, darling,
tenderly!
If they find us, we are ruined—no more joy
we'll ever see.*

Bazaraly looked up at the first words and even flushed with pleasure.

"There's a girl for you, that beautiful dark-eyes," he exclaimed when the song was finished. "If only I could find one like that!"

The company was amused. Birzhan smiled at him reproachfully. "What do you mean—if only you could, Bazekkeh? There's a dark-eyes right next to you. You're not blind, are you? Look at Balbala. Is she any worse than the girl in the song?"

Bazaraly turned quickly. "True, by God," he exclaimed flashing a glance at his neighbour. It was the look of a falcon peeping from under his hood.

Balbala sat slightly aslant of him and returned his glance from the corner of her eye. Blushing gently, she frowned primly, then smiled for an instant.

Bazaraly had caught an irresistible glance from her shining dark eyes, and like a repenting sinner chanted:

"Oh, woe is me! God has punished me with blindness. May Allah have mercy on me!" He let his eyes wander over the young women in the tent. "They are all beautiful—every single one of them."

To soften the effect of his jest, Birzhan added, "Have a good look at all of them. They are all good speakers,

and as to their singing, it's as sweet as honey. My darling pupils! They are courteous and soft as silk." To emphasize his friendliness he avoided calling them girls or sisters. Though he mentioned no names, it was clear that he meant Balbala, Umitei, Korimbala and Aigerim. All four flushed with pleasure—they were the rosy colour of the stray morning sunbeam on the rugs and silk covers. The company grew more animated and there were more jokes and laughter, but even at the height of the merriment the young people still behaved with decorum.

They were indeed the flower of the Tobikty youth. The girls, young women and djiguits of the Irgizbai, Torgai, Kotibak, Zhigitek and even the outlying Bokenshi had come here two days before in response to Abai's invitation.

Young Amir, the son of his deceased brother, sat at his right side. Before his brother died, Abai had promised to adopt his children and had taken as good care of them as of his own. Abai loved Amir dearly, allowing no one to offend him. The young man was very fond of songs and promised to become a good singer.

Amir had come with some friends of his own and his young kinswoman, the beautiful Umitei, the daughter of Eskhozha. Balbala, a bride of the Anet tribe, had come with another company. The Bokenshi were represented by Akimkhosha, Sugir's son, who had brought his sister Korimbala. Oralbai, the younger brother of Bazaraly, had come from the Zhigitek. These young people liked music and were invariably good singers. This was not the first time they had met Birzhan.

"Go and see for yourself! If he is really as good a singer as they say, then invite him to our aul," Abai had instructed Amir when he had heard of Birzhan's arrival two months before. "Arrange a gathering and a feast for the young people who may come here to learn from him."

Finding Birzhan in one of the remote Tobikty auls,

Amir had spent two days with him, extended his invitation and without delay returned to his aul to set up a yurta for the guest and make other preparations for the occasion. On his way home, he visited his uncle and told him how delighted he had been with the singer. Abai first received Birzhan in Amir's aul and then in his own, in Kunanbai's Great Aul. He too was captivated by the akyn, and they were soon as intimate as old friends. Abai had several times invited to his aul the young people of Tobikty, the best singers and dombra players among them, and now he had introduced them to Birzhan, explaining what great talents he had. The young men and women had learned the akyn's songs by heart and eagerly urged Abai and the singer to come to their auls as well. It thus came about that Abai and Birzhan had for a time stayed with Amir and Umitei and visited the beautiful singer Korimbala, Sugir's daughter, everywhere being received with the deepest respect. On their way back, they had spent a considerable time with Bazaraly and Oralbai of the Zhigitek.

On the eve of Birzhan's return to his native aul, Abai had ordered that four white yurtas be erected for a farewell toi. The departure of the akyn was scheduled for the next day, and the young people had come to spend the last evening with him. The skill of the young singers was to be tested; each of them was to sing a song. Amir had led with the song "Zhirma-bes."

When the laughter evoked by Bazaraly's jest had abated, it was Oralbai who reached for the dombra to accompany Korimbala.

Abai remembered the young woman very well. When she was still a slip of a girl, she had been an accidental witness of his love for Togzhan. She had now become the handsome and spoiled daughter of a rich aul. Already betrothed to a djiguit of the Karakesek tribe, she had been kept at home by her father Sugir and her brothers

—she was the life and soul of their aul and they could not bear to part with her. She was a cheerful beauty with large, striking dark eyes, luxuriant chestnut braids and a fair face pink with liveliness. Though she bore herself freely and independently, there was nothing that could injure her reputation in the eyes of her aul and family.

She, too, sang a song she had learned from Birzhan, a song hitherto unheard among the Tobikty, “Karga”—“Beloved”—whose author was unknown, a favourite of Birzhan and other singers. “Is there a place for me in the heart of my beloved?” Her singing was an expression of cheerful and tender friendship. Birzhan and Abai were fascinated. Then followed the ardent song of Oralbai, “Gaukhartas”—“The Precious Stone.”

*Your graceful movements caress my glance,
Your earrings glitter, your sholpy dance.*

The pleasing voice of the blonde djiguit lent fresh charm to the words. He seemed to visualize a Kazakh maiden with silver sholpy in her hair and eyes that flashed fire. The company listened with rapt attention.

Korimbala smiled approval without waiting for Birzhan’s opinion.

“Sing something else, just once more,” she pleaded extending her white hands weighted with bracelets.

“Yes, please do,” Birzhan warmly agreed.

The voice was raised in song again:

*Beyond the river thy voice I hear,
Make thy earring a boat that I may come near.
If I cannot cross then woe is to me;
Not even in heaven will I find thee.*

Those words spoke of Oralbai’s own passion. The heart of the young djiguit revelled in the warmth of love like a young lynx basking in the sun. “Joy is not joyous with-

out you. Let our hearts be one." The fervour of the song enveloped them all. Korimbala's cheeks were burning. Aigerim, though flushed, smiled reservedly. Balbala's red lips parted slightly to reveal her gleaming white teeth. Umitei's eyes were fixed on Amir.

The dombra passed from hand to hand, and now it was Umitei's turn. The young woman needed no coaxing and sang "Bayan-aul." Now caressing the lower keys, now seeking higher chords, Amir merged his accompaniment with Umitei's voice, and the dombra and the girl sang in unison.

*Low above Bayan-aul the heavy storm-clouds creep.
O the hawk has missed the fox amid the mountains
steep.
Know, your lover will remember till his very death
How you whispered as we parted "Love!" beneath
your breath.*

Umitei's singing was filled with tender affection, but reflected doubts, repressed hopes and secret sadness. She interpreted the tune and words in her own way. The song seemed to rise over the yurta like the shimmering sickle of the new moon.

Umitei was festively and handsomely dressed. She wore a beaver hat and gold earrings. Her sweet face, though usually flushed, had now acquired a pallor which was emphasized by the mole on her right cheek.

Everyone listened spell-bound, some sitting, others standing. When her voice died away, she looked over the company and turned to Aigerim, who sat next to her. Her features were as serene and cheerful as before.

"Now, it is the turn of the real singer at last!"

There was a stir among the women of the outer yurtas who had gathered to eavesdrop at the door.

"The kelin, the kelin will sing," they whispered.

In Amir's hands, the dombra seemed to be summoning the new singer. Aigerim looked at Umitei with embarrassment.

"I'd better not, my dear."

"No, you're not supposed to miss your turn," Abai interjected. "Sing the beginning of the song of your native aul at least." The tone of his voice imperfectly concealed his impatience to hear her. Birzhan, Bazaraly, Balbala and Umitei looked at her eagerly, expectantly.

Her serene features were fresh and warm; her pensive eyes touched the soul—shining almond eyes, sunk in the bluish shadow with which nature rarely endows those fair mat-skinned faces. This shadow is the brief companion of youth and purity and in time will vanish for ever. Beautiful dark eyes are fairly common, but all too few are marked with this touch of loveliness. Abai could not feast his eyes upon her sufficiently and had often regarded that shadow with delight. "Those eyes are like chicks peeping from their warm nest," he often thought.

With her eyes upon Balbala, who sat opposite, Aigerim began the introduction, unusually long and quite different from the others. Abai again fell into a reverie, his eyes fixed on his beloved. It was only the beginning of the song that penetrated him.

Ai-bi-bye, hear the song that sing II

Then the words were forgotten. He could hear only the melody, which at times was reminiscent of the ringing of a little bell and at others of a rustling sound. Whose wings were those fluttering in the sun and tempting one to venture into the skies? "Arise and cast off your fetters," the soft whisper said to him. "Your heart is chained and your mystery unspoken. Reveal it at last. With all my heart I call upon you to follow this song. Shake the burden from your shoulders and the song will embrace you, will caress you like a beloved. Be bold and

speaking your mind. Be inspired and inspire. Unfold the wealth of your talent, for it will disappear with youth like the blue shadow lurking about my eyes."

Though her eyes were turned upon the others, Abai felt that the song was meant for him alone.

The melody died away. His eyes still upon her, Abai sat immobile in strange despair. Why had that round white chin become motionless, why were those lips which had just carried a song now silent? Where were those white teeth which had so gladdened the heart?

Abai came to himself with a start when Aigerim handed him a piala of kumys. He put aside her hand like a sleep-walker and frowned.

"What a pity it is over," he said slowly.

Aigerim reddened with embarrassment, but laughed softly, the piala still in her hands. Recovering at last, Abai accepted the piala, tenderly embraced his wife and stroked the silk kerchief on her shoulders.

"Our dear kelin, may your children prosper," called the women at the threshold in chorus. "May Allah give you joy!"

"May you live the whole of your life with such a song and such esteem as ours," mumbled old Iys.

"That's a good wish," smiled Abai, turning to her. "Say 'amen' to that, Aigerim!"

"Amen, my dear woman," Aigerim gravely complied. Beckoning to the old woman, she offered her a piala of kumys with her own hands.

Birzhan had been moved by Aigerim's singing, but did not thank her, fearing that she might mistake his words for flattery. Zhirenshe, for his part, could not restrain himself.

"Tell me, my heart," he said puzzled, "was it a song from your lips or from Paradise?"

"If one must sing at all, one should sing like Aigerim," said Birzhan turning to Bazaraly.

The song of the hostess was the signal for the feast to start. The women who had gathered at the entrance now rose and scurried off towards the cauldrons which had been boiling incessantly. The guests, a lively group, went out into the open for some air before the repast. As Aigerim ordered the kumys pialas to be removed, Kalikha entered the yurta.

"Telkara, your mother is calling you," she said, approaching Abai.

"I may be away for some time," he said to Amir, Os-pan and Aigerim. "Let the guests be served and don't wait for me." He rose and left the yurta.

2

In the Great Yurta, Abai found Ulzhan, Aigiz and Dilda waiting for him.

He had long noticed that his mother was quickly growing old. She still preserved her impressive bearing, but the hair straggling from under her kerchief was grey; her broad face had grown sallow and the furrows on her forehead deeper and longer. Especially sharp were the lines at the corners of her mouth, the traces of hard thinking. Abai could not help noticing that they added grimness to her sad and pensive features. "I'm not going to be lenient with you," her cold and forbidding air seemed to say. Abai waited for her to speak with some trepidation. But no sooner did she begin than Abai felt her usual kindness behind the severe words.

"Abai-zhan," she began slowly, looking at him intently, "it is not for nothing that they say, 'There is no peace for those who think; there are no cares for those who make merry.' Isn't that what is happening to you, my son?"

Abai knew what she meant, but wanted her to speak her mind more fully.

"Everything is possible, Apa," said Abai looking at her questioningly.

"It is a long time since your aged father left and we have had no news from him. We are full of anxiety. Do you not feel the same, my son?"

Aigiz was displeased with this introduction.

"Who is to remind you of this if not we, your mothers?" she cut in impatiently. "You've neglected us all the summer. Is this a time to act as you are doing now? What can you be thinking of?"

Abai said nothing wanting to hear them to the end. Dilda could no longer restrain herself.

"What can he be thinking of? He has neither the time nor the mind for thinking," she said bitterly, realizing that she had the support of both mothers-in-law. "He's taken a witch for a mistress. A singer, of all things! He's ready to sell his soul for her." Angry tears welled up in her eyes. Ulzhan did nothing to stop the flow of her bitterness.

"Are those seri and girls the only guests in the aul?" said Ulzhan. "Has not Dilda's mother been here for a long time? She's your mother, too, and you pay no attention to her. It is she who should be the guest of honour. And it was not me she came to see! She wanted to bless you, perhaps for the last time, for nobody can say what will happen tomorrow. And you have not once come to see us. You don't even think of it. That's what you've come to."

Dilda burst into tears, shouting, "A beggar's daughter. She's not fit to cross my threshold, but just look at her. She's barely taken off the wedding veil and has already turned up her nose. She's been singing songs day and night just to spite me. What impertinence to give a beggar such licence!"

Before she could finish Abai turned upon her pale with fury. "That's enough, Dilda! Good-for-nothings spring

from rich families as well." He looked at her severely. There in the Young Yurta he had left the spring and sunshine, while here there were only the lowering skies of autumn and the dry, biting wind, the harbinger of the djut.

"Birzhan is my guest and an akyn whose like has never been heard among the Tobikty," he continued, answering all the reproaches at once. "I do not compel the young people to hear him, do I? They themselves are drawn to him. If you were more intelligent, Dilda, you would send Akilbai, Abish and Magash to hear him too."

"My children shan't go there," Dilda vehemently retorted. "You would like to have them hanging round that witch, wouldn't you? My poor little darlings, orphans though their father is alive." Sobbing hysterically, she rushed from the tent.

Her absence, however, did not help Abai to come to terms with his mothers. They continued their reproaches and insisted that the guests should be received in Dilda's yurta.

"What do I care if you love Aigerim," said Aigiz bluntly. "Let her not turn up her nose at us. Why shouldn't she remember that she springs from the Baishori clan and under whose shanrak she is now sitting. Her songs are a humiliation to us and she had better stop them."

Thus the Great Yurta had laid down the law. Abai held his tongue, though the injustice of it all seared his soul. To forbid Aigerim to sing was both unjust and cruel. The decision had been prompted by Dilda, and was characteristic of her callousness. His heart filled with bitter resentment, he heard them out in silence and then left the yurta.

He was on his way to the Young Yurta when Maibasars called to him. The man looked as healthy and ruddy as he had always been; only his beard had turned grey. He had grown a little stouter and acquired a confident bearing which showed that since Kunanbai's departure he

was the real master of the aul. Leading his nephew aside, Maibasar seated him some distance from the Great Yurta.

"Abai," he began importantly, "I've been told to talk to you by your mother-in-law, who is also your guest. It's me she singled out to talk to you." He looked at his nephew significantly. Smiling faintly, Abai imitated his uncle's important air. Maibasar frowned, but pretended not to notice this and continued in the same vein.

"Your mother-in-law asks and I order that you shall be in Dilda's yurta as long as she chooses to stay with us. Why are you fussing about Aigerim all the time? Has she cast a spell over you? You're not the first man to be married to two wives. Your grandfather and father had several wives, too. If you did take a second wife, you must not neglect the first. Aren't you man enough for the two of them?"

Still affecting an air of importance, Abai could hardly wait for him to finish.

"Mayekeh," he began bombastically, "life is passing, beauty is fading and beards are turning grey, as though to remind us that the time is gone for the sowing of wild oats. You're still the same matchmaker as you always were, aren't you?" Abai smiled acidly.

This smile gave Maibasar's thoughts quite another turn. Slapping his thighs, he burst into laughter. "Oi, you rascal, you've tripped me up again. I thought you had forgotten all about that long ago, but you never miss the chance of taking a dig at me, do you?"

But though he had turned Abai's thrust into a joke, he stood his ground.

"What if I was the matchmaker in your marriage with Dilda. She is still your lawful wife. Or perhaps you're so crammed with Russian books that you have become a Russian? Two wives are not allowed among them."

"It would not really be a bad idea to borrow that custom from the Russians," remarked Abai.

"Is that so? So that's what you're thinking of? What will happen to Dilda and the children then?"

"She doesn't need me. She's lost all feeling for me except malice and revenge."

"Now, now.... You're not going to leave her, are you?"

"She's the mother of my children. If she's a good mother, she'll be my friend. If that is not enough for her, she has herself to blame."

He rose abruptly. Maibasars was nonplussed—Abais words seemed preposterous to him. He tried to object, but Abai brushed him aside.

"Enough of that," he cut him short. "That's my business and let my kinsmen mind their own." Unexpectedly he changed the subject. On his way to Ulzhan from the Young Yurta, Abai had met Baimagambet and Baisugur, the latter in tears. Baimagambet had been trying to soothe the boy and when Abai came up, he complained bitterly of Maibasars. Abai suddenly remembered this little episode.

"I've something more to say to you. And I'm angry, I can tell you," he began sharply. "Why did you beat Baisugur? His father is dying and you...." Abai paled with anger. But Maibasars was not easily put out.

"Is it worth talking about that?" he waved his hand in a gesture of disgust. "The boy is all right. Nothing will happen to him. Those shepherd boys get out of hand."

"Why should they get out of hand?" Abai grew still angrier. "They're devoured by need as a corpse by blue-flies. You think nobody will intercede for them, and you do what you like. I demand that you stop raising your kamcha* over the aul. This is not the first time you've whipped our tribesmen."

* Kamcha—a kind of whip.—*Ed.*

Maibasar tried to say something, but Abai went on:

"Do you think we are an aul of orphans and you are the guardian? Father is away, it's true, but we're not children. Don't you dare molest the shepherds or the poor neighbours again! I don't want you to threaten them, let alone beat them. Just let me catch you laying a finger on the children. If you do, we'll quarrel, Mayekkeh. It will be a quarrel you won't like, Mayekkeh, and you'll have only yourself to blame. By striking that boy you have struck at me. Is that clear?"

In the Young Yurta, he found his guests preparing to depart. Their mounts, well-rested pacers, fiery amblers and well-fed mares, stood tethered between the yurtas, where their saddles and ornaments had been admired by the entire aul.

Abai was not aware of the fact that Maibasar, determined to put an end to the merriment in Aigerim's yurta, had secretly sent his own people to some of the guests as soon as Abai had left. Among others, Akimkhozha received the following message: "Mirza is away and we live in anxiety. Mirth is out of place where care has entered in. Let Akimkhozha hint as much to his fellow guests." Aigiz, who was a distant relative of Umitei, had sent her a message as from one kinswoman to another: "Let Umitei go home. There has been enough merry-making. Her father Eskhozha must be missing her." All this took place without Abai's knowledge, so that he did not realize that Maibasar and Aigiz were driving his guests away. Nor did the guests care to tell one another the reasons for their unexpected departure.

The young people drained the farewell cups of kumys, thanking Birzhan and Abai, and went to mount their horses. Abai, Birzhan, Yerbol and Aigerim went out to see their guests off.

The first to go were Akimkhozha with his sister Korimbala and his friends. They were joined by Oralbai. Then

followed Amir and Umitei, accompanied by the jesting Murzagula. Their auls lay in Birzhan's path and they had invited the singer to stay a while with them. Abai was very much in favour of this—he wanted the tribe to fête this welcome guest again.

Balbala and her companions were also on the point of going, but Bazaraly, who had long saddled his horse, was still undecided as to which party to join. When Balbala mounted, assisted by Aigerim, he regarded her intently for an instant and then lightly remarked:

"What's life to Medjnun if he's parted from his Leila? Where's my horse?"

He quickly mounted and rode alongside Balbala, having come to a sudden decision to see her as far as her aul. The two did not notice the malicious gaze with which Manas, one of Kulinshak's five sons, known as bes-kaska—the five dare-devils, was watching them. When his alert ear had caught the djiguit's words, he at once drew Maibasar from Aigiz's yurt.

"There has been a lot of talk about Bazaraly and Balbala among the Torgai," he said gasping with anger. "Just see for yourself. There they go together—a devoted couple, aren't they? Is he trying to seduce a bride of our tribe? The girl has a bridegroom, Besbespai, our nephew. He's a batir* and won't stand for this. But since the honour of the tribe is at stake, I won't keep out of it either. I'll have my revenge on that Kaumen miscreant. I just want you to know about it, Mayekheh."

White with anger, he gripped the handle of his whip with trembling fingers.

Maibasar had his own account to settle with Bazaraly. It was only recently that he had heard about Bazaraly's connections with Nurganim the previous year. Gritting his teeth, he had said nothing out of deference

* Batir—hero.—*Ed.*

to Kunanbai. But as he listened to Manas, his eyes flashed and his nostrils dilated.

"Don't touch him now. Wait till after dark," he said to his angry informant in an undertone. "Set a trap for him near Balbala's yurt. Allah will help you and you'll catch him red-handed. If you five dare-devils don't teach him a lesson then, may the earth swallow you up, may you all perish. Understand?" He nudged Manas. "Now go."

As the young people left Kunanbai's aul that evening, they rode along in small compact groups singing the new songs they had heard. First it was lively snatches from "Zhirma-bes," then the plaintive "Zhanbota" so full of reproach, then the impetuous confessions of the swift "Zhambas-siipar."* The stream of Birzhan's precious gifts flowed richly over the steppes.

The best songs he had brought from Sary-Arka came to life again in the confident young voices of Amir and Oralbai, revealed their mystery in the soft diminuendo of the beautiful Balbala, fading away but reaching far in the singing of the sweet Umitei and the charming Korimbala.

"Oh, life, life, how I love thee," those free melodies seemed to say. "Unfold your wings, oh skilful singer. Let the young hearts pour forth their sadness on this evening of song." How passionate their appeal! "Where are you, my beloved?" What sacrifices would she not make who says, "Even if they seize us, my love, I shall not be afraid." What passion lies in the words of the djiguit, "Thinking of you, I am a lone wolf ranging the hills." What faithfulness is promised in the words, "Know, your lover will remember till his very death, how you whispered as we parted 'Love!' beneath your breath." And the refrains, "My Moon," "Dark Eyes," "Light of My

* Zhambas-siipar—fond caresses.—*Ed.*

Eyes," "My Consolation," "Impatience"—all express the full measure of yearning.

On that evening, the voices of Korimbala and Oralbai mingled over the serene steppes. Akimkhozha, who loved songs passionately but dared not sing himself, made them sing the songs they had heard from Birzhan all the way.

On that evening, Bazaraly listened to the singing of Balbala, as he accompanied her to her aul, not once taking his eyes off her as she swayed on her horse like a slender flower stem.

On that evening, Amir and Umitei, though surrounded by a crowd of riders, spoke in songs as if they were alone.

On that evening, too, Aigerim sang once more in the Young Yurta for Birzhan and Abai.

At first she had stubbornly refused, pleading that she had sung enough that day and that it would be better to listen to Birzhan. This was merely a pretext, for she, too, knew what Abai had been told in the Great Yurta, although he had hoped to conceal it from her.

She had been summoned by Aigiz and Dilda as soon as the young people had departed.

"Abai has no regard for us," they said with asperity, "but you'd better take our advice."

They reminded her of the poverty of her clan, asking whether she realized what she had been and what she was now.

"Don't be too proud. Slacken your pace! Look well and see whom you are trying to outstrip."

Aigerim listened to the unjust and arrogant reproaches with tears in her eyes. Alternately paling and reddening, she said nothing, her silence prompted by her natural reticence and her love for Abai. She had sung because Abai had liked it, merely wanting to express her happiness. When she had sung in her poor aul in the old days,

no one had rebuked her. These rich people here were apparently even accustomed to ruling over songs. The final words of Aigiz were especially humiliating.

"We are a rich aul and what are you? You are fit only to be our slave. You've wormed your way out of an aul where our shepherds and slaves were born; so tread cautiously and know your place. Do not turn up your nose. Keep your pride down, you upstart. Remember that you are not our equal. And we do not want to hear your voice again."

Aigerim returned, her heart burning at this injustice and weighed down by the blunt and stupid violence of those who envied and scorned her. She saw before her in all its meanness and cruelty a rich and perfidious aul determined to crush everybody. She could sing no more.

But Abai, Birzhan, Ospan and Yerbol would hear of no refusal. Ospan was the most pressing. Lolling on his corpeh like an Oriental potentate, he declared that he would not have a zhengeh deny him his wishes.

"Look here, Aigerim. Is it seeming that a young bride, still in her veil, should cross a kinsman? Am I your brother-in-law or am I not? I order you to sing or bear the consequences." Abai and Birzhan joined in Ospan's banter laughingly, and Aigerim at last complied. But now she was under a strain and sang timidly. Birzhan and Abai listened intently and then demanded other songs she had learned in the past few days. The greater her grief, the more her heart went out to Abai. His appreciation of her and her songs filled her heart with love. She could not help noticing that Abai reciprocated her feelings and her singing grew less and less restrained, as if she were throwing off one fetter after another.

When Aigerim's voice was once more heard to ring free and clear over the aul, the Great Yurta sent Kalikha to the otau. The cunning old crone who knew everyone

in the aul so well entered the Young Yurta in grim silence, expecting that her very appearance would be enough to silence Aigerim, but it was not so. Having finished her song, Aigerim respectfully placed Kalikha at her side in the place of honour, and at Ospan's request sang again.

As soon as she began, Kalikha, unnoticed by the others, gave her a painful pinch. Aigerim did not flinch or cease her singing, although the ruthless reminder wounded her cruelly. Flushing and barely managing to restrain her tears she sang "Zhambas-siipar" to the end, and no one noticed her agitation except Kalikha.

"Enough of that. Will you keep quiet!" Kalikha hissed.

Aigerim sang no more. Birzhan took up the dombra and his powerful voice floated into the starry night.

This night of song ended unexpectedly in a barbarous outrage. The event took place amid the Anet tribe and the victim was Bazaraly.

Balbala and he had been singing and talking softly all the way and reached the aul at dusk. The young woman was loath to take leave of him.

"Be my guest, Bazekeh," she insisted.

Her elder brother, master of the aul since the death of her father, was away. The fair-skinned, rosy baibishe was confused when a strange djiguit entered the yurta behind her daughter, but nevertheless ordered tea to be served.

Drawing Balbala aside the baibishe asked:

"Do you realize what you are doing, my daughter? The Torgai, the kinsmen of your betrothed, are wandering not far from here. They can even hear the barking of our dogs. What shall I tell them if they ask whom you are receiving?"

Balbala smiled broadly in reply. "Ah, Apa, am I too not a guest, as you call me? Soon I shall go to the Tor-

gai for ever. Why should they resent what I do now? Judge for yourself: could I refuse hospitality to Baze-ken? Receive him as an honoured guest and do not worry."

The baibishe ordered a lamb to be slaughtered. The fire was kindled and the yurta grew warm and cheerful. Balbala was all smiles, singing songs and jesting, and Bazaraly was quite carried away. Balbala's sister-in-law came from her Young Yurta, and he began to sing and jest. Soon everyone was at ease.

As the evening drew to a close, two Torgai youngsters, poorly dressed and looking like shepherd boys, came into the yurta. They were looking for a lost lamb, they said, in explanation of their unexpected appearance. The baibishe, however, had the impression that they were more interested in her guest than in their lamb, for they watched the women closely and listened to every word they said. She offered them some titbits and hurriedly bundled them out.

To avoid talk, the Mother sent Balbala to spend the night with her sister-in-law, while Bazaraly was accommodated in her own Great Yurta.

The youngsters hung about the aul, asking the shepherds whether their lamb had been seen in the flocks driven out to graze during the day. They left only at midnight, when Balbala took leave of her guest, closed the tunduk of the Great Yurta behind her and went off to the tent of her sister-in-law, not suspecting that she was being watched.

Bazaraly could not sleep and soon after midnight went out of the yurta. The moon had not set and everything was still. Neither the barking of the dogs nor the chanting of the night watchman could be heard. The white Young Yurta was not far off. Its tunduk was down and everybody seemed to be asleep. Bazaraly was walking towards it when a dark figure emerged from the shadow of the

neighbouring yurta. A giant of a man seized him by the shoulder and jerked him back.

"Where are you going? Get away from here!" he hissed.

Bazaraly recognized the man at once, but tried to conceal his alarm.

"It's you, Manas," he said calmly.

"Manas or talas,* it doesn't matter. Just follow me," Manas snapped. He was speaking quietly, but was seething with rage.

"Don't be a fool, go on your way." Bazaraly tried to shake him off, but Manas held fast.

"If you're a djiguit, then respect the honour of a girl. Do you want to disgrace Balbala before the whole zhailyau? Follow me or I'll raise the devil right here."

Bazaraly shook his head and stepped back. They had hardly reached the shadow of the yurta when three more djiguits sprang out of the bushes. One of them was the younger brother of Balbala's bridegroom, as huge and as agile as Manas and Besbespai and as handy as they with his soeel. The four closed in on Bazaraly and pushed him away from the tent. One of them was leading Bazaraly's grey horse, which had not been unsaddled. The djiguits now put their captive on the horse, mounted their own and set off for the Torgai auls.

"Why don't you respect the reputation of your bride? If you make a row, there will be a lot of talk tomorrow," argued Bazaraly as soon as they had come some distance from the yurtas. They would not listen to him. When they had reached the steppes, Manas motioned to the others behind Bazaraly's back and the djiguits at once fell upon their captive with their whips, one of them checking Bazaraly's horse by seizing the reins and winding they round his wrist. After beating him severely the djiguits removed Bazaraly's chapán and led away his horse.

* Talas—accuser or plaintiff.—*Ed.*

Early that morning Maibasar summoned Abai to Aigiz's yurt. When Abai arrived, he found Bazaraly, Yerbol, Aigiz and Nurganim waiting for him. At the entrance he was astonished to learn from Ospan about the beating Bazaraly had received.

Bazaraly's right cheek had been bruised by a whip, and Abai was pained to see his proud and handsome friend thus disfigured and humiliated.

Maibasar's attitude was quite different—he could hardly conceal his glee. Maliciously, he kept questioning Bazaraly about the details, even demanding to know with what he had been beaten and for how long. Bazaraly's pale face was twitching with anger. He answered in monosyllables, realizing that Maibasar, while pretending sympathy, was trying to humiliate him before the others and especially in the eyes of Nurganim.

"Did they actually strike your face with the whip?" Maibasar continued, in gloating tones, looking at him with a smile of mockery. "The Torgai must have gone mad. What a cheeky sparrow* to perch on such a face!"

Bazaraly, who had been downcast and reticent until then, suddenly flared up:

"You should know that the Torgai long ago turned from sparrows into falcons. Wasn't it you who made them cheeky by allowing them to perch on your backside? The sparrow first pecked your behind and then took a peck at my head." Bazaraly laughed scornfully and the mirth became general. Everybody remembered how Maibasar had been thrashed a few years before by the very same bes-kaska—Manas and his brothers.

"Curse your rotten hide; may you chew the embers of hell for that," Maibasar grunted, the thrust having hit right home.

* Torgai—the name of the clan—means sparrow.—*Ed.*

Abai supported Bazaraly, pleased with his friend's retort.

"Good for you, Bazekeh," he shouted through his laughter. "With a tongue as sharp as yours, you'll never be killed even by a bullet, let alone a whip."

Everyone in the aul did their best to conceal the event from the guests, and especially from Birzhan. Abai for that reason gave Bazaraly a saddled horse and sent him home.

On the afternoon of the same day Birzhan took his leave of the Great Aul. Ulzhan had invited him to her yurt, serving him with her own hands. She gave him her maternal blessing, wished him Godspeed and begged him to accept the aul's togiz—nine valuable gifts which were presented by Aigiz and Nurganim. From herself she presented him with a tai-tuyak, an ingot of silver as large as a foal's hoof. Birzhan's friends were presented with silks and velvet.

"You have regaled my kinsmen, young and old, with your songs," she said. "Be happy, wherever your path may take you. May your music ascend and your fame shine everywhere, light of my eyes! Here, take this modest token of gratitude from your elder sisters and zhengeh. Take it as a parting gift and do not judge us harshly."

"Allah grant that you may see the happiness of your sons and daughters, kind mother. Wherever I may be, I shall always remember the respect and attention I have received in your aul."

Birzhan reverently pressed the hands of Ulzhan and Aigiz in both of his own.

Abai himself presented Birzhan with a brown pedigree pacer, and each of the akyn's companions with an ordinary horse.

Birzhan had decided to accept Amir's invitation to visit him. Abai had also been urged by Umitei and Amir

to visit them, and to take his young kelin with him. At first Aigerim had bashfully refused, but at Abai's insistence she joined him and Birzhan. Yerbol also went with them.

The aul of Kunkeh, Kunanbai's elder wife, was reached the same evening. This was where Amir lived, and he had set up a special yurta for the guests.

Once again, the dombra and new songs resounded throughout the night. As usual, Birzhan and Abai began talking after the evening meal and went on until dawn.

Abai had always thought songs the highest of man's creations. He had always been stirred by this thought, and one summer, listening to Birzhan, he had expressed it in verses which began with the words:

*As song the union of music and word,
Songs from my childhood my spirit have stirred.
Deep are the thoughts that songs call forth.
Love them like me and know their worth.*

Now he recited the poem to Birzhan. The singer had always respected Abai's deep understanding and highly original thoughts, but now he perceived a fresh gift, the gift of the poet.

"Abai-zhan," he exclaimed, "you always claim that my songs bring forth that which is good in you. But it is you who have shown us singers the treasure we have carried unknown to ourselves. You have lit up my path to the end of my days."

"But we are striving for the same thing," Abai objected.

"In our efforts some of us achieve more and others less," said Birzhan. "But this I shall say as we part: It is through you alone that I have understood the

power of song and verse. I want you to know how much I owe you and how deeply I appreciate your parting gift."

During the summer Birzhan had often told Abai about the famous orators, illustrious singers and wise akyns of the Central Orda—from the Argin, Naiman, Kerei and Uak. Abai thought of them now and of their great legacy.

"Birzhan-aga," he said, "we should serve art as long as we live. But let our art be truthful, sublime and a beacon to all. It may be our destiny to be few and lonely, but let us not forget that there has always been a struggle between good and evil."

The two were inspired and understood each other. Was not Birzhan's song a challenge to the overweening despotism of Zhanbota and Aznabai?

The guests retired late and awoke only at midday. Unwilling to tarry any longer, they got ready to set off immediately after tea.

The horses had long been saddled. Birzhan's friends, headed by Abai, came to speed the seri on his way.

"Sing 'Zhirma-bes' to me," Birzhan asked the young singers kindly as he mounted his horse. "You, Amir, begin first and let Umitei and Aigerim join you. Let it be our farewell song, my dear younger brothers and sisters."

Though unusual, the request was made with heartfelt sincerity. It was the request of a real seri.

All three began to sing at once. Birzhan, in his saddle, listened to them, his eyes half closed with evident pleasure and a smile hovering about his lips. Suddenly he silenced them with a motion of his hand and burst into song himself, thrusting his beaver hat, topped with green velvet, deeper back on his head and leaning for-

ward over the neck of his horse. It was a new song and its meaning lay in the refrain.

*Farewell, farewell, young friends! In truth,
Being with you returns my youth.
And when again we have to part,
Old as before becomes my heart.*

His voice shook as he reached these words, and he spurred his horse and rode off.

Abai and his friends stood rooted to the spot. The song continued as the akyn rode into the distance. Abai was the first to recover.

"That is a new song he has made up on the spur of the moment. It's his farewell."

"I'll overtake them. I can't let such a song be lost," cried Amir, rushing for his horse.

He overtook the company and rode on with them.

Birzhan was still singing, and his voice carried far over the steppe. Abai and his friends still stood listening as the refrain died away.

*And when with you I have to part
Old as before becomes my heart.*

The party was by now far away; they had already ascended the hill, but Birzhan's voice could still be heard.

"They're a kozy-kosh* away from us, but we can still hear the song," Yerbol delighted. "What a voice!"

The riders vanished over the crest of the hill. Amir had taken leave of them on the hill-top and now returned to his waiting friends.

* Kozy-kosh—a unit of distance, about 5-6 kilometres (measured by shifting of a flock of sheep while grazing).—Ed.

Amir had learned the song by heart and began to sing it as he approached.

*Farewell, farewell, young friends! In truth,
Being with you returns my youth.*

"What name did he give to that song?" asked Umitei.

"Fool that I am! I forgot to ask him." Amir was disgusted.

"Yerbol has just given it a name," said Abai as he returned to the yurt. "He said that the song could be heard at a distance of a kozy-kosh. It's unlikely that Birzhan has given it a name and so let it be called 'Kozy-kosh.'"

As they were about to enter the yurt, they were intercepted by the baibishe Kunkeh, supporting herself on an elaborately carved staff. The young people addressed her respectfully, while Aigerim greeted her with the usual obeisance of a daughter-in-law.

"Abai, light of my eyes, what are you doing?" she said to Abai, ignoring the greetings. "What an example you are setting the others! When has an aul done such honours to a guest? Whom have you set above us? I wouldn't mind if it were a frivolous youngster like Amir who was doing this, but you! And I have always trusted you so, light of my eyes."

Though annoyed, Abai controlled himself.

"Apa, do you want the aul always to be dead? Are you sure that this is the greatest virtue? It is not hard to be virtuous that way. You can find plenty of such virtue everywhere you look, but you can't find such songs anywhere."

He turned to the young people with a faint smile.

"You can find plenty of such virtue everywhere you look, but you can't find such songs anywhere," repeated Yerbol and Amir, hardly able to restrain their laughter.

Kunkeh winced at the slight. Glancing scornfully at Abai, she turned sharply and went to her yurt.

Amir was laughing openly now.

"You certainly had her there, Abai-aga, didn't you?"

Aigerim and Umitei, though laughing too, were embarrassed and withdrew behind the Young Yurta. But Amir's banter continued.

"She just won't leave us alone. To hear her talk, one might think that the man who sings is an infidel." Amir laughed again.

3

Soon after Birzhan's departure, the whole of the Tobikty were aroused by an unexpected quarrel.

It was at the end of summer when friendly auls which had been wandering side by side since spring were wont to descend together from the summer pastures to the lower foothills before going their separate ways. It is at such a time that the horse-thieves of neighbouring clans are particularly active at night. It was rare that a day passed without the alarm: "They've driven them off, raided us again." Cautious aul masters did not let their droves stray far on such nights, and the djiguits in charge of the herds never dismounted.

Abilgazy, son of Karasha, a bold and agile djiguit, rode out to help the herdsmen of the Zhigitek droves on their way to Karshigaly. He was joined by Oralbai, who had come not so much to protect his father's horses, of which there were few, as to forget the thoughts that were troubling him.

Abilgazy was riding a well-groomed and mettlesome animal, a birch-wood soeel across his saddle. The lapels of his light-grey chapán lay open, exposing a broad expanse of white shirt to the moonlight. With the flaps of his timak turned back, he was listening to Oralbai, spitting aside now and then and watching the droves.

Oralbai scarcely cared where they were going or why.

He found it difficult to keep still, being obsessed by thoughts that kept him awake at night and saddened his days. He had grown pinched and haggard because of the doubts that beset him.

A vision had come to him, fleeting as a falling star. Korimbala's heart had beaten for him but a single night and no more. Tomorrow he was to lose her for ever: her groom was on his way from the Karakesek tribe. Could anything on earth prevent that? Was there any hope? Or was there nothing left for him but his grief? If he could only be with her again, all his other wishes might go unfulfilled. If there were death in store for him, he was ready to die. If he could only put his arms around her and caress those long, silken tresses of ancient bronze. Let the world go to the devil then, and himself be swallowed up with the rest, for all he cared.

That was what he was telling Abilgazy. The other listened in silence, as though he were unmoved by the story.

Abilgazy was known for the strength of his will, as hard as flint and inflexible as an old oak. As Oralbai spoke, he made no comment, but when the younger man had finished, he said briefly:

"You've been talking about yourself, but what about the girl? Does she feel that way too?"

"She said she would give her life for me."

"If that's so, then do something about it—even if you have to swallow a stone," Abilgazy concluded.

Oralbai had confided in no one, not even in his elder brother Bazaraly. He was encouraged by Abilgazy's emphatic approval and support but was worried at the thought of his elder brother.

"What would Bazekeh say about it, I wonder?"

Abilgazy merely grinned.

"He would understand you, of course. He'll help you too. Do what you must do. Not only Bazaraly, but all of the djiguits will be with you."

Oralbai brightened at once and the light-grey animal he was riding bounded ahead, goaded by his whip. The djiguits ascended the hillside before Karshigaly and halted to scan the moonlit valley. The night was still and snatches of a song reached Oralbai's ears.

The young man sat motionless. Though he could only catch a fragment here and there, he thought he could sense the ardour that lay in that call.

"It's Korimbala calling me," he exclaimed. "It comes from Karshigaly and her aul is there."

Abilgazy listened too.

"You're right. The singing comes from Sugir's aul. There's your heart's desire in the flesh, you poor devil!" he teased his young companion.

Abilgazy could not bear a quiet and humdrum existence, preferring any scuffle where he could show strength and daring. He enjoyed fanning the sparks kindled in Oralbai's heart. If they burst into flame, all the better—he had a good horse under him and a trusty soeel in his hand. Why not make use of both for the sake of Oralbai? The impetuous lover could have hardly found a better ally and adviser, and Oralbai could no longer contain his joy.

"If you're not joking, Abilgazy-aga, let us go there together. I don't know if it will be woe or happiness, but she's calling me. I'd rather sink through the earth than give her up."

"Let's go then!"

"Let's go!"

They lashed their horses and sped down the hillside.

If he had been asked, Oralbai would not have been able to say just what he intended to do. He was borne ahead on the wings of hope, convinced that this was Korimbala singing, though he could not say for certain. He galloped on, visualizing in his mind's eye the throbbing of her slender white throat. It would ordinarily have

taken him days of thinking, but the song had decided him.

Wrapped in a milky haze, Karshigaly resembled an enchanted kingdom. The grass-carpeted valley and the limpid waters of the river were veiled in a mist pierced by the moon-rays glistening on the yurta domes. No less than a dozen auls had camped here and most of them were in darkness, their tunduks closed. Only the sleepy call of the night watchman and the lazy barking of the dogs could be heard from time to time.

The djiguits were approaching at a gallop. Now they could tell with more certainty that it was a woman singing. Guessing that Sugir's Great Aul would be in the centre as usual, they headed for it, certain that the singing came from there. But when they reached it, they realized that the singer was in a neighbouring aul.

Oralbai was not discouraged. Listening attentively, he was convinced that this was Korimbala's voice and turned to follow it, praising Allah for having guided him so surely in this maze of auls and thanking Korimbala for the song that was to help them find each other.

These late visitors set the dogs barking. The curs raised a deafening din, as though trying to drown the song. Nevertheless, Oralbai could hear that Korimbala was singing "Zhirma-bes." The voice of his beloved rose above all that yapping and howling, just as their love triumphed over hatred and viciousness.

It really was Korimbala. She and Kapa, the wife of her brother Akimkhozha, had been invited for bastangy to one of the brides of a neighbouring aul. Having rigged up the swings, the young people had placed Korimbala on one of them and begged her to sing. They all knew that these were her last days at home and her friends and young zhengeh were especially sorry. "Now it's Korimbala's turn. A strange man will carry her away and we shall never see her again," thought each of

them. Young Kapa was pushing the swing, stealthily wiping the tears with her sleeve as she listened to the song.

Oralbai all but ran his horse into the swing, having outstripped his companion. Korimbala broke off in mid-song. The slender figure of the djiguit before her, and his horse and soeel, silver in the rays of the moon, were a ghostly vision conjured by her song from the moonlight and the mist.

Springing from his prancing horse, Oralbai hurried to Korimbala. No words were necessary. "I've come." "I haven't waited in vain," their eyes seemed to say to each other.

Forgetting they were not alone, Korimbala took the djiguit by the hand and drew him on to the swing.

The young people were glad of a new singer and eagerly relinquished their places in the swing. Oralbai began to sing and Korimbala immediately joined in.

I burn like fire when I see your sweet face.

The song rang louder with every sweep of the swing, the moonlight playing on the faces of the singers. It was as if the great Birzhan himself were present, invisibly blessing them. Korimbala and Oralbai sang on endlessly—expressing everything that filled their hearts. First one fell silent and then the other, but then again they would sing in unison as though unable to separate. Passion had mastered their wills and now guided their future.

"Only death can set these two apart," thought Abilgazy as he watched and listened. He glanced at Kapa significantly. He was a friend of Korimbala's brother, Akimkhozha, his kurdas,* and as the wife of his kurdas,

* Kurdas—friend of the same age.—Ed.

Kapa never refused to take part in Abilgazy's escapades. They understood each other at once and both began to divert the attention of the others from Korimbala and Oralbai by joking and improvising various games.

When they were alone, Oralbai tenderly embraced her and began to tell her how he had heard her song from afar.

"Oh, light of my eyes," she whispered through her tears, pressing her burning face to his cheek. "The dark day is at hand. Allah himself wants to destroy us, but I cannot part from you even if they rend me limb from limb. I know why you have come. Before I was frightened by your words, but now it shall be as you will. You shall be my husband and may the spirits of our ancestors help us."

She had called him "husband." He was beside himself. "My beloved wife," he said over and over again as he pressed her to his heart.

These words decided everything and the unthinking passion of youth did the rest. Korimbala was carried off by Oralbai and three djiguits the very next night. In the auls of the Tobikty there was such an uproar that it was as though the very skies had parted to shower them with fire.

The Zhigitek and Bokenshi had lived in peace with never a quarrel ever since the death of the tribal elders Bozhei and Suyundik, but this wilful act of the lovers aroused the whole of the Bokenshi. Some pauper of the Zhigitek had disgraced so high a person as Sugir himself, Sugir—the head of the clan since the death of Suyundik!

Sugir, who possessed droves of thousands of piebald horses, had become one of the most influential of the bais. He had quickly grown rich by lending his horses to the neighbours. It was said that whenever he saw a rider on a good piebald mount, he always worried that it might be one of his own horses. Korimbala had been betrothed

to the son of Kombar, a rich man of the Karakesek tribe, and Sugir had received a great kalim, enormous herds of cattle and droves of stallions. He had already furnished the Young Yurta for his daughter and was preparing a generous dowry.

Both the Bokenshi and the poor kinsmen dependent on Sugir were outraged. Sugir and his sons, for their part, were beside themselves and first threatened to ruin Kau-men and then to seize the herds of the Zhigitek. Finally they hurled a challenge to the entire clan. "Let them bind the young man and woman and deliver them both by evening or name the place where they choose to fight the Bokenshi." The former elders of the Zhigitek—Bozhei, Baidaly and Tusip—had died long ago, and the new leaders were Bozhei's sons—Zhabai and Adil, their friend Beisembi, nicknamed the "young devil" for his determination, and the resourceful Abdilda, of whom it was said that he could crush enough marrow out of a single bone to feed an entire company.

Sugir's threats had given rise to alarming rumours since early morning, and the Zhigitek had had their eye on the Bokenshi aul the whole day. Abilgazy was kept informed by his people of all the discussions and secret preparations going on at their neighbours' stormy conferences and lost no time in passing on his information. The Zhigitek were on the alert. They were more numerous than the other clans and never afraid of raids, but these threats of the Bokenshi to drive away their herds and attack their auls could not be ignored. They had therefore saddled rested horses, driving the others out to graze, and armed themselves with soeels.

Dispatching messengers to their enemies, the Bokenshi at the same time sent riders to neighbouring kinsmen. When they heard of this, the Zhigitek followed suit, sending riders with spare horses to their kinsmen.

The strongest and most influential of the Tobikty were

the Irgizbai, Kotibak, Topai and Torgai. In this appeal for just arbitration, both parties addressed themselves mainly to the Irgizbai and Kotibak.

Among the Kotibak, it was Zhirenshe, so respected by all, who had come to replace the dead Baisai, and it was to him that the messengers of both sides came. Neither Zhirenshe nor the elders of the Topai and Torgai cared to bear responsibility alone. Determined first to consult with the Irgizbai, these elders went to Kunanbai's aul. The people streamed towards Ulzhan's Great Aul, which still stood on the zhailyau where the young people of the Tobikty had but recently parted with Birzhan.

In Kunanbai's absence, all serious matters had to be settled by Maibasars, the eldest of his brothers, and Takezhan, both acting on his behalf. As soon as word of the quarrel had reached their aul, they called upon Ulzhan and stated that anyone wishing to see them was to make his appearance here.

Meanwhile, Oralbai and Korimbala had in vain been seeking a hiding place. The auls of Kaumen and Karasha were out of the question, since the pastures of the Bokenshi were too near, and their young friends therefore advised them to find shelter elsewhere. The first clash would probably take place here and it was dangerous for them to stay.

The fugitives were at last given shelter in the aul of the Kengirbai, from whom so many tribes had sprung and who were held in veneration by the whole of the Tobikty. But as messengers began to arrive on each other's heels there was disquiet here too, and the Kengirbai asked in alarm, "What if somebody learns that they are here? The memory of our ancestor will be desecrated by violence."

Oralbai and Korimbala were then sent to the aul of the "young devil," Beisembi, an influential young djiguit, a man who would never lie. Hardly had they drunk their

tea, when Beisembi said to them, "Tomorrow I have to quarrel with the Bokenshi, but if I shelter you here my tongue will be tied. You had better leave my aul for a while."

Unable to find shelter until evening and everywhere encountering timid refusals, Oralbai lost heart and sent the following message to his brother: "If Bazaraly has not yet disowned me, let me look upon him again." Only despair could have prompted such words, and when Bazaraly received the message he mounted at once and set off.

The news that morning had surprised him, but he had held his peace, nonetheless. No one knew whether he was in sympathy with his brother or not, and no one could guess what his silence meant—whether it was prompted by anger or a determination to help. "I'll do it if I die," were the only words he said, the expression on his face grim. He watched the neighbours and listened to their talk with the same impenetrable air. He knew everything that was said among the Bokenshi, and also knew that Oralbai was blamed for his action by some of the Zhigitek, especially by the elderly men.

"Why should we lose the friendship of the Bokenshi?" they argued. "The people should not quarrel because of a pair of mischief-makers. The Zhigitek should admit they are wrong, pay for the offence and return the girl."

Bazaraly listened to this without comment.

Such calm reasoning came to an end at noon, when the threats of the Bokenshi grew more ominous; they would drive away the horses, raid the auls and attack the Zhigitek with arms in hand. The majority of the people, moreover, were favourably influenced by the attitude of the young folk, led by Karasha's son Abilgazy who was the first to congratulate Korimbala.

Abilgazy spent the day on horseback, watching the enemy and sending herdsmen, milkers and women among

them. But these people could only see things from the outside, and so he resorted to a more subtle ruse. Early in the morning he had sent a woman from the Bokenshi to the aul of Sugir with a boy, the brother of her husband. She spent the entire day in the yurta of Akimkhozha and Kapa, while the boy carried news several times to Abilgazy's herdsmen beyond the hill. This, too, was abetted by Kapa, who was trying to help the lovers as much as she could, though Akimkhozha had beaten her badly that morning when he learned who had helped Korimbala to get away. Akimkhozha knew that Korimbala had no secrets from Kapa, and so told his wife that she was guilty in the eyes of the aul. But she bore everything and said nothing.

Thus, Abilgazy kept the Zhigitek informed of developments among the Bokenshi, though showing no outward signs of assisting Oralbai himself.

He appeared at the council of the elders just as they were trying to decide whether they should deliver Oralbai to the injured clan or side with him. Abilgazy boldly entered the yurta where the aksakals and karasakals were sitting in conference, seated himself and removed his timak. His handsome, straightforward face was grave, and his hair was caught up in a white kerchief as if he were ready for battle.

The threats of the Bokenshi had surpassed all limits, he remarked. They intended to plunder their auls, drive away the horses and fight to death. They would not be satisfied with the return of the girl, but held the whole of the Zhigitek responsible for Oralbai's actions and would not rest until they had brought them to their knees. If the aksakals had no objection to this, they should say so, "Do what you like with us, sate your fury on us, take our cattle, and order us about as you would a horde of old women. We have no djiguits worthy of the name and

we are helpless. We have quite lost our sense of honour." This is the answer expected of the Zhigitek.

Abilgazy was playing on tribal pride.

"I have committed no crime. Why should I abase myself?" he went on boldly, his face darkening. "That light-headed pair did a rash thing, of course. But if the Bokenshi intend to break their old friendship with us because of this and to disgrace the spirits of our ancestors by murdering us, then where is their sense of honour? If they are so anxious to disgrace us, then what are we waiting for?"

These words put an end to their wavering. Though no decisions were reached, a basis had been laid. They would not plead guilty. If the Bokenshi agreed to a peaceful settlement of the affair, the Zhigitek would come to terms with them before a court of kinsmen. If things went otherwise, there was still no reason to sink to their knees. They would watch the Bokenshi closely meanwhile, and act accordingly.

Bazaraly, who was also present at the council, left without a word.

After making inquiries, he went to look for his brother and sister-in-law who were still hunting vainly for shelter. Towards evening they were taken to a small aul which consisted of four poor weather-beaten yurtas. A young djiguit, the master of one of them, was not afraid to receive them.

"You may stay here, even if it costs my life." And he slaughtered a kid for them from his meagre flock.

It was here that Bazaraly found the fugitives. He did not indulge in a lengthy discussion and in fact brushed aside Oralbai's explanation. As he left he said briefly:

"Everyone regards you as scatter-brained mischief-makers, but you won't be left without help. The kinsmen may disapprove of you, but what could you expect of them? They'll forgive you in the end. Don't repent and

don't give in. We shall not betray you. I'll stand by you rain or shine."

He returned to the aul and immediately sent a rider with a letter to Abai, appealing to him as to a friend.

"We need your intercession. Do not refuse to help them and if the worst comes to the worst, be the judge and give your verdict."

Abai received the letter just as Yerbol and Amir had arrived to see him.

"What can we say to this?" he said, apparently addressing Yerbol. "The Bokenshi are your kinsmen, but the Zhigitek are not strangers either, while Oralbai and Korimbala are your friends. What a muddle this is!"

Yerbol, too, was at a loss.

"It will be hard to deal with the mediators. There will be few who will agree with you and many who will twist and turn like cunning foxes, making things worse instead of better. This matter is a nice pretext for a tribal war. You must try to prevent it if you can. That's the duty of us all."

Abai was pleased with his friend for not succumbing to false tribal pride. "Be just!" his words implied. It was indeed the voice of reason. "You've spoken like an honest man," he thought. "One day, you'll be the most respected man of the Bokenshi."

Yerbol had hardly finished when Amir spoke, though no one had asked for his opinion. Abai, who was still pondering over Yerbol's remarks, missed the first few words.

"What can the Karakesek clan do?" Amir flared up. "At the very worst, they will demand the return of the kalim and some additional cattle to compensate them for the injury. It would be a disgrace if we grudged anything for Oralbai and Korimbala. We should help to pay it off. I think we should send them riding horses and cattle at once."

Abai nodded, smiling faintly.

"You're right," he said. "That's the most you can do right now. Let them feel your support at least in this. But make no noise about it. Send the animals quietly and on your own behalf."

After his talk with his friends, Abai went to Ulzhan's yurt where a council was to be held. The representatives of the mediator clans were already gathered there. Maibasars and Zhakips, who represented the Irgizbais, were ensconced on the places of honour beside Takezhan, who had obviously had too much kumys, and was talking loudly and laughing excitedly. Zhirenshe, representing the Kotibaks, was more reserved. Bazar, who had come on behalf of the Topais, was not too talkative, but Dadanbais, for the Torgais, was as animated and garrulous as Maibasars and Takezhan.

Abai sat down, listened carefully to the discussions and tried to gauge the opinions of the others. The four clans seemed to be divided in two.

"What were the instructions given to the messengers sent to the Bokenshis and Zhigitek?" Abai asked Maibasars and Zhakips after a while.

"No messengers have been sent to them yet," Zhakips briefly replied.

"And what instructions can we give them?" asked Maibasars. "It would be another story if the kinsmen had asked us to reconcile them, but both demand our support. With whom shall we side?"

"In other words, the mediators would like to keep aloof and say nothing," remarked Abai.

"Why keep aloof? We won't keep aloof."

"What are we waiting for then? For the fight to begin?"

Abai spoke in the authoritative tone of one conducting a cross-examination. All small talk ceased and everyone listened.

"But the fire will break out whatever we do," Maibasars retorted. "It's futile to try to reconcile them now. That would only fan the flames, not put them out."

"And so you think that if there is no fire, one should wait until there is?"

"Do you know the proverb: 'Rage comes first and wisdom afterwards.' Let the Bokenshi burn themselves out. They'll come to their senses soon enough. You should know that one must follow a fire in the steppes to put it out and not go to meet it."

"So that's what your concern for peace and friendship amounts to," said Abai, growing angrier. "You don't mind being a peace-maker, do you, but before you start you want to be sure that the fire is well underway."

Zhirenshe and Bazar, who had been listening intently, seemed to share this view.

"It would seem so," Zhirenshe said bitterly. "It is difficult to understand why we sit here doing nothing. What sort of peace-makers are we?"

Zhirenshe had done much to strengthen the friendship between the Zhigitek and the Kotibak. As a bii, he believed that it was his duty to preserve this friendship which dated back to the days of Baisai and Bozhei. The Topai also favoured frank and fair relations and were not easily taken in by the ruses calculated to add fuel to the fire. Neither Zhirenshe nor Bazar, the two representatives of these clans, had been able to understand what Maibasars and the Torgai were after, nor to suggest a solution of their own. Abai's words drew them on.

Takezhan, who understood the situation quite well, was ill pleased with Abai and was waiting for his chance to pounce upon his brother. When Abai accused the "peace-makers" of not striving for peace, but of fanning the flames, he at once interjected, "What flames are you talking about? You'll be saying next that we started the fire. The fire did not begin today, for that matter. Are not

Oralbai and Korimbala at the bottom of this? And were you not loafing about and singing songs with them all the summer. What alternative have you but to defend your companions in idleness?" Takezhan sneered.

Abai listened quietly.

"So you've found the real culprit at last. The culprit is a song and I, too, am to blame, because I love songs. The songs they sang when they stayed with me are to blame, aren't they? But if so, your mutton and kumys too are to blame! Didn't they eat and drink them? I wonder who else is to blame?" He glanced contemptuously at Takezhan. "Say simply that you cannot or will not prevent the evil, that you are dodging the issue and prevaricating, looking for a pretext not to interfere," he finished, with a frown.

That accusation was directed not only at Takezhan, but at the whole of the Irgizbai. Abai knew how to command attention. His listeners were stunned by his words: His bold and caustic speech sounded like the verdict of an impartial jury, and there was nothing Maibasar and Takezhan could say after this. Abai's clear reasoning and sense of justice had won the day, and Maibasar and his allies were defeated.

But Abai had not yet gained his end. He was supported only by Zhirenshe and Bazar. True, this was no trifle, since the two represented major clans, the Kotibak and the Topai. But there were two other clans against him: Dadanbai, of the Torgai, had joined forces with Maibasar, seizing a chance to settle scores with Bazaraly for his alleged association with Balbala by wreaking vengeance through his brother.

Thus, no decision could be reached and no messengers were sent to the warring tribes. But fearful that the hostilities might lead to bloodshed, Abai decided to send a messenger to Sugir on his own behalf. His choice fell upon Yerbol, whom he asked to convey to Sugir and

Akimkhozha the request and wishes of the kinsmen: "Why quarrel and let fists fly, why open up old wounds?"

Abai and his supporters did not know that when he had asked for arbitration, Sugir had promised Maibasar and Takezhan a drove of mares and a stud stallion if a decision were taken in his favour. The two were base enough to betray their mission as arbiters—while expressing themselves at the council in vague and ambiguous terms, they had sent a message to Sugir: "Let him not stand on ceremony in his dealings with the Zhigitek. Let him not hesitate and press harder. The mediators will eventually not side with the culprits, but with the injured party."

Sugir was already beside himself with fury and this salem prompted him to throw all caution to the winds. The last words of the message were all that mattered to him. He interpreted them as a promise of decisive support from the whole of the Tobikty and immediately sent to the Zhigitek a certain Kuntu, a young djiguit who had recently become one of the chiefs of the Bokenshi, to demand that they immediately hand over Oralbai and Korimbala. If they did not agree to this, he was to demand that they choose a place for battle.

Influenced by Abilgazy, however, the Zhigitek did neither the one nor the other and instead entrusted Kuntu with the following message: "This is the language of enemies and not of friendly kinsmen. Send us another message, one which will not split the people, but bring us peace. Invite us to a council where we shall find a just solution together. Your words, as they stand, contain insults and threats. Come to your senses. If a dog has a master, a wolf too has a protector. What harm did the Zhigitek cause you before this unhappy event? Whose friendship was stronger than ours? It was so close that not a hair could have passed between us. Shall we exchange such friendship for enmity and malice? Let us re-

member Bozhei, Suyundik and Baidaly. They established peace and friendship between us and bequeathed this friendship to us. Let the Bokenshi think again and send us another message."

When Kuntu heard the message, he drew aside Zhabai, Beisembi and Abdilda, the young chiefs of the Zhigitek, who had come to the fore as recently as himself.

"This reply will hardly satisfy Sugir," he said in an undertone. "You little realize how angry he is. There'll be the devil to pay, my kinsmen. Don't say afterwards that I did not warn you."

"Come, what are you saying?" Zhabai looked at him guardedly.

"Just that," answered the tall Kuntu coolly, his sharp dark eyes on his questioner.

Zhabai hesitated, but Abdilda, "the dare-devil," was not inclined to hesitate or retreat.

"Ah, Kuntu, it is not you and I who are at stake, but the honour of the tribe and of our ancestors. If Sugir has run amok, so that our answer will mean nothing to him, then he will have to answer to Allah."

Kuntu conveyed the answer to Sugir, who grasped only the fact that the Zhigitek would not surrender the culprits. All the rest was so many empty words to him. Sugir howled like a wounded beast.

"I'll sacrifice every horse I have to the spirits of the Bokenshi," he roared as he struck the ground near the hearth with his whip. "I'll sacrifice all I have to your memory, only give me revenge."

As dusk fell, he ordered a hundred djiguits to mount their horses, to arm themselves with soeels and wait for his signal.

"The Zhigitek have abducted my daughter," he said to them. "I'll accept nothing from them in exchange. We too must abduct a bride of theirs, and such a one as shall make their hearts bleed."

Abai's message reached Sugir when the party had set off. He heard Yerbol without comment, seeming not to comprehend his words at all.

The raiding djiguits of the Bokenshi carried out their mission with zest and soon returned. They had fallen upon a Zhigitek and carried away his young and beautiful wife, still in her wedding veil. They had also plundered his aul and galloped off before anyone around could realize what was happening.

When they learned of this, Beisembi and Abdilda realized that the die was cast.

"Why did we trouble to send messengers?" they said again and again. "What sort of kinsmen are they? They're worse than strangers. Can a kinsman raid his kinsmen? They leave us no choice but to fight. Let's get to our horses," Abdilda said to Abilgazy.

The preparations were swift. The indignation of the Zhigitek knew no bounds and no exhortations were necessary. The entire clan arose as one man. A hundred djiguits led by Abilgazy mounted their horses at once and galloped for the auls of the Bokenshi. They returned after midnight bringing no enemy droves with them, but only one person—the wife of Soltabai, one of the most influential djiguits of the Bokenshi. She too had not yet shed her wedding veil.

Both the Bokenshi and the Zhigitek went without sleep that night. Word of the fresh abduction had scarcely reached the auls of the Bokenshi when they, without waiting for the dawn, drove all their horses from the pastures. All the men armed themselves with soeels, spears and pole-axes and flocked to Sugir's aul. The Zhigitek too were preparing for the clash. The sun had not yet risen when the expanses between Sarigol, the lands of the Zhigitek since time immemorial, and Shalkar, which belonged to the Bokenshi, were filled with armed riders.

At the first rays of dawn the broad plain and the rolling hills became a battlefield.

Sugir, though nearly seventy, was on his horse, and he plunged into the fighting, spear in hand. At one point he came face to face with Zhabai and Beisembi, and with his spear at the ready the old man flew at them. There was just time for Zhabai to shout to his djiguits, "The old man is seeking death. Don't touch him."

Sugir was almost on Zhabai when a young djiguit dashed between them. The old man knocked him down with his spear and dashed on. Apparently troubled by his conscience he kept looking back to make sure he had not killed the young man. Finally he was overtaken by Beisembi, who did not mean to harm him, but to deprive him of his spear. As if guessing his intention, Sugir thrust the spear into his hands and galloped back to his own side unarmed.

"Did you see that?" Beisembi laughed. "He gave his spear to me," he shouted to Zhabai, brandishing the weapon. "If that djiguit dies, the old man will say that he could not have killed him, because I, Beisembi, took his spear. You see how he is!"

In other parts of the field, however, men were wounded and fell from their horses.

The best fighters of the Zhigitek and Bokenshi distinguished themselves in single combat. Abilgazy was the most formidable of the Zhigetek, while Markabai excelled among the Bokenshi. The large-eyed, flat-faced Markabai was 30 years old, had a powerful chest, and calves as big as a baby's cradle. He was known among the Tobikty as both a wrestler and an incredible glutton. Several times that day he had changed horses and, rushing through the fields like a hurricane, was tumbling the Zhigitek riders from their horses right and left. He, too, had had his share of blows, was bleeding profusely, but seemed not to care.

Hard fighting continued until noon. To save them from falling into the enemy's hands, the wounded were removed and returned to their auls. The blood flowed copiously, until large parties of Irgizbai, Kotibak and Torgai came upon the scene by midday, demanding that the fighting cease at once. The Irgizbai drove a wedge between the warring parties, while Zhakip urged the combatants to stop the bloodshed.

"Those who go on with the fighting now will be our enemies," he shouted, weaving his way among the riders.

The Irgizbai stood their ground until the contestants had withdrawn. The mediators, however, followed the Bokenshi and stopped at the yurta of Sugir. This was an ominous sign for the Zhigitek. Did it imply that the mediators felt obliged to join the injured party? Did it mean that the Bokenshi were considered to be guiltless and that the peace-makers had decided to intercede for them? Many of the Zhigitek were troubled.

As usual, after such a clash—which was not the first for many of the combatants—the injuries and losses did not prevent either side from reviling the enemy and exaggerating their own prowess. Sugir and his spear were the chief butt of the joking until Markabai became the object of general ridicule.

When the fighting was over, he had made his way to the aul of Daleken, where lived a certain Kunduz, a girl he had fallen in love with long before. Although she reciprocated his affection, she was zealously guarded by her mother all the summer. Hoping to make the best of the confusion, the djiguit had asked his friends to divert the old crone with their talk and himself slipped into the girl's yurta.

He found Kunduz alone over her embroidery sitting by a large cauldron in which cheese was being prepared. And then this giant of a man, so fearless in battle, lost

all his courage and could not say a word in answer to her questions about the fighting. Forgetful of his wounds, he stood gazing at her fondly, then crushed her to his bosom and kissed her passionately. But meanwhile, the old woman had noticed the absence of the djiguit and came rushing into the yurta.

"May you be struck down by Allah," she shrieked. "Get out of here!"

Markabai heard not a word and stood like one bewitched, the girl still in his arms. With a piercing scream, the old woman snatched the ladle from the boiling cheese and brought it down on his huge shaven skull.

"Didn't you get enough beatings today?" she cried.

Only then did Markabai release the girl and dash headlong out of the yurta. He told the story to his friends himself and on that very day of battle was ridiculed by the entire tribe as the batir who had fled from an old woman.

It was indeed not by accident that the mediators had gone to stay with the Bokenshi. The elders of the four clans had decided that the Zhigitek were to blame and that they had to comply with the demands of the Bokenshi. All the mediators representing the Irgizbai, Torgai, Kotibak and Topai had arrived at Sugir's aul.

The day before Zhirenshe and Bazar had gone to Abai and had sat talking with him until late at night, discussing ways and means of reconciliation. But when they heard the news of the abduction of Soltabai's wife, they both changed their views on the matter.

"What can we do if the Zhigitek refuse to behave as kinsmen should?" asked Zhirenshe and Bazar. "It is true that the Bokenshi took measures that were too severe in retaliation for Oralbai's actions. But couldn't the Zhigitek have waited a little longer and given us time to speak to the mediators? Now they have spoiled everything. Not a loop-hole is left for Oralbai and Korimbala

and they have done harm to themselves as well. It is clear that there will be no peace until the girl is returned."

So Zhirenshe and Bazar also went to the Bokenshi and Abai was left alone. He was thoroughly shaken by all that had happened. He was ashamed to seem so helpless in the eyes of Oralbai and Korimbala and was troubled by the general unrest. For some time he sat in his yurta pondering. At last reaching a decision, he sent a messenger to Bazaraly and began preparations for a secret journey.

The mediators who had come to the Bokenshi sent word to the Zhigitek asking them to dispatch trusted representatives to Sugir's aul. Zhabai, Beisembi and Abdilda, accompanied by twenty djiguits, immediately took to horse. Beisembi had misgivings and before his departure told Abilgazy to convey the following advice to the fugitives: "Things have taken a bad turn. Bazaraly had better take them to a new hiding place."

Bazaraly was hurt by these words.

"Oh you kinsmen with hearts of stone," he burst out. "Can one rely on their crooked judgements? Sugir is rich and I am poor. His piebalds will help him with their neighing alone—you'll see many of them prancing among the droves of the peace-makers. And what can I do? There's no getting away and I have no meat with which to feed those greedy mediators and Zhigitek windbags. I think I'll have to go to the council myself."

"They're angry enough as it is," Abilgazy sharply objected. "You'll just make them angrier still and make things worse."

Bazaraly then went to Oralbai and Korimbala and decided to hide in the stony wastes of the Chinghis with them, nonetheless deeply resenting the fact that he had to run to the hills like a wounded she-wolf with her cubs.

The only consolation of the three fugitives was the support they received from Abai through Amir. On the eve of their departure, Abai had sent them four good mounts and an additional two-year-old for slaughter. The messenger conveyed the following message from Abai to Bazaraly:

"They have been betrayed by the kinsmen. I'm ready to sink through the earth with shame. This is my advice to them: Bazeken should not expect any support from the kinsmen. Tomorrow the Zhigitek will begin to pursue them too, and he will be left alone. He had better take the two to the Russian administrators at once. If they decide to do as I advise, let them send word to me and I shall go to Semipalatinsk to help them. I'm helpless here, alone among these people."

Abai's support raised Bazaraly's spirits, but did not change his mind.

"I'm glad there's one real man left among the Tobikty—you, Abai!" he said in reply. "You have not renounced me like my clan. I am sure you would help me in the town, but I shall not go there. How can I run away to the town as a fugitive? None of us have ever taken such a path. None of us would approve of it. I had better stay and learn the decision of my kinsmen. If they betray us, I shall be able to stand up for my honour. I shall not surrender without a fight and shall help my friends to the end."

He led the fugitives to the Chinghis, hid them in an inaccessible gorge, and slaughtered the two-year-old that had been sent for them by Abai. He then armed himself well: thrust a knife into his belt, a shokpar under his knee and took up a lance. Thus, he guarded the entrance to the gorge like a tigress ready to protect her young. For several days he was in the saddle. He was ever on the alert, and the grim lines never left his weather-beaten face.

Meanwhile the negotiations in Sugir's aul drew to a close. Beisembi and Zhabai had capitulated. On the decision of the elders the Zhigitek admitted guilt, and agreed to pay compensation.

Apart from cattle, they had to yield to Sugir three winter places along the Karaul River, and to give an undertaking not to shelter the fugitives. A party was sent out to search for the unhappy lovers and to carry Korimbala to her betrothed of the Karakesek.

The very first party of ten discovered Bazaraly at the entrance to the gorge. He took them on single-handed, resolved to fight to death. When he had overthrown five men with his lance the others withdrew.

But the entire search party of thirty was now on the track of the fugitives and converged upon their hiding place. Unable to overcome Bazaraly even then, they nonetheless forced him away from the entrance to the gorge and separated him from his friends. He galloped over the hills, trying desperately to cut through the ring of the pursuers. His face was terrifying to see—the face of a warrior ready for death.

At last reaching the lovers, members of the party bound Oralbai and left him lying on the rocks. Korimbala they threw across a saddle and carried off.

"Oh, Korimbala, light of my heart," Oralbai managed to call to her, "I am not the son of my father Kaumen if I don't find you again and carry you away."

"I am ready to give my soul if you save me," Korimbala cried in agony.

Bazaraly galloped to the Great Aul of the Zhigitek that very evening.

"Where are you, aruakhs? Can't you see our disgrace?" And reining his horse amid the yurtas, he shouted to the ancestral spirits, "Let your curses fall upon your descendants who have betrayed the honour of the clan!"



As Beisembi, Zhabai and Abdilda closed in upon him, Bazaraly continued to shout that he would attack the Bokenshi single-handed and drown them in their own blood. The djiguits seized his reins and tried to reason with him, but were lashed over the head with the whip for their pains.

"Scoundrels!" he cried in anguish. "You've sold your souls and will betray the tribe again and again. Get out of my way!"

But Beisembi and Abdilda held fast. Zhabai summoned all the djiguits of the aul, and then finally overwhelmed the man, pushed him into one of the yurtas and pinned him to the ground. A close watch was kept over him all night.

They had still not delivered Korimbala to the Bokenshi when word of the oath sworn by the lovers reached the auls. The fate of the girl had long been decided. "I won't keep a rotten egg in my basket," Sugir had said bluntly. Realizing that neither Oralbai nor Korimbala were subdued and that Bazaraly was ready to fight, the Bokenshi were anxious to send the girl to the Karakesek with a guard of djiguits. Sugir dispatched the following message to the Karakesek: "Let them come to fetch the dowry later. I shall deliver the bride now, while she is still alive. Let them decide her fate themselves. If she does not submit, let them do as they please. I shall not mourn her, nor demand tribute even if they put her to death."

In this way a troubled time among the Tobikty came to an end.

Two days later, Oralbai freed himself from his bonds and galloped to Karakesek. He did not know what he was hoping to do, but his heart was bleeding and he could not act otherwise.

The relatives of Korimbala's groom, especially the elder sisters-in-law, kept a sharp watch over the girl. She

had grown haggard and appeared to be resigned to her fate. A tall, broad-shouldered djiguit, the brother of her groom, sat guarding her in the Young Yurta. He was whetting his knife and only once during the evening had grunted:

"If you don't give in, remember that we're ready for anything. We'll put an end to either you or your lover."

When the meat in the cauldron was cooked and ready to be served, the morose djiguit got up and went to the next yurta to call the others for the evening meal. At that moment Oralbai appeared at the threshold.

Korimbala recoiled in fear. Once more she heard her future brother-in-law threatening her, once more she saw the kinsmen fighting, and the Chinghis rocks. Oralbai looked and realized that her spirit had been broken. Neither said a word as the girl slowly approached him.

"Our fate has been sealed. Good-bye, Oralbai. Let this be my last farewell, as sad and hopeless as the final bow of an old, lame kelin in the Great Yurta.* Take heart, light of my eyes."

She pressed her lips to his. Oralbai rushed from the yurta choking with sobs. Now everything was finished—Korimbala had likened herself to an old woman for whom all joy of living was over. He mounted his horse and dashed off.

No one knew where he had gone, and though several days had passed there was still no news of him.

Abai could not shake off a feeling of disquiet. Talking to Aigerim, Amir and Yerbol in the Young Yurta, he suddenly remembered Birzhan.

"Precious are the lights of your mind, Birzhan," he


* According to custom, the daughter-in-law (kelin) must be the first to bow to all the relatives. When she feels the approach of old age, she kneels at the entrance of her husband's yurta and makes a ceremonial bow. Others must henceforth bow to her first, for she is now regarded as an old woman.—*Ed.*

exclaimed. "You embody the noble strength of my people. Your song has set the hearts of the two lovers free. It is thus that a stone sets stagnant waters in motion, the unchanging pool of our life. If not for the ferment which stirs us up from time to time, our days would stand still like putrid backwaters."

"But the blow fell on all of us young people," Yerbol retorted. "They had looked to the future so hopefully and now they are fettered again."

But Abai could see farther ahead.

"Let art flourish, let it stir up our ignorant never-changing life. Let it impart strength to every bold man," he said pensively, adding after a pause, "It was a wise Kazakh who said, 'What if a lioness is killed while attempting to leap to the moon, her cubs will not lose their leonine habits for all that. What if a white falcon is entangled by the snare, his fledglings will be falcons still. The malice and ignorance of the Tobikty were too strong for Oralbai. But they will not prevail over life. They will not prevail.'"



Over the Foothills

1

The door was wide-open, the tunduk raised and the yurta was cooled by the breath of a fine spring morning. Each apparently straining to get the upper hand, the odours of wormwood and feather-grass flooded the tent, and all was filled with the manifold sounds of spring. Abai was sitting by a high bone-carved bed, his elbows on a round table. Though he was reading, he was conscious of the stirrings of nature around him.

An insistent cuckoo could be heard on the distant slopes of the Akshoky; this small bird was calling its mate, telling its secrets to the whole wide world. A lark was trilling high above the yurta. At times, he could hear the beating of wings—coveys of ducks were soaring over the sprawling hills, towards the meadows flooded with spring waters. The lambs and kids skipped by, their strong little hoofs drubbing the ground. Something must have frightened them and they stamped as though to save their lives. From the neighbouring yurta came a hubbub of children's voices, mingling with the bleating of the lambs.

This joyous burgeoning of nature, re-awakened by the spring, burst upon Abai's solitude, moving him greatly.

The sun-rays coming through the circle of the shanrak and falling on the decorated rugs were as soft and caressing as the spring itself, and there was something soothing about the stillness in the festive yurt. Abai took deep breaths as he poured over the pages, re-reading them with fresh elation, as if he were just seeing them for the first time. It was as if book and reader had no further secrets from each other.

It was a solemn occasion. This was the first fairly large Russian book that Abai had read to the end almost as freely as if it had been written in his native language.

Surrounded by dictionaries and textbooks, he had been studying Russian throughout the winter. When the light of this new world had dawned upon him, he had taken up the works of Pushkin. He had begun with prose, delighted to see that he understood everything. The book was *Dubrovsky*. Pushkin had unfolded the full beauty of the Russian language to him and he could now appreciate the wealth of ideas stored in the book.

It was *Dubrovsky* which was responsible for his mood of deep satisfaction and keen awareness of all that was going on around him. The book seemed to him like a fellow-traveller who had unexpectedly come to be a friend. It was a long time since he had been so elated. His life of seclusion and escape from household cares was at last justified. He had found and crossed the ford he had sought so patiently for years.

Maibasars, Takezhan and Zhirenshe had been making fun of him for a long time. "He has not once left his yurt since he married Aigerim. He can't see his fill of her, it seems. He used to be in the clouds, but now he's caught in her snares like a sparrow in the coils of a snake. He used to fly high, but has now hit the dust."

Abai had laughed on hearing this, and had continued to study his books as industriously as a pupil of the

madrasah. He shared his thoughts with no one and sought nobody's advice. It was abundantly clear to him that he would never be able to confine himself to the steppes. Thinking of the town, of Akbas Andrevevich, the library and the education of his children, he had reached another decision: to build a comfortable house in Akshoky, forty versts nearer to Semipalatinsk, where he could live as he liked.

The snow was hardly gone when he wandered to Akshoky, though no auls had left their winter places as yet, and the yurtas of his mother, Ospan and Dilda were still in Zhidebai. Abai took with him only Aigerim and his children by Dilda—Akiibai, Abish, Gulbadan and little Magash, with their tutor, who was known as the Kishkeneh Mullah, that is the junior mullah, to distinguish him from Gabitkhan. Several neighbours who served the Great Aul, handicraftsmen and workers, joined him with their yurtas and property so that the building of the house could begin at once. The work was supervised by Yerbol and Aigerim, while Abai never left his yurta, devoting all his time to his studies.

He was poring over his books as always when Aigerim, Yerbol and the Kishkeneh Mullah entered.

"Merciful Allah," the mullah said to Aigerim in astonishment as he crossed the threshold, evidently continuing an unfinished conversation, "is it possible that even today, when the foundation stone of the new house is to be laid, Abai will not leave his books. One might think he were confined to his bed by illness."

Aigerim laughed faintly.

"He's quite well. The truth is that he has no time. He has more important work than building a house."

After he had asked Aigerim and Yerbol how the work was progressing and wished them good luck, Abai confirmed the words of his wife.

"Aigerim is right. You will laugh if I say that my work is harder than that of the mason Tureh. What Tureh does is evident to all, but I too have done a good deal."

Yerbol winked at the Kishkineh Mullah. "It's certainly harder to sit about on a soft korpheh than to carry bricks."

"We are celebrating such a solemn occasion today," the Kishkineh Mullah said with a puzzled air. "Moved by good intentions, your wife and friends have begun an honourable undertaking. It is indeed surprising that you hold yourself aloof from our rejoicing."

Aigerim did not reproach Abai, but would not excuse him either. She briefly explained what the mullah meant.

"We've invited the worthy mullah to give his blessing to our work. We've slaughtered a sheep as a sacrifice and the mullah has prayed to the ancestors, read the Koran and blessed our new abode."

Abai once more wished his wife, children and friends a happy life in the new house, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Mullah-akeh," he said to the Kishkineh Mullah, "I didn't know there was a special prayer for the building of a house. What was the text?"

"Do you really think there is no such prayer?" the Kishkineh Mullah retorted hotly. "Every Moslem should know that there is a special prayer for every good beginning. I have read 'Yarazikul gibadi'—'I praise him who gives us food.' Wasn't that appropriate?"

"But if I remember correctly, mullah-akeh, this prayer is intended for the preparation of the threshing-floor," Abai observed with the same mild amusement. "I seem to have read it in *Lauhunamleh*."

Abai's tone annoyed the mullah, and although he said nothing his blue eyes flashed beneath lowered

brows. Yerbol was sorry for the hot-tempered but kind mullah.

"You're too particular, Abai," he said to Abai soothingly. "Don't ignorant people repeat, 'Black sheep's head and grey sheep's head and we are the slaves of Allah,'* and think in their simplicity that they are praying? Our worthy mullah was reciting a real prayer and so beautifully too, that we all thought it to be the prayer of prayers, even if it was about the threshing-floor or the meadows or anything else. Everything is justified by good intentions."

The Kishkineh Mullah's ill-humour vanished in the general amusement. Aigerim beckoned to young Zlikha, changed the table-cloth and ordered the kumys to be served. The elation that had possessed Abai when he completed his work now returned to him and he decided to share his pleasure with his friends. He sipped the thick, cold kumys as he turned the pages before him.

"To build a house, to prepare a threshing-floor or knead the clay for the bricks requires much labour, of course, but to attain the understanding of a wise book which could not speak to you for years takes no little work either. Aigerim and Yerbol know and you, mullah, must also guess that I've been living with a single desire all year. I am happy to be able to see the complete edifice of my work before me."

He fell silent afraid that his words were not clear to the others. But then, an apt simile occurred to him:

"The Kishkineh Mullah will explain it," he went on looking at Yerbol. "An industrious shakird may study at the madrasah for many a year and then one day the truth dawns on him and he is able to see what has been concealed from him for many years. When this happens,

* A haphazard combination of words that sounds like a Moslem prayer.—*Ed.*

the mullahs say that he has found the key of knowledge. You know how long I have been studying. I was a pupil without a teacher, but today I, too, have found the key of knowledge. This has happened to me on the very same day as you, Aigerim and Yerbol, have laid the foundation stone of our new house. My labours have been justified, my friends."

Abai's words were joyful and full of meaning. He was clearly pleased. Aigerim, who was always quick to understand Abai, smiled at him, the tears welling to her eyes.

"And so it turns out that it is you who have greater reason to celebrate today than we. It is we who should congratulate you and wish you well." With these words she filled a piala with kumys and handed it to him.

Yerbol made no remark, but smiled happily, too. Only the mullah was not in accord.

"The key of knowledge? I would agree that you had gained the key of knowledge if you had been studying *Mantik* and *Gakaid* without a spiritual teacher, without a khalife or khazret, or if you had unlocked the meaning of *Kafiya* or *Sharh Gabdullah*, but if it is a matter of studying some Russian nonsense, the expression is not appropriate. You are under a misapprehension, Abai," he added sententiously.

Abai frowned, but said nothing, trying to keep himself in hand.

"Our spiritual teachers, the khalifes, khazrets and ishans, have always been narrow-minded," he said calmly, after taking a sip from his piala. "I can see that you are not free of this vice either."

But the Kishkineh Mullah would not agree.

"I would not mind at all if it were a question of Islam, but why bother to talk about such books as yours? The infidels of ancient times also had a science of their

own, but it was not recognized by a single Moslem scholar. It is inadequate for true knowledge."

Abai felt that the debate was likely to go on for ever. He was not in mood to bandy words with the Kishkineh Mullah and though he had many arguments to put forward, he chose only one in order to stop the mullah's flow of talk.

"You say that no Moslem ever recognized the science of the infidels. Just remember what the Prophet said in the Hadith—let alone what others have said—'The ink of a scientist is more precious than the blood of a shahid.'* You say that the science of the infidels is inadequate for knowledge. But can you regard as science the story of the origin of the world as given in the history of the prophets *Kissasul Anbiya*. And what knowledge of mankind and of the nations can one gain from *Krik-Hadith*, from *Lauhunameh* and *Fikhhaidani*?"**

"If these are not enough for you, then read other books by Moslem scholars," said the Kishkineh Mullah, parrying the thrust. "You'll have more than enough wisdom there to last your lifetime."

Abai smiled.

"It would be understandable if you had but said like a real scholar, 'Borrow knowledge wherever you may find it. Take it from whoever has it.' But what advice have you given me? Those pastures you have mentioned were familiar to me long ago. I've travelled more than one path to master the knowledge gained by mankind through the centuries. I am really surprised at you, mullah. If you were an ignorant man, you might be excused, but you are a teacher. How can you say that knowledge should be sought along one narrow path

* Shahid—one who fell on the battlefield of a religious war.—*Ed.*

** Ritual books.—*Ed.*

alone? Isn't science a boundless world? Haven't the wisest of the Moslem scholars availed themselves of the wisdom of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle? Which of these was a Moslem? You see before you a man who has spent years in quest of knowledge and you tell him, 'Look no further. Give it up!'" He thought for a while and went on, "We shall never understand each other. Each life, every aspiration, has its own lodestar and goal. My aspiration is irresistible and my goal lies far ahead. Let us finish with this."

He frowned again, and drawing out his ornamented shaksha,* he tapped it with his finger and took a pinch of nasibai.

Yerbol had said nothing throughout the argument, but inwardly sympathized with his friend's quest for knowledge, though himself an ignorant man. When the talk was over, he tried to soften its effects with a jest.

"I'm an ignorant man, but even I know the proverb: 'An ignorant mullah may destroy the faith.' Thanks to Abai, I have understood that much: When there's talk of unbelievers, our mullahs behave just like the Irgizbai and Zhigitek of our Tobikty. Our Maibasars, Takezhans or Beisembis will never give the Karabatir, Kokshe and Bokenshi a chance to say anything, even if they are in the right."

Abai could not help smiling as Yerbol concluded:

"Our worthy mullah pounces on Russian books and science much like Maibasars on the sons of Kulinshak."

The comparison was not lost even on Zlikha who was serving the kumys, and she smiled knowingly. As for Abai, he responded with laughter. The Kishkineh Mullah, however, thought the remark rude and uncalled for. He left the yurta frowning and soon the humming of the

* Shaksha—a box for carrying a kind of tobacco called nosibai.—*Ed.*

children's voices in the next tent subsided like the bleating of the lambs at dusk.

Aigerim who had followed the mullah out of the yurta now paused at the threshold. She had noticed two riders approaching the aul.

"There is someone coming," she said turning to the others. "I can't make out who they are. Perhaps they're from the Great Aul. No. They're strangers. One of them is such a giant." She looked intently and began to laugh. "Oi-boi! It must be Kenzhem. Of course it's Kenzhem!"

That was Aigerim's name for Ospan.* Yerbol sprang up and went out. Abai followed. They had all been a little homesick for the noisy and crowded aul from which they had separated more than a month before. Kunanbai's aul usually remained at their winter places in the Chinghis and at Zhidebai until late in spring. Soon they could be expected here—at the rich pastures and flooded meadows of nearby Korik. The wandering auls must now be approaching Akshoky.

As the riders drew nearer, Abai was no less astonished than Aigerim to perceive how tremendously his brother had grown and broadened since he had last seen him. He was mounted on a well-fed, long-tailed bay. His massive body looked enormous because he was still wearing his heavy winter coat and his head was covered with a huge timak of long-haired lambskin. His enormous legs, clad in warm boots, extended nearly to his horse's knees. Abai always gasped when he saw his brother after an interval.

Ospan lashed his horse and soon flew into the little aul with his friend Darkhan. The two were joyously re-

* Kenzhem—the youngest son. According to custom, a new daughter-in-law gives her own names to all members of the family.—*Ed.*

ceived. Aigerim went to meet them, took the reins of Ospan's horse and greeted them heartily.

"You're wrapped up as though you've been riding all night," she observed good-humouredly.

But Ospan was in no mood for joking. His large eyes were reddened as though he had spent a sleepless night. He seemed morose and unwilling to talk, quite unlike the happy-go-lucky Ospan of old. On their way to the yurt, Abai plied him with questions—where were they wandering and were Father and Mother in good health? Ospan briefly replied that the auls had that day left one of the slopes of Akshoky and were bound for Korik. Plucking up his moustache and sparse beard, he said nothing more. It was a curious beard for such a giant. Every hair of it stood alone, as stiff and wiry as horse hair.

Aigerim busied herself with the tea and refreshments, giving instructions to Zlikha in a low voice. Perceiving this, Ospan curtly remarked that he would not eat. No sooner had he sat down, without even troubling to remove his belt, than he announced that 12-year-old Makulbai, Kunanbai's favourite and oldest grandson and the son of Takezhan and Karazhan, had died the previous day after an illness that had lasted since the winter.

So that was why Ospan was behaving so strangely, Abai decided. He thought all the more highly of Ospan since he knew that his younger brother had not been on friendly terms with Takezhan. He stopped questioning Ospan, afraid of upsetting him still more.

Abai was silent until the guests, having finished their kumys, began to question him about the progress of the new house.

Ospan knew very well that Abai had always been awkward in household matters. He, himself, on the other hand, had always been a far more thrifty and capable aul master, one who knew how to look after his cattle and other property. When Abai had set off for Akshoky

to build his house, it was Ospan who had picked the most capable handicraftsmen and workers for him. He had also seen to the tools and food supplies. But after Abai had left, he had joked to the mothers and other relatives:

"Now Abai's decided to do something really worthwhile. It's not a great affair that he's building here, but he thinks he'll show us that he's a master of the trade. I've told him again and again to let me see to the household and him to his books. But no! He had to do the building by himself. I can imagine the results."

Now that the conversation had turned upon their affairs it seemed that not Abai, but Ospan was the elder brother. His questions were brief and to the point; how much clay had they kneaded, how many thousands of bricks had they prepared, and how many were made by the best workman in a day? Abai could not answer and looked to Aigerim and Yerbol for help. It was clear that he had not followed the progress of the work at all. At any other time there would have been no end to Ospan's jokes, but now he merely smiled and turned to Aigerim and Yerbol.

Aigerim was still weeping over the news of Maku'bai's death, but Ospan ignored this. He put many questions to her and demanded detailed answers. Finally he decided to inspect the work himself. As Aigerim and Yerbol walked out in front of him, he paused at the door.

"Tell them to saddle your horse. We'll have to go to Korik. You must visit the Great Yurta and make your salem to Father. You should read some prayers in Takezhan's yurta too. We'll have a talk on the way. There's something I must ask you about."

Regarding him intently, Abai noted that the last words contained a hint that there was something deeply troubling his brother.

"Has it anything to do with the tribe?" he asked casually.

"You'll see for yourself whether it's the tribe or just some bad kinsmen," said Ospan evasively. "I must talk to you. Have your horse saddled at once."

As things turned out, the two brothers were accompanied by the Kishkineh Mullah, who had been summoned by Ulzhan to read the funeral service from the Koran. As Ospan was unwilling to speak of intimate matters before a stranger, the talk revolved around the building of the house, the haymaking and preparation of stocks of fodder for the winter. Since the winter was especially severe and there was much more snow in these parts than in Zhidebai and on the Chinghis, they had to store up a great deal of fodder against the possibility of a djut. Ospan advised Abai to cut as much hay as possible on the neighbouring meadows, remarking that the auls which had wandered to Korik were situated too near Akshoky and that this was a disadvantage.

"The auls have returned to their old grounds. That's something I'd overlooked," he said ruefully. "I was too busy with the funeral or else I would have chosen another place farther on."

Abai had also overlooked this, and was now touched by his brother's concern for him.

"You're right," he said, "but I'm not an Anet or Kotibak. I can't go about shouting, 'Keep your cattle off. This hay is mine!' Will you talk to our mothers and brothers about my winter place?"

But it appeared that Ospan had already seen to this.

"Let the auls stay here to the seventh day and accept first mention in the prayers of the kinsmen. I'll take our auls farther on after that. The flood waters have spread far, so there is plenty of water this year. The grass will grow quickly here and you'll have all the hay you need."

As they had left Akshoky, Abai had seen meadows

dotted with cattle, but had observed no auls. Now that they had reached the valley, at a distance of a two-year-old's run,* he could count at least fifteen auls huddled together. Around each of them the herds and the droves were grazing on the meadows abundantly watered and richly covered with grass. The animals stood feeding upon the luscious grass, motionless as always after hard days of wandering. The expert eyes of Ospan and Darkhan soon appraised the value of these pastures by the behaviour of the cattle.

"The animals know the richest pastures better than we," said Darkhan. "Just see the way they go at the grass without moving."

"I should think so," Ospan agreed. "It's what they've been wanting all the winter."

An occasional yurta could be seen among the herds. It was obvious that the wandering auls had been travelling in even rows and had halted simultaneously; each aul had already set up its keregeh and was now shaping the domes from the long uiks, painted a vivid red and easily seen from afar. They had begun to cover them with felt and the still expanses of green were flecked here and there with white. Ulzhan's octagonal Great Yurta had quickly risen in the very middle, and when it was finished, the Great Yurtas likewise sprang up in the other auls.

These pastures were no farther from Akshoky than a two-year-old's run. By the time Ospan and his companions descended to the stay and reached Ulzhan's aul, the yurtas were completed everywhere. The fifteen auls filled the once deserted valley with noise, movement and life.

Without pausing at the Great Yurta, the brothers made

* Distances in the steppes were sometimes measured by the lengths covered by the horses in the baiga (races): Run of a foal—5 kilometres, run of a two-year-old—8 to 10 kilometres, of a horse—20-35 kilometres.—*Ed.*

directly for Takezhan's mourning tent, near Ulzhan's aul. When he had become a rich volost ruler, Takezhan had separated from his kinsmen and wandered independently, but on the death of Makulbai, Ulzhan had decided to keep her auls closer to those of her son for the last lap of the wandering. She and the other elder kinsmen spent much of their time in Takezhan's yurt. The loss of their first-born evoked general concern over the bereaved couple, and it was not only Ulzhan who mourned the loss of the child and attempted to console the parents and arranged the prayers. Kunanbai too expressed his sympathy for his son and daughter-in-law.

Abai approached the yurt of mourning slowly, neither setting his horse at a gallop nor chanting the lamentation, since the deceased was an adolescent. He embraced Takezhan at the entrance, and began the prescribed mourning chant—"My child, my poor little foal"—only when he had entered the tent where Karazhan and the other women sat wailing.

The yurt was full of kinsmen and both the men and the women were weeping. Still chanting, Abai and the Kishkineh Mullah embraced the elder women in turn, beginning with Karazhan, Aigiz and Ulzhan, and then seated themselves in the places of honour lower than Kunanbai and Karatai. Soon the general lamentation abated and only Karazhan was left voicing her grief.

Sad though the occasion was, Abai could not bring himself to feel fully for Karazhan. Her voice was hoarse and unpleasant and her words seemed cold and formal. It was hard to believe that it was her own son she was mourning for.

The Kishkineh Mullah read the Koran in the sonorous, sing-song Bokhara fashion. At the first words, Kunanbai lowered his head, closed his single eye and motioned to his wailing daughter-in-law. Aigiz and Kalikha, who sat next to Karazhan, understood his gesture.

"That will be enough, kelin. Let him read the Koran!" they said to her.

Abai and Ospan stayed until only a few people remained in the yurta, among them Kunanbai, Karatai and Ulzhan, who had been there all day. Mullah Gabitkhan sat there too, turbaned and bespectacled, reading the Koran, which rested on a large white pillow before him. He read with something like ecstasy, his eyes closed: he knew the suras of the Koran by heart.

Kunanbai whispered something to the Kishkineh Mullah. Having finished his ablution, the other drew forth the copy of the Koran he had brought with him, laid it on the pillow next to that of Gabitkhan and joined the latter in a drawling whisper. The monotonous chant sent Ospan to sleep. He sat with his shoulder resting upon Abai and his back on a keregeh.

Abai had little to say. He exchanged a few conventional remarks with his father, and some mutual inquiries about their health. It was only at the end of the previous winter that Kunanbai had returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca, which had kept him away for four years. His hair was white and he seemed very old. His large body had preserved something of its old bearing, but his face was a mass of wrinkles. Once a hale and hearty man, he now gave an impression of being weary and limp. He wore the white eastern skull-cap he had brought from Mecca and a white silk chapan with cross-stitched lapels, likewise an unusual garment among the Tobikty. The low thunder of his voice was gone, and he spoke in soft undertones. To his kinsmen he seemed to have come from another world. He was doing his best to show his piety and softness and to act like a repenting sinner.

On his return from Mecca, he had settled in Nurganim's yurta and separated himself from the others with a curtain, converting his abode into something between

a monastery cell and a mihrab.* Only the death of his nephew had drawn him temporarily from his seclusion. He spoke to no one except to his old friend, Karatai, and that only on rare occasions.

Abai knew there was nothing he could discuss with his father and had made no attempt to address him. It was only Kunanbai and Karatai who talked. Old Karatai knew how to draw anyone into conversation. To get Kunanbai to talk he turned the conversation to topics appropriate to a yurta in mourning and put several questions of interest to every pious Moslem. He asked him about the tombs of the saints which Hadji Kunanbai had visited in Mecca and Medina.

"In Medina I visited the tombs of Rasul Allah, Khazret Abu Bakh, Omar and Fatima," Kunanbai related, solemnly telling his beads. "I was also privileged to visit the tombs of the worthy khazrets Gabbas, Khamza and Gusman."

"And did you see the tombs of the Sahabs?""** Karatai went on piously.

"Sagdi-bin-Wakas, Gabdrakhman-bin-Gauf and Khazret Gaisha lay buried there," Kunanbai answered willingly. "Their resting places are called 'the places of repose of the Prophet's friends.'"

"In Arabic they are called Gashura and Mubashshara," Gabitkhan observed without looking up from his Koran.

Kunanbai turned to the mullah and inclined his head in deference. "You're right, mullah," he said. "I referred to these places in our native tongue."

Kunanbai then began the tale of his journey from Mecca to Medina. He had travelled over the Arabian Desert

* Mihrab—the place in the mosque corresponding to an altar.—*Ed.*

** Sahabs—Mohammed's associates.—*Ed.*

by camel for 13 days after leaving Sham with the caravan. He had not forgotten the place where he had donned his ikhram, the robes put on by every pilgrim before entering Mecca. He told how he had ascended the hill of 'Arafa and of how many namazes he had chanted in the sacred Mosque of Kaaba. He had left Mecca on foot and now recalled what had happened on his way back. Kunanbai seemed to enjoy this talk with Karatai—a break from his life as a recluse. He had shown Karatai much attention at tea and dinner and when his friend had gone commented on his talk to Ulzhan in these words:

“There are few among our illiterate Kazakhs as well informed as Karatai. He knows all the things I have seen so well that he seems to have seen them with his own eyes.”

“May all his wishes come true,” said Ulzhan. “He has done us much good today. He has caused you to tell us what we have never heard before. You have seen and come to know so much and yet have kept it secret from us.”

Ulzhan's observations were rare, but always to the point. Both Kunanbai and Abai understood that her praise of Karatai harboured a reproach to her husband. Kunanbai, however, considered the remark flippant and frowned, as though to say, “Women will be women and sacred things should be kept in the heart when they are about.” He told his beads with quick fingers, then turned away from her and passed his palms over his face as he whispered a prayer.

Abai smiled faintly to his mother. Kunanbai's talk with Karatai, his mother's just reproach and his father's annoyance exposed the vanity and emptiness of the old man's existence. The four years of pilgrimage had yielded him nothing more than the names of a few tombstones. Why should he turn away from his family, friends and kinsmen and withdraw from the world? He had

gained little, but lost a great deal. What sense was there in his life now?

The sun was setting when Abai and Ospan at last left Takezhan's aul. The brothers had not yet decided where to spend the night—they had just mounted and were riding along the river-bank away from the auls and the droves on their way to the waterside. Ospan had chosen the road and Abai had followed in silence, expecting the conversation which had been postponed in the morning. They were interrupted again, however, this time by their nephew Shakke, the son of the dead Kudaiberdy. They were descending to the river when the young man overtook them at full gallop on a splendid light-grey mare. His light chapan flew behind him while his gold-topped timak of black lambskin was pulled down over one ear. Coming abreast of them as smoothly as a sailboat, he presented his salem.

"I've caught up with you to tell you about my falcon," he said excitedly, exhibiting the grey falcon perched on his arm. "Abai-aga, please ride on along the river and my name is not Shakke if I don't get a duck apiece for you. They'll be tied to your saddles in an instant."

The steel-grey feathers of the bird glowed like molten gold in the setting sun. The dark-brown eyes glittered evilly, their fire a challenge to the rays from the west. Fascinated, Abai took the falcon from Shakke, perched it on his wrist, and stroked its head and feathers, feeling for its muscles with knowing fingers. He could tell how well the bird had been trained by its impatient movements.

"There's a falcon for you," he said. "He'll fight any fowl in the air. Who trained him, Shakke?"

"I trained him myself. I've learned how to do it."

Abai was pleased.

"Good for you. That requires plenty of skill and patience. Now let's see what he can do."

Abai returned the falcon and lashed his bay to a gallop. Shakke's grey dashed after, followed by Ospan's horse.

Before them the river widened. Many flocks of game birds—pintails, pochards, mallards—floated on its surface or soared high above the water. The hunters were still riding swiftly when the falcon sensed its prey and beat its breast against the restraining hand of its owner. Shakke looked about, but could see no birds right nearby.

"Let him go. He has sensed his prey," Abai advised, as he overtook his nephew.

The falcon slipped from Shakke's arm as if to drop to the earth, then wheeled before the very nose of the mare and sped over the ground almost touching the grass. He darted over the river and then could be seen flashing behind the reeds for an instant before he vanished. The riders decided that the bird would strike from ambush, but the falcon suddenly appeared again. They could just glimpse his breast, glowing red in the sun's rays, as he shot upwards and then swooped. The birds whirled away in all directions, emitting piercing cries. The riders galloped to the spot where the falcon had disappeared.

A pair of motley-coloured ducks were struggling in the reeds with the enemy that had dropped from the blue. The duck was quacking and thrashing about in the water trying to shake off the falcon, which had sunk its claws into her feathers, while the drake was hovering above to strike at the attacker as though he were a bird of prey himself. The wings of the drake fluttered like yellow and crimson tongues of flame, and the blue-grey body of the falcon looked like an iron bar as it is cast into a glowing furnace. Abai reached the birds when the fight was at its height. The colourful scene compelled him to pause. Shakke, however, got ahead of Abai, leapt from his horse and was wading out to the reeds.

By the time he got there, the falcon had killed the birds. The beating of the drake's wings and his pecking had enraged the falcon, and with the talons of one foot still clawing the duck, he had struck at the drake with the other and brought him down. Shakke shouted with admiration. He hit at the duck with his kamcha, the feathers floating off in all directions, and tore the drake from the falcon's clutches.

The incredible had happened, and two birds had been bagged at once. Shakke was justly proud of his bird and severing the head of the duck, he scooped out the brain, sprinkled it with sugar and fed it to the still excited falcon. He then tied the game to the saddles of Abai and Ospan, and remounted.

Though frightened, the other birds had not flown far, and the riders soon came upon another big covey of ducks on the water. Feeling the pressure of the falcon's breast on his wrist, Shakke lashed his mare to a gallop with his arm extended. When the ducks sensed the approach of the riders and flashed up, he thrust the falcon into the air after them. At first compressed like a ball bounding in space, the bird then spread its wings and darted forward.

"Now that was fast," Abai cried.

Shakke was racing after him, pummelling the *dabil** at his saddle with the handle of his whip. Frightened by the rattling, the ducks rose in a body. The falcon shot upwards like a lance hurled skywards and pounced upon the green-necked, yellow-headed drake flying above the others. It happened so quickly that Abai, speeding along with his chapán fluttering behind him, and shouting something inaudible, thought that the drake had dropped into the falcon's talons of its own accord. Clutching its prey by the breast, the falcon made several circles and

* *Dabil*—a small hunting drum.—*Ed.*

descended to the grass in front of Shakke. Abai could not contain himself. This had been even better than the fight with the two ducks.

"I've never seen such a bird. Well trained too! You're a real hunter, Shakke, as every djiguit should be," he said to the young man.

Ospan, hitherto oppressed by his thoughts, was now smiling at Abai's boyish enthusiasm. Shakke controlled himself perfectly. Whether bred or inborn, his dignity prevented him from saying anything. Abai looked upon his nephew's conduct with almost paternal pride.

The brothers were about to take leave of the young hunter when Akilbai, Abai's elder son by Dilda, galloped towards them from the neighbouring aul. The boy resembled his father, though the whiteness of his skin came from his mother. He presented his salem to Ospan and gestured at the game, his face beaming.

"I was sent by Ani-apa,"* he began. "She saw you hunting and asked you to send the game to our aul." He brought his horse across the path of Shakke. "Will you fasten those birds to my saddle, Shakke-aga?"

Shakke was raising the game to do as he was asked when arrested by Ospan.

"Hold on! I wouldn't give a feather to Nurganim, let alone a fowl."

Abai was struck by the malice in his voice. Shakke was embarrassed. Akilbai reddened, his eyes filling with tears.

"I didn't know you were so mean, Ospan-aga," he complained, starting his horse. He was detained by Abai.

"Just a minute," he said. "What brought you here?"

"Mother sent a wagon to bring us to Akshoky, and so

* Ani—mother in Tartar, apa—the same in Kazakh. The combination means elder mother.—*Ed.*

we're all here—Abish, Magash and I," the boy retorted, and set off for the aul at a gallop.

The head of his horse was graced with a plume of owl feathers, the saddle finished with silver. He wore a hat of sable and a cape of blue cloth with silver buttons and a gilded belt studded with motley gems. He was as prettily dressed as a girl, a habit he had formed under Nurganim's care. It was she who had reared Akilbai, as though he were Kunanbai's youngest son. The boy had been born when Abai was seventeen, and Nurganim adopted him when she became Kunanbai's wife. Akilbai could not regard Abai as his father, and the latter, for his part, regarded the boy as a favourite younger brother rather than his son, and when the youngster had darted off resentfully, Abai felt as if he had quarrelled with a dear brother.

He too had been hurt by Ospan's unexpected rudeness. The elation of the hunting was gone. With a brief farewell to Shakke, who was feeding his falcon, Abai wheeled his horse and rode for Akshoky. Ospan was soon at his heels.

"Why did you pounce on the boy?" Abai demanded. "Losing your temper that way in front of children! Are you really envious of them?"

Ospan had borne himself as his elder brother's equal all day, but now he had been put in his place.

"You're right, I suppose," he mumbled guiltily. "I just lost my temper. Children should be kept out of this affair, of course. But I've reason to be angry; I've been trying to tell you about it all along. My heart's been bleeding all these days. To think that we've lived to be disgraced like this!"

"Who is disgraced? What are you talking about?" Abai reined in his horse, fastening his eyes upon his younger brother. He was chilled with foreboding.

Ospan returned his gaze unwavering, with lowering brows and an angry glint of red in his pupils.

"Nurganim is disgracing us," he snapped. "This tokal's dear guest, Bazaraly, has been living in Father's home for three days. Isn't that a disgrace? The profanation of the bed of our parents! I knew about it long ago, but I shall keep quiet no longer." Silent for an instant, he flared up again, "I'll have the two of them hung to the shanrak this very night, while Father's in the mourning yurta."

"Hold your tongue," gasped Abai. It was as though someone had stabbed him. His feet shook in the stirrups. He could barely breathe for the weight on his chest. "Is that the way to protect the honour of the family? That's sheer ignorance, stupidity! How could you think of such a thing? I would rather see you hanged to the shanrak. Father is nearer the grave than a walk to the hearth in a yurta. Are you trying to push him into his coffin stripped of all honour? Do you want to make his disgrace known to all the world, to throw his name to the dogs? Now let me tell you this: let your tongue and your hands be tied!"

Giving his horse the full measure of his whip, he flew on towards Akshoky. The sun was setting and the edge of the sky was scarlet. Abai would not spare his horse; his heart was afire.

He was bitter with Nurganim who had lost all shame, with Ospan who was so ready to expose his father's disgrace, and with Bazaraly. "Ah, Bazaraly, you were the only man whom I held in such high regard, but now you've become a stranger." It was long since Abai had been so shaken. Resentment, pity, rage, shame and bitterness raced over the steppes with him, each more painful than the lash of a whip. He was bewildered as never before.

He suddenly remembered the Russian book he had finished that morning, *Dubrovsky*! The feuds handed on from father to son, the generations stricken with blood

and strife, Kunanbai and Bozhei, Takezhan and Bala-gaz—Bazaraly's brother, Oralbai—another of his brothers, the unfortunate Korimbala. He recollected Bazaraly's kinsmen, one after the other, those of them that had been wronged at the hands of Kunanbai's kinsmen. The face of the old and dying Dubrovsky, crushed by Troyekurov, flashed into his mind. And Vladimir? He too was engaged in the feud, but had found salvation in his love for Masha. Was Bazaraly really to blame? The truths of art merged with the bitter truths of life.

Something had to be done. What was the way out? Honour was at stake. Cruelly spurring his horse, he seemed to be goading his thoughts over the steppes as well. He could not separate Kunanbai, Nurganim and Bazaraly from Troyekurov, Vladimir and Masha. There was no way out!

Abai approached his aul at dusk. Everything was still, and no one had come to meet him. There were no children about and the workmen too were gone, having ridden off to visit their relatives in Korik. Abai reached his yurt at a walking pace, dismounted, and was about to enter the yurt when he heard someone singing softly, a song that floated on the evening air like a silken thread. Afraid that it would be broken by his entry, Abai sat down on the grass near the door. Only Zlikha, who was sitting outside by the fire, paid any attention to him, getting up quickly and coming over to him.

"Sh... Aigerim is singing a good song," he whispered to her. "Don't go in now. Let's listen."

"But I was going to light the lamps," she answered.

"Never mind the lamps. You'll interrupt the song."

Zlikha smiled understandingly and returned to the fire.

Abai removed his timak, unbuttoned the shirt under his chaplan and exposed his chest to the evening breeze as he sat listening. Aigerim, feeling that she was alone, stood singing by the bedside of her first-born, Turash.

The child stopped gurgling, either because it was listening to the song or had fallen asleep.

Aigerim was singing the sad "Karagoz" ("Dark Eyes"), one of Birzhan's songs. The high, pure voice vibrated over the stillness of the evening. She was singing in an undertone and this made the melody even more moving and tender.

*That dark-eyed sorceress of mine,
When she is far away from me
Her soul from heavy thoughts is free
Though I in melancholy pine.*

This refrain was especially moving. She was improvising and singing some of the lines in her own way. In this evening hour, the time of prayers and supplication, she merged her own sadness and Abai's grief in one melody.

Abai had not heard her sing for a long time. The singing kelin had been the talk of all the Irgizbai since the departure of Birzhan. When Kunanbai had returned from Mecca, it had been necessary to conceal the fact that one of his daughters-in-law was a singer, for worldly enjoyments were obnoxious to him. To make matters worse, Dilda had been doing her best to turn the kinsmen against Aigerim, and Abai was frequently rebuked by his relations for his wife's singing. Even when she sang softly to him alone, in response to his pleadings, it somehow became known in Kunanbai's aul and caused fresh trouble. Singing was no longer a pleasure to her, but a torment. Aigerim, therefore, often begged Abai not to make her sing, and he could not but agree, though he felt that in this he was helping to stifle her talent.

Whenever he strummed his dombra, Aigerim paled, her beautiful eyes filling with tears. Abai tried to show no sign that he had noticed, and would go on playing, trying to soothe her.

But one winter evening, when Abai had been playing longer than usual, Aigerim's deep sigh made him lay his instrument aside.

"What troubles you, Aigerim?"

A hot tear fell on his hand as he embraced her.

"You were my nightingale," he said sadly. "That free voice of yours could touch every heart. I have turned out to be a bird-catcher. I caught a nightingale and locked it in a gilded cage. I, too, am to blame if your voice is heard no more."

And he sat listening to the voice of his caged nightingale, afraid to sing too loudly. Aigerim imparted many new undertones to the melody of "Karagoz," each of them vibrant with a meaning of its own. Now it was tenderness, now anxiety, now happiness over the tiny babe, now deep love for Abai. It was a grievous revelation from a heavy heart, sad as a mother's lament, and Abai grew oblivious to the world.

Aigerim sang for a long time, as if unable to part with this song, her only companion in the cage that confined her. Abai grew thoughtful. He entered the yurta only when the darkness was complete and the song was over. Aigerim was startled and embarrassed.

"When did you come?" she asked, rising quickly.

"When Turash was not yet asleep and 'Dark Eyes' entered the yurta," he laughed.

Zlikha, too, came in and lit the lamps. Abai seated himself beside his wife.

"This is what I thought of while I was listening," he said. "You'll go to Takezhan's aul tomorrow for the mourning. I have heard Karazhan lament today and I must say that though she is Makulbai's mother, she's not able to sing at all. Listening to your song, I thought of some words. I'll write them down for you to learn. You've been singing 'Karagoz' in your own way and I

think it will suit my new, mournful words as well." He reached for the paper.

Abai reflected, searching for the words, now and then glancing at Aigerim's delicate features. He had been moved by her song and was now convinced that she was more than a singer; she herself could give birth to new melodies. Watching his hand on the paper, she was full of awe, realizing that a new song was coming into being. A smile hovered about her lips. It was an evening of inspiration, an evening of melody. When the lament was ready, Abai read it to her.

*The bravest of falcons his son has lost,
Shot from the archer's wicked bow.
The greenest of trees that ever tossed
Is beheaded by lightning's fatal blow.
The proudest of steeds has lost all its grace,
Its mane and tail are cropped to the skin.
O you, once admired by all your kin,
Never again will they see your face.
You faded before you had ever bloomed.
Sore is the wound of untimely death.
The sun shines bright, but the seed is doomed
To be killed by winter's merciless breath.
That greedy death is relentless to all.
She comes to us whether we wish or no.
Each one of us under her scythe must fall.
So how can we stop the tears that flow?
With all nature's gifts was my son endowed,
So frank and so gentle he was, my dear,
But now he lies underneath his shroud
And we stand weeping beside his bier.*

Full of maternal love herself, Aigerim had felt poignant sorrow over Makulbai's death and Abai's words now brought tears to her eyes.

She had a good memory and quickly learned what her husband had read.

On the very next day, Abai, Aigerim and Zlikha took a remembrance gift with them and went to Takezhan's aul. Aigerim began the lament in a high voice as they approached the yurta of mourning. The tent was as crowded as on the day before. Aigerim seated herself in a place lower than that of Karazhan and continued her song with her hands on her knees. The elders, including Kunanbai, listened attentively. The bitter words on the death of a child and the melancholy tune composed by Aigerim touched every heart. The sobbing that had subsided after the general lamentation broke forth afresh.

"My little lamb, light of my eyes," Ulzhan chanted, overcome.

Even the men could not restrain their tears and wept with the rest, singing the melancholy words under their breath. Aigerim's voice not only stirred up the grief that Abai felt over the death of Makulbai, but all the past sorrows that lay dormant within him, and he too wept with the others. The general grief seemed to have found expression in Aigerim's voice, and the sobbing continued even when the Koran was being read.

"Let this daughter-in-law mourn over my boy until the fortieth day," said Kunanbai to Ulzhan when the mourners had somewhat composed themselves. "Let her stay here as long as mourners shall come."

He had anticipated Ulzhan's silent wish. Aigerim did not return to Akshoky. Sitting beside Karazhan, she poured forth the lamentations of a mother.

2

Kunanbai stayed in Takezhan's aul until the end of the memorial week. The cause of Ospan's indignation had not removed himself, for Bazaraly was still Nurga-

nim's guest. Though it had aroused no talk, Ospan grew increasingly restless. His hatred for Nurganim smouldered until it burst into flame.

Bazaraly had come to the aul just before Makulbai's death to salem Kunanbai on the occasion of his return from Mecca. The old Hadji had singled out Bazaraly since the time the latter had openly defended his brother Balagaz and boldly spoken his mind to Kunanbai. In conversation with Nurganim, Kunanbai had often expressed regret at the fact that so intelligent and strong-willed a man should have been born in a poor aul, and had more than once commented that if he had been the son of a stronger man, he could have been the pride of his clan. When Bazaraly came, Kunanbai had asked him about himself, about the life of his parents and the family of his exiled brother. Bazaraly had been too proud to complain of his poverty to anyone, but he decided to conceal nothing from Kunanbai. He told him how Balagaz's bereaved family had scattered like hungry sparrows, how the elder children had gone out to work for prosperous neighbours, while the smaller had even no milk, since the family had not a single cow.

Kunanbai then surprised everyone; he ordered that two milch cows be sent to Balagaz's family at once, while a new chapan, timak and leather boots were to be made for Bazaraly, who had arrived in shabby clothes on a lean horse. Karatai, who was also present, talked everywhere about the repentance of the Hadji who tried to redress the wrong that he had done to Balagaz.

Since her husband treated him with such distinction, Nurganim did not conceal her partiality for the djiguit. Her affection for Bazaraly had not abated. Her bearing was unconstrained, though rumours about Ospan's irritation had reached her more than once. She received Bazaraly as her most honoured guest and even decided to make the clothes for him with her own hands.

"It's a disgrace. What will they be saying?" Ospan fumed, but she would only pout and did not trouble to explain that everything was being done on Kunanbai's orders. She seemed to find enjoyment in teasing Ospan. It was precisely for this that she had sent Akilbai to ask for Shakke's game. The boy told her of his uncle's rude reply, but the self-confident young woman was not affected, though this was the first time that Ospan had dared to insult her in Abai's presence.

His brother's angry words could not restrain Ospan. On his way to the well on the day after the falcon hunt, he passed Kunanbai's yurt and overheard Nurganim and Bazaraly laughing. This was the last straw.

"Clear out of here," he pounced on the maid who was drawing the water. "There's no water for Nurganim here. I won't have my well befouled. Go back to her and tell her this: I'll break the head of anyone who comes to fetch water for her."

He immediately posted Masakpai and Darkhan to keep watch over the well by day and night. They were to see that not a drop of water reached Nurganim's yurt. He kept returning to the well on his horse to see if his orders were obeyed, and Nurganim's aul was unable to get water for an entire day. Towards evening, however, Ospan noticed two women leading a camel carrying a barrel of water obviously brought from the river. He promptly fell upon the camel and upset the barrel.

"Tell your mistress that there shall be no water while Bazaraly is her guest," he shouted. "Let her remember who she is before she comes to some harm!"

Ospan continued to guard the river and the well even at night. Wild with anger, he completely overlooked the fact that his conduct would in itself give rise to gossip.

Nurganim's aul faced a second day without water. Ospan's hostility had come into the open and a real conflict was near. Nurganim was no less angry than Ospan

and far from dismissing Bazaraly, she did not even tell him about Ospan's behaviour. She walked about the aul grim and lost in thought, but the moment she re-entered the yurta she assumed a carefree attitude, her face beaming. She redoubled her attentions to the guest and there was no end to her cheerful and winning words for him. Bazaraly was perfectly aware of what was happening outside, but pretended to notice nothing. He was pleased at Nurganim's behaviour and secretly amused.

By the time of the midday meal, Nurganim had found a way out which no other woman would have taken. The aul stood in the midst of moist grass, a sure sign that a well could be sunk here. Summoning three djiguits to the Kitchen Yurta, she ordered her maid to clear a space in the middle of the yurta near the hearth.

"Dig a well right here," she commanded briefly.

The djiguits fell to with a will, while Nurganim watched smiling, her striking brown eyes twinkling merrily.

"Ospan is too sure of himself. Won't he be angry when he finds he's been fooled. Dig as quickly as you can, and then let the tea-urn be prepared." She went out, stalking through the aul, her stately figure erect, her sholpy tinkling in her heavy braids as if laughing at Ospan. The women of both auls marvelled at her audacity. This was a direct challenge to Ospan and all evil tongues.

But Ospan retaliated unexpectedly and cruelly by placing Bazaraly in the hands of his enemies.

The election of the volost rulers was then being held on the cool and spacious Yeraly, some fifteen versts from Kunanbai's aul. More than a hundred auls had come to the district: Bokenshi, Zhigitek, Irgizbai, Kotibak and the numerous clans of the Mamai which had been wintering on the Orda Mountain. It was indeed the most convenient time and place for the election. An even row of thirty new tents had been set up for the expected authorities and the elders of the clans. The election this time was not

to be supervised by a mere local chief and his officials, but by Koshkin, the chief of Semipalatinsk District. It was rumoured that he had arrived not only for the elections, but also to investigate some matters of importance.

He had already arrived, accompanied by the local chiefs of both volosts and a large number of policemen and guards. There was a long train of wagons with tinkling bells. Shabarmans* with bags slung over their shoulders and guards with bared sabres in their hands rode at the head and the sides of the procession. While still on his way to the election, Koshkin had ordered two volost elders of Gzil-Adir and Chinghis, who had come to meet him, to be publicly whipped. The news of this had travelled before him and those who were gathered in Yeraly referred to Koshkin only as Tentek-Oyaz.**

Abai was in Akshoky when he received a messenger from Zhirenshe and Asilbek demanding that he should come to Yeraly as quickly as possible; evil days lay ahead. Another message arrived from Abilgazy. The chiefs had come to investigate the case of Oralbai, and Bazaraly had been seized in Nurganim's aul and arrested.

Abai mounted in great anxiety and asked Yerbol to come with him.

On arrival in Yeraly, they at once went to the yurtas set up for the authorities, expecting to find Zhirenshe there. The Great Aul of zhataks, of no less than forty yurtas, stood nearby. This settlement differed sharply from the others in its lack of the usual large herds of cattle. Though it was the largest in the valley, this aul had no tethering posts for foals, nor were there any sheep droppings to be seen on the kotan. Only a few groups of cattle could be seen grazing here and there. The small

* Shabarman—messenger.—*Ed.*

** Oyaz—chief; tentek-oyaz—angry chief.—*Ed.*

yurtas covered with sooty and patched felt stood huddled together on their tiny zhailyau. Dire need was in evidence everywhere. When Abai had just arrived from Akshoky, early in spring, Dandibai and Yerenai, two old men of this aul, aptly called Kop-zhatak,* had been to tell him of the poverty of their aul and to ask for help.

"They seem to be in dire need," Abai said to Yerbol when he saw the aul. "Just look how terrible." He pointed to the outer shanties and tents, very small and more like rag heaps than human dwellings. The spaces between them were cluttered with old coffers, hearth tripods, shabby saddles and broken beds. Scores of ragged children, old men and women in mere remnants of cloaks and chekmens** were milling about amongst the rubbish.

"Their yurtas must have been upset in the winds," said Yerbol. "That often happens here. They're practically without shelter."

"Let's turn off the road here, to see what has happened," suggested Abai, and veered towards the afflicted aul.

An old man, in a ragged chekmen that barely covered his naked body, came to meet them, leaning on a long staff. His face was deeply lined and it was only with difficulty that Abai recognized Darkembai.

"I didn't know you had come to live in Kop-zhatak, Darkembai," he said after greeting the old man.

Darkembai did not answer at once. It was only when the younger men had dismounted and followed him to the nearest shanty that the old man said sadly:

"You could not have known. I have not been here long, but here I shall probably stay until I die. Here are about forty beggars such as I. I have worked for Suyundik and Sugir all my life, but do you think either of them have

* Kop-zhatak—a host of zhataks.—*Ed.*

** Chekmen—a light coat closely fitting at the waist.—*Ed.*

ever said, 'When you were strong, you held my soeel, watched over my goods and guarded my herds in the winter. And now that you are old and weak, you'll be taken care of. You've earned a calm and quiet old age by your labours.' No, our ways have parted and I thought it better to live with others than to wander the steppes alone with a saddle on my back."

"Haven't you any relatives here?" asked Yerbol. "You know the old saying: 'If your kin drink even poison, then drink it with them.' Why have you gone away from them and to whom have you come?"

There was a reproach in Yerbol's words. Both Darkembai and Yerbol belonged to the Bokenshi clan.

"My kin are right here, in these forty households," he answered, his eyes still on Abai. "We are not related by blood, perhaps, but by life. We have been drawn together by our common sorrows and common troubles."

"What do you mean?" asked Yerbol, puzzled.

But it was Abai that Darkembai addressed again.

"Yes, that's just how it is, Abai, just so."

Quiet for a while, he smiled bitterly and pointed to the shanties with his staff, as he explained in a weary voice:

"These people here come from the Anet and Karabatir. All the year round they used to herd the cattle of the rich Irgizbai Akberdy and Mirzatai, and also of your father, in Kunkeh's aul. Those over there are the former poor neighbours of Bozhei, Baidaly and Tusip. There are some from the Kotibak, who served Baisai and some from the Kokshe, Mirza and Mamai. We've all had our share of sorrow, living with kinsmen. They too have been deserted and are beggars like me. They and their families did all the hard work around the yurtas of the bais, like their parents, grandparents and great grandparents before them. That is why we are kinsmen all. Just look at us. Here am I, old Darkembai, and there is Dandibai, just as shrivelled as I, and the aged Yerenai. We're all sick old

men with not a single grown-up son to take care of us. There are some here who are younger than us, but they are cripples or the husbands and fathers of cripples. And why? Because they never spared themselves in the frosts and the blizzards, because they lost their strength working for the bais. And what for? For an extra ladle of shurpa. Just come into these yurtas and see for yourselves. Some are lying about, weak with old age and some have wasted away while still young; some have a pain in the chest and others an ache in the side; some are lame and others blind and many others bedridden. Our yurtas are bad and our lives are as bad. Everything here is poor, shabby and worn out. The bais have cast us aside like so much rubbish. We could no longer follow the herds and flocks of Kunanbai, Bozhei, Baisai, Suyundik, Sugir and Karatai, and so they had no more need of us—no more than for an old saddle or leaky pail.”

The old man smiled helplessly.

“You, Yerbol, have said that ‘If your kin drink even poison, then you should drink it with them.’ These people here are my kinsmen. We have the same lives and the same thoughts.”

Abai listened with aching heart. He frowned, sighed, and fidgeted with his timak, unable to sit still.

“Our people have fallen on evil days,” he said, when Darkembai had finished. “And you’ve become as sharp-sighted as a falcon. There are many empty windbags among us Kazakhs. Their tongues are oily and their speech is as smooth as a fast ambler, but what’s the good of it? Words should be judged by the truth they contain. Those were bitter things you said just now, but true. I’m sure that Kunanbai and Suyundik could say nothing to refute you. You’ve nailed them down properly and you’ve opened my eyes too.”

While talking, they were joined by several others, among them Dandibai and Yerenai, old men whom Abai

knew, and a few wan middle-aged men and young djiguits, haggard and gloomy. Abilgazy, who had come to visit his friends, also approached, salemed Abai and took a place near him. Meanwhile, many more were crawling out of the shanties and the heaps of sooty felt scraps.

"What has happened here? Have you had a hurricane?" Abai asked Darkembai, pointing to them. "So many families left without shelter, old people and children."

"You've guessed right, my dear Abai," Dandibai answered. "It was a hurricane sent not by God but by the authorities, by the volost ruler." The old man smiled grimly. "Do you see those yurtas near the white yurtas of the chiefs?"

Abai and Yerbol now noticed some shabby yurtas which had been set up near the festive white tents. They stood crowded together as though whispering secrets to each other.

"The white yurtas for the chiefs to live in and our yurtas to humiliate us with," Dandibai explained with an oath.

"What humiliations are you talking about?" Yerbol demanded.

There was a hubbub of voices:

"Our yurtas have been taken from us for the prisoners."

"And others have been taken as kitchens."

"Kitchens are not so bad. They've made lavatories out of them. The whole of Yeraly is not enough for them."

"The volost ruler and those scoundrel elders are to blame."

"The devil knows when we'll be rid of that pack of dogs."

"The old people, children and cripples sit about in rags with no place to lay their heads."

"One might think," Abilgazy added, "that the zhatak have to bear the burden of the election because the bii and the volost ruler are to be chosen from their midst.

No one even asked for their consent. Maibasars gave his orders and the shabarmans threw their belongings out, dismantled the yurtas and carried them over there."

"But why did you give up your yurtas?" Abai looked at the crowd, puzzled. "Let them take the expenses upon themselves!"

All tried to answer at once.

"Oi-bai, oi-bai! How can you say such a thing to them?"

"What could we do about it?"

"We don't even dare to say anything."

"They are not shabarmans, but real sabarmans."*

Abai listened, his eyes roaming over the ruined homes. Two babies lay wrapped in an old chekmen among the old coffers and bundles. Both looked very ill; their matted hair hung over their pale foreheads and dim eyes, while the flies clung to their parted lips. Abai was outraged.

"Those poor children, they've been left to be eaten by the flies. Where is your old courage, Darkembai? You should have kicked those shabarmans away."

Darkembai smiled bitterly.

"My dear Abai. That's just what we did, and it only made things worse." He then related what had happened on the eve of the elections.

On his way to Kunanbai's aul, Bazaraly had stayed with him for a time ten days before. Despite the great difference in their ages, these two resembled each other in boldness and sharpness of opinions and always met as close friends.

"He's like the leader of a pack of wolves lost in the steppes," Darkembai said. "He's not like our djiguits nowadays. I couldn't help telling him everything I had on my mind."

During his three days' stay, Bazaraly visited every one of the yurtas of the outcasts who had once belonged to

* Sabarman—tormentor, robber.—*Ed.*



the Zhigitek, Bokenshi and Kotibak. He called on the sick, talked to the others and gave what advice he could. He would sing or tell funny stories to encourage them and make them feel better, and thus came to be a real friend of this paupers' aul.

He told them that such auls as theirs could be found everywhere. He had been around and seen everything. The zhataks of the Sak, Togalak and Tasbolat clans lived in the foothills of Dogalan; the outcasts of the Anet, Baken and Kotibak dwelt in Bildeh Valley. Those of the Mamai tribe were near Mount Orda and those of forty other clans near Miala. Bazaraly had also heard about the zhataks of the distant Kerei, beyond the Chinghis Range, and about the group of zhataks known as the "forty yurta men" in another distant volost, the Kokensk Volost. The zhataks of the Baltorak and Zhalpak had settled at a distance of one piket from Semipalatinsk.

It was not by accident that Bazaraly had spoken of all this in such great detail. These people, driven out by their clans, were raising grain; they subsisted on this all year round, working for themselves and not for the bais.

"You, too, should learn to feed on the breast of mother earth," he urged. "Let two or three families join forces, plough six or eight acres and sow grain. In the summer-time you can turn to haymaking. Aren't there plenty of good spots in the steppes, meadows and autumn pastures? If you have but a single scythe, you'll be able to make some hay. The town is not far and you can sell it at the market and buy what you need for the money. Your own father could not find a better spot for you to live in!"

Bazaraly again exhorted them to think this over and save their families.

"What else can you do? You've been deceived by empty hopes all your lives. You've frittered away your strength. There were many of you who thought the kinsmen would never let us starve, that they would be sure to help. And

yet they were cast out. There's an old saying: 'One is as safe amid the people as a child in a golden cradle.' But such cradles seem to be made only for the rich and the high-born. Don't I know how the zhataks of my own Zhigitek clan live! Surely, you won't let yourselves be deceived any more and realize the truth of the saying: 'To hear him talk, you'd think there was a treasure of gold, but when you come and see there's not a copper.' Don't be taken in by the old proverb: 'If your kin drink even poison, then drink it with them.' That proverb was invented to make a poor man follow on foot behind the idler on horseback. Forget the tribal cries of the Zhigitek or the Bokenshi. You have but one cry now: 'Zhatak of Yeraly!' Among yourselves, you are the closest kinsmen now, people with one life, destiny and faith. You must hold together."

Darkembai was so pleased with Bazaraly's ideas that he had learned them by heart.

Abai and Yerbol listened intently to the grim story. If Bazaraly had been an educated man, he would have been the mainstay of the oppressed not only among the Tobikty, but among the Kazakh people as a whole, thought Abai.

Darkembai continued his story. The shabarmans had come galloping to Yeraly on the day that Bazaraly was to leave. Entire caravans of white yurtas had arrived with many flocks of sheep for slaughter. The shabarmans had been sent by Takezhan and Maibasars with the following message: "Beware! The district oyaz is on his way here. The yurtas must be set up!"

Bazaraly and Abilgazy were sitting in Darkembai's yurt when the shabarmans fell upon their aul like an invading enemy.

"Where is Darkembai? Out with him!" shouted three of them from their horses, as they flew to Darkembai's yurt.

Bazaraly immediately winked at Abilgazy.

"Keep quiet," he said to Darkembai. "We'll see what happens."

"Come out at once. Don't pretend to be important!" the shabarmans shouted in chorus, irritated by the delay. "The volost rulers give us no peace and now you too are making trouble, you cursed beggar."

"Hei, djiguits, where are you from," Bazaraly called calmly from the yurta. "Get off your horses and come in for a talk."

Lashing away, the shabarmans drove their horses against the yurta. "Come out at once, do you hear!" they shouted, swearing.

Their whips lashed the yurta on all sides, setting the uiks groaning. Infuriated, Darkembai leapt from the tent, but found himself caught in a shower of blows. Bazaraly and Abilgazy bounded out of the yurta like a pair of tigers springing from the thickets. Bazaraly tore two of the shabarmans to the ground, while Abilgazy unhorsed the third.

"Sitting on their heads, the two rent away their chapans and let fly with their own whips," Darkembai related gleefully. "All the zhataks were there to see and were greatly pleased," he went on. "At last there was a protector. And Bazaraly kept whipping the cursed shabarmans until the handle of his whip came off. And it was a strong handle too, made of tabilga."

"But how did they get the yurtas after all?" asked Yerbol.

Darkembai briefly explained: When the shabarmans went away, the zhataks cast their worries aside. Bazaraly stayed with them two more days, but on the day after his departure about thirty men came galloping to the aul—the shabarmans, headed by the volost ruler and the elders. They dismantled the yurtas in a trice and took them away.

"They're robbers, all right," concluded Darkembai. "No better than dogs. They'd dig graves for their own fathers if their chiefs told them to. Ah, Abai, I'm not the Darkembai that I once was. Couldn't you put in a word for us, light of my eyes? Make them return our yurtas. Can't those swine set up their kitchens and lavatories in other places?"

"Yes, make them...." clamoured the zhataks. "Don't let them trample on us!"

Abai rose, shook himself, and stood for an instant with his whip doubled against his side.

"Let's go. You too, Abilgazy!"

He set off at the head of the zhataks, leading his horse by the rein and talking. It was about a verst to the white yurtas, and as they passed through the aul they were joined by more and more who had crawled out of the heaps of rubbish and dirty shanties. Some were young and strong, others old and decrepit, but all equally silent, grim and determined.

On their way, Abilgazy whispered to Abai that the zhataks knew nothing of Bazaraly's arrest. The biis were afraid of general unrest. It was with Takezhan's help that he had been arrested. Takezhan had come to Yeraly a few days before and, cowed by the news of Koshkin's arbitrary punishments, had decided to sacrifice Bazaraly. The chief biis of the Chinghis, Zhirenshe, Urazbai, the latter a new chief, and Asilbek were alarmed—when the authorities arrived, Takezhan had publicly called them the protectors and abettors of Bazaraly. Everyone was waiting for Abai with impatience.

Three of the most ornate hexagonal yurtas had been combined into one in the centre of the election aul. The entrance to the big tent was flanked by silent, ominous guards, while messengers were hurrying to and fro with a preoccupied air or tiptoeing in and out. It was evident that the great man in the triple tent was in bad humour.

As soon as Abai approached the white yurtas, he was met by Zhirenshe, Urazbai and Asilbek, who took him aside and hurriedly told him all the news, interrupting one another in their eagerness. This is what Abai gathered from their account.

Koshkin had come to Yeraly with a group of Naiman plaintiffs. They had complained to him that horse-thieves of the Tobikty, headed by Oralbai, had driven many horses away from one of their richest auls last winter.

Nothing had been heard of Oralbai after he had lost Korimbala and vanished. Now it had become known that the embittered djiguit had gathered a band of accomplices, armed them with guns and was stealing horses all the year round not only from the Naiman and the neighbouring Kerei and Siban, but also from the Tobikty. The band had taken refuge among the crowded auls of the poor Kerei.

Everything indicated that Oralbai was at the head of the gang, which was apparently determined to ruin those who were rich, influential and held official positions, for the horses were taken only from the richest auls. The complaints had already passed through all the offices of both the Semipalatinsk and Dzhetyysk districts—the gang operated on the border between them—until they had reached the office of the zhandaral, the general in charge of the gubernia. But it looked as though the desperate Oralbai was not even scared of the tsar's troops. Only late that winter he had enticed a detachment sent in pursuit from Semipalatinsk and drove away all of their horses at one of their bivouacs in the desolate steppes. The forty men of the detachment had consequently had to wander on foot through the steppes for days without food or water. Then there was another charge against him, one which Zhirenshe and Urazbai were inclined to ridicule, whereas Asilbek anticipated grave consequences—on the high road between Ayaguz and Shubaragash,

a local chief from Semipalatinsk had been severely beaten, despite the fact that he was accompanied by two guardsmen. The Naiman put the blame for this on Oralbai too.

The case was grave and complicated, so that Koshkin had arrived in person to investigate. The five Naiman in his company were both plaintiffs and witnesses, and they refused to leave the Tentek-Oyaz's yurta and negotiate with the Tobikty in the Kazakh manner. Bazaraly's name too must have figured in the complaints, for Tentek-Oyaz had ordered the three biis to arrest him and his brother immediately he had arrived. "That scoundrel Oralbai belongs to your tribe!" he had repeated again and again. "Are you trying to shield an offender against the tsar? All of you—the volost ruler, his deputy, you biis and you elders will be brought to trial for this."

"This is where we differed from Takezhan," Zhirenshe explained. "We had intended to answer this way, 'We know nothing about Oralbai. He is an outcast and beggar, and neither the people nor Bazaraly have any idea where he is. Hunt him down yourselves and do what you like with him. The Tobikty won't support him.' We had agreed with Takezhan and Maibasars yesterday to give this answer, but towards evening Darkhan came galloping to the volost ruler. He had been sent by Ospan who must have quarrelled with Bazaraly, because this is what he advised Takezhan, 'Clear yourself of blame as well as you can and let them have Bazaraly. He's in my hands.' Takezhan sent the shabarman Zhumagul with four guardsmen to Korik, where they seized Bazaraly and turned him over to the authorities. He's either being questioned now or is locked up somewhere. Takezhan accuses us of shielding him. That is why we wanted to call for you. Tell us what to do. Should we defend Bazaraly or give him up?"

Abai well knew that this was a tangle hard to unravel. The menace from outside seemed more ominous than the inner strife kindled by Ospan.

It was Asilbek who spoke first.

The oyaz has not yet begun the elections though the people have gathered long ago. He seems to be in dead earnest about Oralbai's case. Endless people are being summoned and questioned. He is coming down hard on those who oppose the volost ruler and is beating those who tell the truth to his face. Some of the witnesses have said that we are shielding Bazaraly. If Takezhan says so too, our troubles will really begin. If we try to help Bazaraly, who is innocent, and tell the truth, what will happen to us? Will that stop the tongues of the malicious? We haven't been troubled so far, but what will happen if we side with Bazaraly. What do you think is our best course?"

Abai still did not answer.

"We have told you how things stand," said Urazbai, "and will do whatever you say. How shall we avoid blemishing the honour of the tribe and yet evade trouble? The three of us will go with you. Just tell us what to do."

Just then several shabarmans rushed from the triple yurta brandishing their whips and calling out various names:

"Zhirenshe Shokin! Asilbek Suyundikov! Urazbai Akkulov! You're wanted by the oyaz. Come quickly!"

"They've called our names," said Zhirenshe to Abai impatiently.

Abai glanced at the three and clenched his fist.

"Don't let him browbeat you," he said firmly. "Zhirenshe's way was the best. Keep Bazaraly out of this. Let the oyaz hunt for Oralbai himself. His halter is longer than ours. If the evidence you give does not tally with that of Takezhan, we'll find a way out. I do not know why he is so savage, but it is better to be buried alive than to bring trouble to the entire people. Remember that if you involve Bazaraly, you will be admitting the guilt of the entire tribe."

The three biis were led to the chief by the guards. Abai beckoned to the shabarmen in the rear.

"Just watch how the oyaz treats them, and let me know," he whispered to him. "I entrust this task to you alone, you understand."

The shabarmen was a local djiguit who knew Abai very well. Though forbidding in the presence of his superiors, he now nodded, proud of Abai's trust.

"Send messengers to the auls," Abai instructed Yerbol and Abilgazy. "I want all the men to come here right away, on horseback and on foot. And meanwhile go and call all the servants—old and young, men and women, grooms, water-carriers, cooks, anyone you meet, and be quick about it."

Abai himself stayed to wait on the spot where Zhirenshe and his friends had left him.

The people were flocking to the election yurtas. The guards and shabarmen kept them at a distance with their whips and shouts. Nothing could drive them off, however, or change the look of expectancy on their faces. They well knew that Bazaraly was innocent and they all hated Takezhan. Most of the onlookers were poorly dressed. Among them were the zhataks who had come with Abai. The news of Bazaraly's arrest had reached them at last and now they stood about murmuring, glancing at Abai, who waited silently.

The shabarmen to whom Abai had spoken finally appeared and addressed a few words to him in an undertone. Abai then made his way to the edge of the crowd where Darkembai, Abilgazy and Yerbol stood.

"I'm going to the yurta of the oyaz," he said to them. "Zhirenshe and the other biis are being questioned. Bazaraly is also there. I have heard that the chief is quick with his whip and likes to humiliate people. I cannot let him insult us that way. I will not have Bazaraly or Asilbek so much as touched with the end of a whip. Stay

where you are. We shall not let them brand the innocent as a criminal. Yerbol and Abilgazy will come with me."

The three accordingly made for the entrance of the triple yurta.

Abai's words quickly spread through the crowd, hardening the faces of the djiguits, the old men and the zhataks.

In the first of the three united yurtas Abai found only armed guards, policemen and clerks. There were none of the local people here. Interrogations were conducted in the adjacent section, where the chiefs sat opposite the door at a table covered with green silk. The chief interrogator was Tentek-Oyaz Koshkin, a thin man of slight stature with a drooping and colourless moustache. His expression was cold and forbidding. As Abai entered, he was shouting at Urazbai angrily, even stamping his foot. A fat slant-eyed interpreter stood at his side, his head attentively inclined.

Whether it was Koshkin's rudeness or the sudden appearance of Abai, Urazbai now assumed his usual superior air.

"Tell the oyaz this," he addressed the interpreter firmly. "I am not Oralbai. I am neither the culprit nor the defendant. Zhirenshe and Asilbek have spoken truly, and I can only say the same. Nobody here can be held responsible for Oralbai. One cannot call to account the tribe, or even his parents for a man who disappeared more than a year ago. If anyone is to blame at all, it is the authorities who have been unable to hunt him down. Bazaraly has nothing to do with it either. If our volost ruler Takezhan brings Bazaraly into this matter, we, the biis, cannot support him. Bazaraly is innocent. Instead of shouting at me, the oyaz would do better to consult the local people. Tell him exactly what I have said."

"Good for him," Abai whispered to Yerbol and Abilgazy. He stood at the entrance of the central yurta to hear

how all this would be translated. The guards barred his way.

"Who are you? Keep out!"

"Don't shout at me! I want to see the chief Koshkin," Abai answered in Russian.

The guards refused to budge, but an official who happened to be standing near was surprised to hear Russian words from a steppe Kazakh and scrutinized Abai with interest.

"What can we do for you?" he asked. "Who are you?"

Abai doffed his timak and bowed politely.

"I am Ibragim Kunanbayev, a man of the people," he said and raised his eyes hopefully.

The other smiled and beckoning the guards aside came closer.

"So you are Ibragim Kunanbayev. I know quite a lot about you," he said, extending his hand. "Your friend Akbas Andreyevich, as you call him, has told me a great deal about you. This is really a pleasure. Permit me to introduce myself: Counsellor Losovsky."

"What's happening in there?" Abai asked, greeting him. "It is an affront to us, the people."

"I quite understand you," Losovsky said with a fleeting grimace, as he bent over confidentially. "Not only do the people resent it, but it is quite useless too. Riding rough-shod over people will never get us anywhere. But what's to be done? Everyone acts in his own way." The man actually flushed with annoyance and as if to spite the other officials who were looking at them with a shade of scorn he gestured to the guards to admit Abai into the central yurt.

The interpreter had just finished translating Urazbai's words and the Tentek-Oyaz was shouting, "I'll show you how innocent they are." He gestured to the two guards who at once flung Bazaraly to the ground and let fly with their whips.

"Stop that at once! How dare you!" shouted Abai rushing in. The guards lowered their whips in astonishment, and Koshkin sprang from his seat as though he had been stung.

"Who are you? Who has called you?" He glared at Abai, his moustache trembling. Abai, who was taller than Koshkin, looked down upon him accusingly, his face white with emotion.

"I'm just a man and you are behaving like a brute," he said in Russian. "Stop this outrage at once!"

"What are you standing there looking at me for?" Koshkin shrieked to the immobile guards. "Do as you're told! And I'll have you locked up," he hissed, nearly jabbing his finger into Abai's eye.

Heedless of Abai's shouts, the guards now showered Bazaraly with blows. This was not enough for the Tentek-Oyaz, however.

"Twenty-five lashes! Thirty! Fifty!" he yelled to the guards, pointing in turn to Zhirenshe, Asilbek and Urazbai.

Abai was ready for anything. He was no longer merely seething with indignation, but thirsting for a fight.

"Very well! Just remember that you'll have no one to blame but yourself!" he shouted to Koshkin and rushed for the exit.

Losovsky, coming into the yurt, almost collided with him at the door. Abai's angry cries clearly showed him that the patience of the people was at an end.

"Enough of your outrages, Koshkin!" His fist thundered on the table. "This is a terrible mistake. Tell those men to stop."

Koshkin was at a loss for an answer and the raised whips froze in the air. Meanwhile, Bazaraly sprang to his feet.

"Well, we're enemies now," he shouted to Takezhan,

who had backed timidly away against the Russian officials. "It's not me they were beating, but my honour! You'll pay for this if I live."

Abai's voice came to them from the outer section.

"Yerbol and Abilgazy, bring the people here. Let them break down the yurtas."

The crowd seemed to have been waiting for the signal. Short bludgeons and heavy whips appeared in a flash, and the words "Break them down" were hardly out of Darkembai's mouth when many hands, bludgeons and whips struck at the yurtas, raising clouds of dust. The wooden frames creaked as if lashed by a storm. One of the policemen fired into the air, the bullet striking the shanrak of the central yurta. The guards followed his example. But by now the Tentek-Oyaz had pulled himself together and ordered the shooting to be stopped. Some of the old men, afraid of the noisy guns, had shrunk back nervously. But Abai, the only Kazakh who understood the oyaz's words, called through the door, "Don't be afraid. They won't dare to shoot again!" His words were echoed by Yerbol, Darkembai and Abilgazy.

"Don't be afraid. Overturn the yurtas! Break them down!"

The crowd, with the zhataks in the lead, hurled themselves against the side of the outer yurta, breaking the keregehs and uiks. The yurta sunk in and collapsed.

As the administrators withdrew immediately to the rear yurta, Abai sprang to Bazaraly's side and seized him by the sleeve.

"Now is the time to get away!"

Bazaraly gained the outer yurta with a single leap, closely followed by Asilbek, Zhirenshe and Urazbai. All four quickly vanished in the crowd, while more and more people, led by Darkembai, Abilgazy and Yerbol, pushed their way into the central yurta. None of the three leaders had ever been a bii or an elder, but all spoke and

acted with authority, for the wave of the people's wrath had swept them above the others. The Tentek-Oyaz winced at every shout—they were showering him and Takezhan with demands. Abai now kept aloof, leaving the crowd to exact justice by itself.

"We don't want those elections!" the three shouted. "You haven't come here to hold elections, but to ruin us. Get away and be quick about it. Nobody here will obey you."

With this, they withdrew into the crowd, but loud voices could still be heard, now here, now there.

"Take your yurtas down and go home!"

"Leave the Tentek-Oyaz to himself!"

"And his lickspittles too!"

"Get out of the valley, every one of you!"

"Take your yurtas back, zhataks!"

"Go home with your things and to the devil with the chiefs!"

"Let them sit in the open if they like!"

Then things moved quickly. All the yurtas disappeared, except for the two still occupied by the administrators. The zhataks were the first to leave, but that was not all. The herds too were driven from zhailyau.

The seat of power, which had commanded fear throughout the Yeraly a few hours before, was now empty steppe-land again. The sumptuous aul had vanished. A heavy wave had swept it, leaving only the debris of keregehs and uiks and two crooked yurtas like bubbles on a pool after rain.

The Tentek-Oyaz and his suite were in an absurd position. Helpless and disgraced, they were left alone amid the steppes. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere. Losovsky came out of the staggering yurta, shaking his head and laughing.

"There's not even a mongrel left about."

Koshkin thoughtfully paced to and fro outside the tent. He knew that he had gone too far, that he had himself

alone to blame, but he was seething with impotent rage. Losovsky, for his part, was cool and unperturbed.

"I've known the Kirghiz steppes for many years, but have never seen the people here acting so unanimously," he dryly observed. "That will be a good lesson to you. Your methods are unpardonable. You've disgraced the men they've elected and punished them for nothing. Of course there had to be an outburst. You asked for it! I'm sorry, but I cannot keep quiet about the things I've seen. We'll talk about it in town."

The Tentek-Oyaz had nothing to say to this, only waved his hand and looked away.

Only Takezhan, his two messengers and two elders stayed with the Russian officials, but the erstwhile formidable volost ruler was now as helpless as a child. He could not procure a pinch of tea, a handful of boursaks, a crumb of cheese, or even a sip of water.

The elections had been disrupted and it was useless to try to gather the electors again. There was nothing to do but to return to Semipalatinsk. Koshkin ordered Takezhan to obtain horses. The volost chief was only able to harness his own horses to four deserted wagons. After great difficulties, the officials were ready for their return journey at dusk, while the guards had to follow afoot.

Before their departure, the Tentek-Oyaz had put several questions to Takezhan and the elders and drawn up something in the nature of a statement which he intended to submit to the authorities. The purport of this document was to justify his actions of that day.

The statement declared that Oralbai had turned out to be a steppe robber of major proportions, while Bazaraly was his mainstay and a shrewd and clever leader of the population. The locally elected biis, Zhirenshe, Urazbai and others, had proved to be confederates of the bandits.

Another accomplice was Ibragim, nicknamed Abai, the brother of Takezhan Kunanbayev, the ruler of the Chinghis Volost. Bazaraly and Abai had incited the mob of poor servants, beggars and the like and disrupted the elections. Furthermore, volost ruler Takezhan Kunanbayev had proved unequal to the office he held. Though he had not abetted Oralbai and Bazaraly, and was evidently hostile to them, he could not keep the population under control. He had failed to suppress the outburst against the administration. He had not been able to detain a single aul when they had deserted the election grounds, leaving the officials alone in the bare steppes. Nor had he attempted to resist when the mob had forcibly released Bazaraly. It was obvious that he had no prestige among the nomads and it was therefore advisable that he resign his office, which should be temporarily assumed by his deputy, Zhabai Bozheyev.

To save his face, the Tentek-Oyaz announced his decision to the interpreter who had stayed on in Yeraly, and set off for the town.

3

It was the tenth day of Abai's detention in Semipalatinsk.

Though this was no real prison, but only a room where arrested persons were kept at the police station, it was guarded with all the strictness of a regular jail; the windows were barred, the cells constantly under lock and key; only a small aperture enabled the prisoner to communicate with the outside world, that is with the turnkey. But the guards, elderly men with sleepy eyes and ashen complexions, armed with sabres as a mark of authority, did not always respond to the pounding on the door from within.

All this was very different from the free life that Abai had led in the steppes, but he had already accustomed himself to his surroundings and spent most of his time reading. The days slipped by unnoticed.

The books were brought to him by his old acquaintance, the lawyer Andreyev who visited Abai the day after he was arrested, pretending that he had come to obtain particulars of the case. Since then he had been to see Abai every other day, each time bringing new books.

"I've brought some new friends to your dungeon," he would say with a smile.

Their meeting took place in the guardroom, which hardly differed from the cell. It was just as dark and equally infested with flies. Andreyev had long talks with Abai, trying to keep his spirits up. He did not conceal the fact that the situation was grave.

"To abuse an official in the execution of his duties is no joking matter. I can understand that your anger was justified; it does you credit, in fact. But in the eyes of the law your actions are nothing less than incitement to rebellion and the consequences may be serious. We'll see what charge they prefer."

Before he visited Abai, Andreyev had been informed of all the details of the event by his old friend Losovsky. The lawyer thought that a great deal depended on Losovsky's evidence, and the latter was more than eager to testify, especially since he differed sharply with Koshkin on the methods of governing the people of the steppes. He could never mention Koshkin without a scornful smile and regarded him as a bureaucrat and a bully. He attributed the outburst to Koshkin's arbitrary actions, and Abai, in his opinion, had merely sought to preserve his dignity.

They had discussed the matter in the presence of Mikhailov, a determined and intelligent-looking man of thirty with a broad dark beard and a prominent forehead which seemed still larger owing to the thinning hair above his

temples. Though Mikhailov was living under police surveillance, his friends had secured him a post in the local administration. He laughed heartily when he heard of the absurd position in which one of the most prominent of the local officials had been placed, and begged Andreyev to introduce him to the bold man of the steppes who had put that petty tyrant in his place.

Abai was always heartened by the lawyer's visits. He felt quite safe in the knowledge that he had such a protector. Andreyev had immediately obtained permission to bring him books and so interesting did Abai find them that the days were too short, and he continued to read far into the evening and even at night, standing under the dim lamp suspended high above. When the wick began to flicker, he would pound on the door with his fist. Awakened from their sound sleep, the guards, mostly old men, shuffled up grumblingly, "Whoever heard of a Kirghiz reading books like that! He's trying to make up for his father and forefathers who never saw one. Isn't there enough time to read during the day?"

Abai laughed at their gibes, called them by their first names—Sergei and Nikolai—and they were impressed by his calmness and courtesy.

"You know the jail's full of bedbugs, Sergei. How can I sleep? The books are my only consolation. And remember, the jail pays for nothing but the oil. I don't even take the food."

The old man would argue stubbornly, but invariably brought the oil and refilled the lamp.

"A fine place you've found to study in!" he would grumble. "You'd have done better to study in school like all good people do and not have waited until you were put in jail."

Abai was right when he said that his upkeep cost next to nothing; he did not take any food in the jail. Kumys, shurpa and tea were daily brought by his friends Yerbol

or Baimagambet, the latter having been taken on by Abai to attend to the horses.

A large piala of kumys, boiled meat and biscuits wrapped in a cloth lay untouched on the table. It was not worry that prevented him from eating, but merely that the cell was too hot and stuffy. Owing to lack of sun and air, his usual tan had vanished.

He had slept little the previous night, and when he could finally sleep no more, he had taken a few draughts of yesterday's kumys and at once absorbed himself in reading. The title of the book was *Sokhaty*; it was a story of a band of Russian outlaws. The hero was the just avenger, the brave Sokhaty who lived in a dense forest with his friends and waylaid government officials. Abai recalled his impression of *Dubrovsky*, which he had read the spring before. He thought of Vladimir, who had set fire to the house full of corrupt officials, and was again thrilled with the idea of outraged honour being avenged. Yes, it was from such things that courage stemmed. Had he not been through events much like those described in the book? How well he remembered it all! The Tentek-Oyaz, the guards and policemen, huddled together in the rear yurt, terrified, the creaking of the tent props and the roaring of the crowd. It was just as the writers described it. What did it matter if people spoke different languages and lived far apart? Didn't they act in the same way to defend themselves against violence or avenge their wrongs? Who could meekly endure injustice? Abai peered into space, the book lying on his knees.

The creaking of the rusty door startled him. It was Khomutov, the warder, coming in. His appearance always announced the arrival of the lawyer or investigator. Abai was surprised, expecting neither the one nor the other that day. Was he to be set free? The thought flashed through his mind. He got up to receive the warder, who paused in the doorway.

"Kunanbayev to the guardroom," he said glumly. "Your father has come to see you from the aul."

Abai followed him crestfallen. "Why should Father come all this way," he thought as he entered the guardroom. There were several people waiting for him, in the foreground Yerbol and Baimagambet. Exchanging greetings, Abai looked about for his father. In the twilight of the room he discerned Darkembai, but not Kunanbai.

"Where is Father?" asked Abai. "I was told..."

Yerbol nudged him warningly.

"Today Darkembai is your father," he muttered hurriedly, pretending to address Baimagambet. "They wouldn't have let us in otherwise."

Abai smiled knowingly and extended his hand to Darkembai, who solemnly embraced him.

"My son, the pillar of my old age," he exclaimed kissing Abai.

Khomutov had received a handsome bribe from Yerbol and, furthermore, was now convinced that the old man really was Abai's father. He left them to talk in peace.

Abai now had a better look at the two other visitors whom he had not previously recognized. Overjoyed, he embraced the two tall djiguits, who had been standing by so quietly. He was astonished—neither of them should have dared to show himself in Semipalatinsk, not even in the auls of the Irgizbai, let alone in Koshkin's police station.

The Irgizbai were convinced that the Zhigitek were at the bottom of all the trouble. Everything had started with Oralbai, and, they considered, had subsequently been aggravated by Bazaraly and Abilgazy. It was about these two that Takezhan and other Irgizbai leaders had complained to the Tentek-Oyaz. This was the pair that had stirred up the trouble in Yeraly; it was they who had incited the zhataks to pull down the yurtas. Abai had gathered that this was how their actions were looked upon

from the questions of the interrogator. He had avoided mentioning their names even though he saw that the interrogation and his imprisonment was being prolonged as a result.

After the events in Yeraly, Takezhan had been summarily dismissed. Abai had been summoned to town for questioning and taken into custody, while Bazaraly and Abilgazy had made good their escape. And now, with the entire administration at their heels, the two of them had ventured to come here to see him. Abai was dumbfounded; only true kinsmen and friends could do such a thing.

"What made you enter the lion's den, my friends?" he asked. "Is it because the Irgizbai have turned your water to poison and your food to stone? Or have they brought you here by force?"

"You're wrong this time, Abai," smiled Bazaraly. "If they could, they would have brought the whole of the Zhigitek here, but no one has forced us to come. Old man Darkembai and the brave Abilgazy insisted that to be in prison with you would seem like being in a palace. If Takezhan were in your place, we should never dream of coming here."

Darkembai and Abilgazy quietly agreed.

"Why should you be locked up because of us?" began Darkembai. "We have neither the skill nor the wisdom to speak for you."

"We should be here and not you," Abilgazy cut in. "Of what use are we? The people need you to console them. You would be able to find a way to get us out if necessary. You're brave and clever enough for that. And so let us change places."

Except for their brief meeting during the tussle in the tent of the Tentek-Oyaz, Abai had not met Bazaraly since his talk with Ospan. Though Bazaraly was referring to the other two, it was evident that it was he who had brought them here. In his action there was a plea for

pardon. He had unhesitatingly sacrificed his pride and put his fate in Abai's hands.

After some moments of thought, Abai raised his clear bright eyes.

"The camel is tested in the journey and the brave man in time of trouble. You have filled me with happiness, my friends. There is Darkembai, a grey-haired old man, ready to sacrifice all for my sake. And I see that you two batirs are no less determined than he. What fires then can terrify you? And why should I flee from danger?" He laughed and went on, "And there is no danger, really. The pop-guns of the Tentek-Oyaz won't kill me. I've had no real troubles so far, and there's hope ahead. We have a friend among the Russians—I have told you about him. He has staunch friends too. And one of them, a wise and honest counsellor, saw the outrages of the Tentek-Oyaz for himself and has promised to speak of what he saw. That is how things stand. I'll have to meet the Tentek-Oyaz one of these days and I'm afraid that our good Darkembai here would be no match for him," he concluded jestingly.

"It is true, Bazekeh, that you're as eloquent as any Kazakh could be," he said to Bazaraly in the same jesting vein. "But it's my turn this time. The more people there are to argue, the more difficult the argument. There will be no end to the complaints and appeals and the trial will drag on for ever. No, you're not wanted here, my friends. Please go back to your auls."

He embraced them in turn and took leave of them.

On Yerbol's advice, Darkembai and Bazaraly decided to stay in Semipalatinsk and found shelter in the Tartar district rarely visited by the Kazakhs of the steppes. Meeting Yerbol after dark, they decided that if complications arose over Abai's case and he were threatened with serious punishment, Bazaraly would take the guilt for the Yerally riot upon himself.

Bazaraly was ready to give his life for Abai. The thought that he had not been able to master his passion for Nurganim had been tormenting him and he had felt that the very earth would swallow him for shame if ever Abai learned of it. He had not realized that Abai knew all that there was to know but had not permitted his personal feelings to interfere with his sense of justice. After his talk with Abai in the guardroom, Bazaraly felt better.

"It's a true saying that 'The djiguit will perish unless he finds a worthy friend, and the people will perish unless they find a worthy leader.' I have found both a friend and a leader. It's all clear now; either Abai will be released and come home happily, or Bazaraly will never see his native aul again and will go into exile. And he'll go without flinching too, because he has learned from Abai that real honour lies in the hearts of men and not in vain pride."

"Abai says, 'Never bow to your enemies and spare nothing for your friends,'" Darkembai echoed. "It's a clear noble mind he has."

Abai's imprisonment brought him not only notoriety but fame, and the circle of his friends grew steadily. In telling him of this, Yerbol said nothing about the sympathy displayed for him by Saltanat, the daughter of Aldekeh, Tini-bai's brother-in-law and friend, a rich merchant who lived on the banks of the Irtysh near the town.

The life in the auls along the river differed greatly from that in the steppes. The inhabitants lived by raising grain and trading; they were no strangers to city life, since they often brought their produce to the markets and fairs. Unlike the Tobikty, they lived in log houses surrounded by barns and other structures.

Saltanat, who had been betrothed to the son of a rich aul, had come to town in a carriage drawn by three pedigree horses to make some purchases with her younger mother. This was not the first time they had visited Tini-

bai's house, and Saltanat was a friend of Makish, who had told her about her brother the previous winter and had even sung her some of Abai's verses.

*The sun and moon shine brightly in the sky,
But full of grief and black despair am I.
Though she, my dear, may find a better lover,
No love is left for me until I die.*

Saltanat had listened to the song with her arm round Makish, her eyes upon the darkening shadows in the window. Deeply moved, she had laid her head on her friend's shoulder and, embarrassed by her display of emotion, had blushed crimson.

"What more could a woman wish, if such songs were sung to her?" she sighed.

She was worried about Abai's imprisonment, and often asked Makish what could be done, and what was the worst that might happen.

She, her mother, Makish and Tinibai's baibishe were at tea one morning when Yerbol entered the room. "How is Abai's case progressing? What does the lawyer say? Will they set him free?" They all demanded to be told. Yerbol hesitated to speak, his eyes on Saltanat, whom he did not know. The girl returned his gaze pleadingly and Makish hastened to set him at ease. "You may speak freely. We're among our own people."

"Both, Akbas Andreyevich and Abai hope that it will be over soon," he briefly explained. "We don't know the details. Akbas Andreyevich says that Abai may be released on bail immediately after the investigation. We must find someone who is known to the authorities and who would be willing to put up the 1,000 rubles they demand. A house-owner or a merchant would be best. That's the sort of person I'm looking for."

Yerbol clearly meant Tinibai or one of his sons. Tini-

bai's old baibishe had been in such situations before, but now she could only throw up her hands.

"If there were only something I could do for you, my dear," she said warmly, "but my husband is away, as you know, and my sons too. No one will pay any attention to me. I have no money of my own."

Yerbol and Makish were disappointed.

"Is there no way out?" asked Yerbol. "There's no time to fetch cattle. Our auls have gone to zhailyau, and are too far away. Could you, baibishe, talk to one of the local merchants? I could go to such a man with your recommendation."

That was his only hope. The baibishe and Makish enumerated the names of the rich merchants whom they knew, but as ill luck had it, they were all away on business.

"Why can't they stay home where they belong?" said Makish indignantly. "As soon as summer comes, they pile into their wagons and off they go—some to the mountains, some to the steppes."

What was one to do? It was at this point that Saltanat addressed Yerbol:

"Why look for friends to help Mirza Abai only in town? You know the old saying: 'Friendship is paid in friendship!' My father has often said that Abai and his father have befriended him more than once. Convey a salem to Abai from my mother and me. We shall take his cares upon ourselves. Let him name me, Aldekenova, for surety."

The company rejoiced, and Yerbol was the happiest of all.

"Our beloved sister," he said, "you've done more than most men could. What nobler thing can one do than restore a friend's freedom? Even gratitude seems weak and foolish here, especially since Abai will soon be here safe and sound to speak for himself."

Saltanat's clear forehead, straight and dainty nose and soft round chin seemed to shed a rosy glow, and her fresh young face was bright with animation. There was a hint of gold in her glossy hair. Though her eyes, limpid as those of a doe, seemed grave and calm, an impish twinkle lurked deep within them. Her slender wrists and fingers were heavy with bracelets and rings of gold, while gold pendants hung trembling from the lobes of her ears. "Yes, she really is Saltanat,"* thought Yerbol.

And so one of the chief worries of Abai's friends had been removed. And none too soon; the case was about to be heard in the office of the district administration, and not to be tried in court, but to be decided by the officials themselves.

Abai's two guards took him to the zhandaral's department, a large room on the first floor, and seated him at the foot of a long table covered with baize. The room was soon filled with officials in brass-buttoned uniforms. Andreyev was one of those who came in, although Abai did not notice him at first among all these unfamiliar faces. He was followed by Counsellor Losovsky and a stranger, a broad-shouldered man, with receding hair and a long dark beard. Abai was struck by the man's serious yet energetic air. When Losovsky spoke to him, he smiled and looked curiously at Abai. Both of them took seats behind him.

The administrators sat around the table. Presiding over the proceedings was an old man with a steel-grey beard, similarly coloured hair brushed smoothly back and piercing blue eyes. He opened the session by summoning the district chief Koshkin. The Tentek-Oyaz, trim in his uniform, though grey and stony, strode to the table with a martial gait. Passing behind Abai, he too took his place at the green table. The only other Kazakh in the room was

* Saltanat—luxury, luxuriance, festiveness.—*Ed.*

the flat-faced interpreter, with a sparse moustache and sleek hair. He stood near the chiefs, his eyes blinking nervously, while the questions Abai had been asked during the investigation and the answers he had given were once more repeated.

Abai related the events at Yeraly, described the illegal and humiliating actions of the Tentek-Oyaz, who had ordered the flogging of the biis. He especially emphasized that it was the biis who were beaten, the men chosen by the population and approved by the authorities. This was what had caused general indignation, he explained. No one could respect such a chief, but no one had done him any harm. The people had simply refused to take part in the elections and gone home.

"Was it a crime to convey the words of the people to him?" he concluded.

Abai spoke to the gathering in Russian. His speech was fluent as long as he confined himself to the words advised by Akbas Andreyevich and set down in his previous statements. But the moment he deviated from this to emphasize some point of his own, he floundered—his vocabulary was not yet big enough. He then appealed to the interpreter, adding in Kazakh, "Tell them exactly what I say." But after a few sentences he returned to Russian again, secretly elated to be able to talk so long in that alien tongue. He was not afraid of making mistakes and tried accurately to convey his thoughts, extemporaneously translating Kazakh expressions.

The aged chairman seemed a fair-minded man. To the general surprise, he had determined that the two cases, that of a tsarist official and of a plain Kazakh, were to be heard simultaneously. This and the fact that he had permitted Abai to speak at such length were no accident. There was an inside story.

When he had returned from Yeraly, Koshkin had pulled all possible wires; he was the son-in-law of the president

of the district court who was a friend of the governor. Determined to clear Koshkin, the two had at first attempted to quash everything concerning the flogging of the men elected by the people. This had been prevented by the interference of Andreyev, whose authority and persistence were well known: he might refer the matter to the offices of the governor-general of the steppes, which could give an ugly turn to Koshkin's case. To make matters worse, the young Counsellor Losovsky had independently submitted to the governor his report on the events in Yeraly, a document describing the illegal action taken by the chief of the district. To hush up the case was difficult under such circumstances and a way had to be found of clearing Koshkin, sentencing Abai and settling the whole affair in Semipalatinsk.

For that reason the governor had preferred to avoid an open hearing with its inevitable publicity and to deal with the case in the privacy of his offices. The matter required cautious and expert handling and, therefore, was entrusted to the old and experienced official Khorkov.

From the outset, Khorkov realized that if Abai were to receive a heavy sentence, for instance, a lengthy term of imprisonment, the lawyer would most certainly obtain a second hearing in the offices of the governor-general and break the affair up again. In the circumstances he decided that a fine would be enough. Abai would be released and there the matter would end. To bring this about it was necessary to combine the two cases and hear them as quickly as possible.

Khorkov, who wielded great influence in the administration since the governor was married to his niece, never missed a chance of accepting a handsome bribe. This time, too, he decided to make the best of the situation. While pleasing the governor and the president of the district court, he was by no means inclined to lose sight of his own interests. Talking to Andreyev, he hinted that the

lot of the defendant depended to a considerable degree on his generosity, since there were some who needed persuasion and that it was not impossible that this would gain him a full discharge. The hint was not lost on Akbas. "Our chairman seems a little indisposed," Andreyev said to Abai. "Five hundred rubles is just the dose he needs to heal him," and Yerbol promptly counted the money off from the funds brought from the auls.

Khorkov had now only to instruct Koshkin on his conduct during the hearing, but here he ran into difficulties. The Tentek-Oyaz, who knew Khorkov's weakness, at once jumped to the conclusion that the man was out to clear Abai at his, Koshkin's expense. The fact that his case was to be heard together with that of one of those savages of the steppes was a deep humiliation to him. He had accordingly demanded a separate hearing. Khorkov had tried to reason with him, but in vain and, in an attempt to frighten Koshkin and make him toe the line, he finally assured him that the floggings meted out to the biis might produce grave consequences.

On hearing this, Koshkin let himself go. The threat had stung into action the same arbitrary bureaucrat as had ordered the floggings in Yeraly. He retorted that he was afraid of no publicity, since, except for the mishandling of the biis, he had nothing to conceal, which was more than could be said for some who indulged in extortion and bribery. Moreover, he was ready to tell any court against whom and on what score his actions had been prompted. In any event, he would demand to be judged by those who were unsullied themselves.

Realizing the implications, the old official took matters into his own hand. When invited to tea at the governor's house, he spoke of Koshkin's overweening pride in such terms that the ladies decided that this upstart should be put in his place. When the governor heard what had passed between the two of them, he concluded that Koshkin



was a fool who did not even know on which side his bread was buttered, and fully agreed that Khorkov should polish off both hearings at one session. But on the day scheduled for the hearing of the case the president intervened. This was a man with whom the governor preferred not to quarrel and eventually it was decided that Koshkin's case would be heard separately, though he was to be present at the first hearing as well. This was why Koshkin looked so haughty when he now appeared before the court and took his place at the green table.

And so the case in which so many personal interests were interwoven was handled in a rather peculiar manner. The aged presiding officer's show of impartiality concealed his desire to wind up Abai's case, to gag his lawyer by pronouncing a mild sentence and only then to proceed to the hearing of Koshkin's case.

"The district chief deals only with official persons," he said after hearing Abai to the end. "Kaumenov, Shokin and Suyundikov were duly elected biis and your brother was a volost ruler. All of them had the right to speak on behalf of the population. Why, then, did you interfere? You are not a volost ruler, not even an elder."

"The people made me speak for them," Abai calmly rejoined. "When the chief Koshkin began to flog Urazbai Akkulov, the people told me to intercede for him."

The Tentek-Oyaz, incensed because Abai had been permitted to speak freely, could not control himself any longer. "And who are you, pray," he shouted. "What right have you to speak for the people? Do you think you're powerful enough for that?"

Abai regarded Koshkin contemptuously and addressed the presiding officer:

"It is true that neither I nor the people were as powerful as he and his guards, but there is a force even stronger than his power and his orders. That force is called justice and honour." Abai here turned to the interpreter,

saying, "Tell them what I say word for word," and went on in the Kazakh language: "They used to say in olden days, 'Believe not in power but in the truth. Do not obey injustice. Stand up for what is just even at the cost of your life.'"

These words epitomized his evidence. Andreyev, Losovsky and Mikhailov exchanged glances.

The hearing then went quicker, confined to the duel between Koshkin and Abai.

"You, Kunanbayev, have defended Bazaraly Kaumenov, though his brother is a bandit," Koshkin accused.

"It was only the duly elected biis whom I rescued," Abai parried.

"That's not true. It was not of them you were thinking. You wanted to release Kaumenov and you provoked all that trouble to get your way."

"I did nothing of the sort. But, for that matter, I do not regard Kaumenov as guilty of anything."

"Ah, there you are. You'll soon be justifying his brother too." Koshkin turned to the presiding officer. "I want his answer to be put on record."

Abai gave his explanation to the presiding officer. Oralbai, Kaumenov's brother, had been in hiding for a year. Before that, there had been nothing against him. He had been a well-behaved djiguit. His crimes had only been committed since he had broken away and been lost to his family and the tribe. "Let the presiding officer well consider what I say," he demanded. "If a young peasant from Semipalatinsk District were to run away to Orenburg and commit a crime there, would Koshkin be allowed to go to the young man's village and flog the elders, the volost ruler and the clerks? Would such actions be approved? Would he continue in office after that? Or be promoted?"

Koshkin brazenly denied that he had ordered the biis to be flogged. Abai looked at him with aversion.

"I have nothing more to say," he declared. "You are not only a tyrant, but also a liar. When an ordinary man tells a lie, he is merely being brazen, but when a man lies in his official capacity, he is committing a crime. And since you are a criminal you have no right to be sitting there among my judges. Counsellor Losovsky can testify to the fact that Koshkin ordered the floggings."

Losovsky confirmed Abai's words:

"The district chief actually resorted to illegal measures and not only on the election grounds alone. I can testify that several persons were flogged with whips and nagai-kas by his orders."

But Koshkin did not lose his composure. "I did it because they were all abetting the criminals. Their stubbornness was exasperating, and perhaps my feelings did run away with me. My intentions were good, and my conscience is clear. I have never sold it to anyone, nor have I ever taken bribes, as some do."

Losovsky laughed and shrugged his shoulders, looking at the presiding officer.

The public part of the proceedings was over, and the officials did not wish to discuss the matter further in the presence of an ordinary Kazakh. Abai went back to spend another night in his cell. The next morning he was set free.

He had not been fully cleared, however. The sentence ran: "Ibragim Kunanbayev is hereby sentenced to be fined the sum of 1,000 rubles for inciting unrest and obstructing the district chief Koshkin in the execution of his duties." The sentence was calculated to maintain Koshkin's authority in the eyes of the nomads, and his own conduct was not even mentioned. The outrages perpetrated by the official in full view of the people went unpunished, while the man who had protested against these actions was compelled to pay a heavy fine.

On meeting Andreyev, Mikhailov could not restrain his indignation.

"It's outrageous! The sentence is nothing less than criminal. It will encourage all the Koshkins to bludgeon the people as long as they endure it in silence."

Abai, as yet unaware of the details, was overjoyed at his liberation. But there was yet another case to be heard: that of Oralbai and Bazaraly, the Kaumen brothers. Bazaraly, who had never been in hiding, was now to be placed under police surveillance. If any of the volost rulers were to complain of him or if Oralbai were caught by the authorities, he too would have to answer.

A trio of excellent bays stood waiting for Abai; Makish and Yerbol came forward to meet him and threw their arms about him. There was also a strange young woman with them.

Yerbol had not told Abai anything about Saltanat and had warned Makish to say nothing either, half afraid that Abai might feel awkward at the thought that he had received help and bail money from a girl. But when she saw that Abai stood staring at Saltanat, Makish smilingly explained:

"Her name is Saltanat. You must have heard about her from Aldekeh."

Abai inclined his head as Makish continued:

"She has been a real friend. You have known her only by name until now, but there you can see her, true friendship in person. It was Saltanat who put up the bail money."

Abai was speechless and it was difficult to say whether he was pleased or indignant. Not wanting to go to either extreme, he asked no questions, but silently took Saltanat's hand in both of his, then bowed and laid one of his palms reverently on his breast. Saltanat was embarrassed and silent; she lowered her eyes, waiting for him to speak.

Makish was cross at her brother's silence.

"Have you lost your wits in prison, Abai-zhan," she admonished with her usual alacrity. "Can't you say anything? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Abai showed his friends into the carriage.

"It is said that wit is the essence of charm, but reticence is always the companion of wit," he countered as he got into the carriage with them. "Now what could I say, Saltanat?"

"You're right," she replied with a smile. "Happiness should not be voluble."

And its bells tinkling, the carriage sped towards Tini-bai's house on the other side of the river.

Although the case was over, Abai stayed on in Semipalatinsk, sending his djiguits and Bazaraly back to the auls, and keeping Yerbol and Baimagambet with him.

In the evening Abai learned from Yerbol what Saltanat had done for him. Though she was the daughter of Aldekeh, well known to the authorities, she had been rejected as a surety. She had then persuaded Duisekeh, a well-known Semipalatinsk house-owner and felt manufacturer, to represent her, taking advantage of Duisekeh's friendship for her father and her kinship with him—she was his niece on her mother's side. Duisekeh was cautious to the point of cowardice. He had no connections with the Tobikty; moreover, he had even tried to keep aloof of them. It was only Saltanat, with her will-power and courage, who could make him represent her in this matter while she put up the money.

The more Abai learned about the trouble she had taken, the more awkward he felt. Such a thing could not have been done merely out of friendship. He felt that he ought to have a talk with Saltanat. There was nothing he liked so much as frankness.

As it happened, Saltanat's mother had gone to the market on the other bank of the Irtish, accompanied by

Makish and Yerbol, and Abai found himself alone with Saltanat.

Tinibai's great house was deserted. The heavy dark silk curtains kept out the sun's rays and the rooms in their quiet half-light were cool and comfortable. The djiguit and the girl were seated on the soft corpeh by the low round table, their arms resting on cushions, talking quietly. Abai thanked Saltanat for what she had done for him, but she was too embarrassed to answer, waving his words of gratitude aside with a slight movement of her fingers. "Is it worth talking about?" her eyes seemed to say.

But Abai could not fathom her silence: Was it shyness? Or was she afraid that her admission would commit him? Or perhaps her silence meant: "I have done what I had to do and now care only to listen." Still, he wanted to put his mind at ease.

Baimagambet entered just then and set a silver bowl of cold kumys before them. Abai stirred the contents, then poured them into a coloured piala and proffered it to the girl.

"There are times when one djiguit helps another. I have found myself indebted to my friends more than once, but never anticipated help from a woman, not even from my own mother. I would never have thought that a woman could act so boldly without fearing for her good name. Straightforwardness is no vice, as you know. Please tell me what prompted you to help me?"

Saltanat seemed to have expected this question. The faint gold of her face turned crimson and pale by turn, the corners of her full-lipped mouth trembling. She took the piala from his hand, sipped at the liquid and only then raised her eyes.

"It is simply that I am young and could not help pitying your youth. No one asked me to do it. I did it of my own accord. You owe me nothing. You did not ask me to help you, did you? I only hope you will not be angry

with me and say that you would have done better to find other friends."

Abai was now convinced that she had truly acted on her own, indifferent of the consequences. Her strength of will and determination appealed to him.

"You have spoken truly, Saltanat. I shall never forget your words," he began when a man entered the room. He stood tall and sturdy in his high boots and hat of black lambskin in the Tobikty fashion. He held a whip in his hand and it was clear that he had just come from an aul in the steppes. As he had entered from the bright light outside, he had some difficulty in discerning the people in the room, but Abai recognized him at once and invited him to come nearer.

The visitor stepped warily through the dimly-lit room, sat down, feeling for the cushion, and then saw Saltanat. His surprise was so great that the piala of kumys that had been offered him remained untouched in his hand as he sat staring at them.

It was Manas, one of Kulinshak's "bes-kaska." He had arrived just as a carriage emerged from the gates. He gestured to the foaming sides of his horses and told Makish that he had been riding from the aul by day and night to learn of Abai's fate. Makish reassured him, saying that the trial was over and that Abai was in. Baimagambet, who was with her, explained that the carriage belonged to Saltanat, a guest, and then went on to ask all sorts of questions about the auls, much to the annoyance of Manas, who was eager to see Abai. The young man at last lost patience and moved off. Finding Abai in a half-dark room alone with a girl, he interpreted Baimagambet's chatter in his own way.

He overcame his surprise at last and explained that he had received instructions from baibishe Ulzhan. The auls had wandered to a distant zhailyau. The roads were deserted and a solitary traveller was far from safe; for

that reason they had sent such a man as himself to learn the news. His parents, wives, children and other kinsmen were distraught with anxiety over his fate.

"They do not sleep at night, thinking that you are languishing in the cage. But you're safe and sound, light of my eyes. They told me so at the gates. So my journey was lucky after all. Baimagambet tried to hold me, saying you were busy, but I just couldn't wait. I can see that you have no reason to be lonely here. More power to you!"

He guffawed and took a long draught of his kumys. This home-spun witticism was quite refined for Manas, and Abai quickly interjected to prevent him from saying more.

"It was only yesterday that I was set free and I have hardly had time to meet my friends. The matter is not finished yet. We are discussing what to do next. I'm still on bail, you know, but we'll talk about that afterwards."

He called for Baimagambet.

"Lead Manas-aga to the guest-room, arrange for him to rest and prepare a place for him to stay tonight," he commanded briefly when the young man appeared.

Abai resumed his conversation with Saltanat as soon as they were gone.

"How could I be angry with you for setting me free? Nothing is farther from my thoughts. There's only one thing that troubles me; in what way can I serve you? There would be nothing more gratifying than to fulfil one of your wishes. I shall really be sorry if there's nothing I can do for you."

Saltanat listened without raising her eyes to look at him.

"That was well said, Abai," she answered quietly. "But let my wishes go unfulfilled for the time. Did you not say only yesterday that reticence is the companion of wit? This is the first time I have ever spoken to you, but I have heard a good deal from Makish about your sense of jus-

tice and your clear mind. I have always regarded you as a man upon whom one could rely. And I can see that I'm right. Your words have put me at ease. They have told me a good deal." She added with a faint smile, "Though this room is spacious, my path within it is short. Allow me to go now."

Abai helped her to her feet.

"What real friendship can there be when there's a veil between friends? Should not hearts be unveiled?"

"'In rending the veil from your heart, do not rend it from your honour!' that is what Suffi Allahyar says, I think," she said, as she crossed the threshold. "Let us be modest and keep these veils in place." And she was gone after a last glance at him.

He continued to stand at the door, puzzled yet pleased. 'In rending the veil from your heart, do not rend it from your honour!' he said to himself. Those were good words. She has a rare self-possession and a keen mind. Perhaps I have found a treasure. Recalling everything he had said to her, he was annoyed with the way he had expressed himself. Who would have done what she had? That was no mere woman's caprice. It was genuine kindness. And she had been so reserved, courteous and dignified.

He realized that this meeting with her had been a test. Her feelings were so sincere that they called for sincerity on his part. He decided not to stay in Tinibai's house any longer, but to move to the other bank of the Irtish, to the house of the hospitable Kazakh Kerim, where he had usually stayed during his earlier visits to town.

A few days passed. Abai was now living in Kerim's house, devoting all his time to reading. Every morning, accompanied by Baimagambet, he rode to the heart of the town and halted next to the two-storey stone building in the narrow alley near the bank of the Irtish. Instructing Baimagambet to be back with the horses in the evening, he entered the white building of the public library.

On this day, however, he had decided to bring the books away with him and he told Baimagambet to wait for him. The spacious reading hall was crowded. There were two or three at every table, most of them young students. "These are the best people of the town," thought Abai as he entered.

The librarian, a modest old man with a lined face and a goatee, greeted him like an old acquaintance. An official with a luxuriant growth of hair and rakish moustache sat at the table near the entrance, ogling his pretty and smartly dressed neighbour whom he had obviously pursued into the austere premises of the library.

"Isn't it surprising that they have begun to admit camels to the Gogol Library," he had remarked loudly as Abai appeared, intending his witticism for all within earshot.

Some of the young readers looked up and sniggered when they saw a Kazakh in his broad steppe chapán. The young woman frowned, however, looking reproachfully at her neighbour. Abai turned his head sharply but repressed his anger.

"Why should a camel not enter here, when he has been preceded by an ass," he remarked calmly.

This time there was general laughter. The official turned white, but held his tongue when he saw his pretty neighbour rocking with mirth. Abai then turned to the aged librarian and asked for a copy of the *Russky Vestnik*.

A man of middle height, with a black beard and a prominent forehead, now turned to Abai. "I have it here. I've finished with it and can give it to you, if you like," he said. "But would you mind telling me please what interests you in that magazine?"

"This issue carries the first instalment of Lev Tolstoi's novel," said Abai. "I should like to read it."

"So you're acquainted with the works of Tolstoi! Why does he interest you?"

The stranger's intelligent face and kindly tone appealed to Abai.

"I haven't yet read Tolstoi," he answered politely, "but I have heard that he is a truly wise man. I should like to know what he teaches."

"That's excellent!" said the stranger, handing him the magazine. "I've seen you before, under less pleasant circumstances. It was in the office of the district administration. But to be frank, I am even more impressed with our meeting today. I am very pleased to meet you. Yevgeny Petrovich Mikhailov is my name."

"Ibragim Kunanbayev," Abai introduced himself. "I have also heard a good deal about you from your friends. I, too, am pleased to meet you."

They left the library together and slowly walked along the bank of the Irtysh, talking. Abai took long strides, his chapan filling with the wind and his hands holding his whip and timak clasped behind him. Baimagambet followed slowly on horseback, surprised that Abai should have preferred to go on foot merely to talk with some Russian. When they reached a white stone house on the riverside near the mill, Mikhailov opened the door.

"Will you come in? I have more to say to you."

Mikhailov lived in a large and well-arranged room. Abai was in no hurry to go home and stayed with him until late in the evening.

He had good reason to be interested in Mikhailov. Andreyev had often told him that Mikhailov was probably the most intelligent and erudite man in the town. According to the lawyer, he had devoted his life to work for the people and had been prosecuted by the tsarist authorities when still a young man. This had left him undaunted, however. His confinement and exile enabled him to meet the finest people in Russia and to broaden his outlook even

more. Akbas had said that Mikhailov was one of the advanced men of his people and would have been regarded as a great man in any other epoch. And now Abai was talking to the man himself.

Mikhailov first asked him what books he had read in the Russian language and warmly advocated self-education, explaining its advantages and disadvantages. As Yevgeny Petrovich voiced his thoughts and doubts, it seemed to Abai that he was listening to an expert teacher. He said as much, telling him that his words were like the hands of a bone-setter, finding the fracture at once.

Though Abai spoke Russian, managing the sentences with difficulty and pausing to think of the words, Mikhailov always caught the gist of his ideas, and the comparison with the bone-setter set him laughing.

"Your comparisons are apt," he said. "If I understand you right, they are always lively and hit the nail on the head. I noticed it during your argument with Koshkin."

These words recalled the present and Abai spoke indignantly about officials like Koshkin who never troubled to think about the people they ruled and preferred to get things done by shouting and wielding the whip.

"You do not yet realize the full scope of the harm done to Russia by these officials," said Mikhailov. "We call them bureaucrats. They're all the same—from Petersburg to Semipalatinsk District. You can't gauge them properly from those you see here. To study them the way you do—by colliding with all sorts of Koshkins and spending a month and a half in jail in consequence—is a long and painful method, to put it mildly. There is a less strenuous way of studying that crew. We have such writers as Saltykov-Shchedrin, who are constantly exposing the officials for what they are. Just read some of his books and you'll get the right idea about the people you came up against."

This sweeping generalization surprised Abai. He had

harboured quite another belief: "People are as different as the fingers of a hand." When he tried to express this view, Mikhailov laughed:

"You're too naive, my dear Kunanbayev. Officials are all alike, big and small, young and old."

Finding that Abai disagreed with him, Mikhailov also resorted to a figure of speech. "They're as alike as the seeds of the bur and they're sown by the same hand, by the tsarist regime." He hesitated about going further.

Abai had an inkling of what Mikhailov meant. His new acquaintance attracted him more and more, and he tried to get him to explain himself further.

"Your words would be convincing if there were no such officials as Losovsky," he objected. "You can't deny that he showed a real sense of justice in that trouble I had with Koshkin."

But Mikhailov gave the conversation an unexpected turn.

"I see. You mean to say that Koshkin is bad and Losovsky is good, implying that things would be better and justice triumphant if there were less Koshkins and more Losovskys?"

"Yes, I think so."

"It's true that Losovsky is better than others. If he hadn't given the evidence he did, things would have looked ugly for you. And so you've decided that he is the ideal official, isn't that so?"

"I'm afraid so. He was just, at least."

"And so he was, under the circumstances. He will be in the future—but in little things only. He may be useful, of course, if he doesn't begin to do harm like the rest. Since he has such liberal inclinations, you are quite right to make the best of him—but never forget the essence of the man and his office."

"But how is one to judge a man if not by his deeds. What essence are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you what I mean," Mikhailov replied with an ironical smile. "Try to rely on Losovsky not in such trifling matters as yours, but in more serious issues affecting the welfare of the entire nation and then see what happens. Losovsky is merely a white crow, but a crow nonetheless."

Abai did not understand.

"Then let me explain. It's from the Russian proverb about those who differ from their kind and are as rare as white crows. I wouldn't be deluded by its whiteness either, if I were you. Don't mistake it for a nobler bird, because, black or white, it is still a carrion-crow; it lives by its trade."

It was only now that Abai caught Mikhailov's idea.

"Our people also say that one crow never pecks at the eye of another."

Mikhailov laughed.

"And so you should remember that a carrion-eater will remain such and nothing more. Losovsky has no business to look like an innocent dove and take in such as you. I would rather deal with Koshkin. He, at least, appears in his true colours and the people can plainly see his ugliness, while such as Losovsky and their half-hearted justice and dubious virtues only beget futile hopes. It is thanks to him that you suffer under the illusion that it is not society that is to blame, but individuals. It's just such good officials as that who prevent the people from discerning the true nature of the crows who go to make up tsarist officialdom."

Abai had fully grasped Mikhailov's idea and his keen sympathy with the people. He marvelled at it and was grateful to his Russian friend for his outspokenness.

"You've opened a door to an unknown world," he confessed. "This talk of ours has been a useful lesson."

Mikhailov touched Abai's shoulder.

"It's not from me that you should learn," he said kind-

ly. "There are wiser Russian thinkers than I. If you like, I can lend you some books. In general, I should like to help you in your studies. It's a good idea to study, I assure you. There are far too few educated men among you Kazakhs. Suppose something like your troubles with Koshkin occurs again? You've got to know a lot to distinguish the truth from deception. It is only thus that you can be useful to your people. Russian books will be very helpful to you. They'll be loyal friends, believe me!" he smiled. "And I'll be happy to be your adviser in your work of self-education, especially so since I have had some experience in this field."

Abai was touched.

"I can thank Allah that your path has crossed mine. I accept your offer as a precious token of your sympathy."

After that conversation, Abai called upon Mikhailov every few days. They often talked about the life of the nomads. Mikhailov was curious about the real story of the events in Yeraly. Who was Oralbai?

Abai told the story at length—about Oralbai's love for Korimbala and their subsequent misery. Unable to resign herself to fate, Korimbala had died, while Oralbai had become an outlaw. Abai did not omit to say that both had been gifted singers.

Abai had always been worried by the thought that Oralbai had been compelled to take to his lawless path by his very friends. It was a view he had kept to himself, however, until the present conversation, when he openly confessed his sympathy for Oralbai.

"They say he is a bandit. Perhaps he is! But only in the eyes of the authorities! The people at large regard him as a bold and just avenger. You Russians, too, have had such men as he. Haven't they rebelled against tyranny? Are they not worthy of respect? I would certainly support such men if I could. And what do you think?"

Mikhailov had been listening intently.

"That's a great story, you've told," he said thoughtfully. "There is something of an old legend in it. One could write a book about it. But in actual life, in political life especially, it is not a good example of how one should act. Public opinion among your people is immature and almost helpless and I can well understand that in your eyes this djiguit is a rebel against tyranny. Still, the unhappy love of a djiguit and a girl is a poor pretext for a popular movement. The fugitive who plunders out of vengeance is not the man to lead a popular struggle."

Mikhailov tried to deepen Abai's outlook. In experience Abai was the equal of those around him, including Kunanbai. Such men as Andreyev, of course, were better informed than he, but hardly superior to him in his knowledge of life. But Mikhailov was a man of wider horizons, with greater social acumen. Abai wanted to know his opinion of his own conduct in Yeraly. He admitted that it was he who had led the people.

Mikhailov answered without hesitation.

"You've taught Koshkin a lesson and that's a good thing. Do you know why you have succeeded? Because you correctly guessed what the people wanted. It was a striking example of their unanimity. Your case was more serious than Oralbai's. If there hadn't been so much evidence to support you, the matter would have been given a political angle. Your arguments struck home and that is why you got away with it."

Mikhailov told Abai about the news in the district and regional offices; Koshkin had been transferred from his post in Semipalatinsk to a similar post in Ust-Kamenogorsk. Counsellor Losovsky was to assume Koshkin's former duties. The district office had instructed him to go into the steppes and arrange the elections of volost rulers, the elections bungled by Koshkin. They were to be held in the Chinghis Volost to which the Irgizbai belonged

and the neighbouring volosts of Konir-Koksha and Kzil-Moly.

Mikhailov advised Abai to accompany Losovsky and to help him to elect really useful people. Losovsky was well disposed to him and would be more than glad. It was the advice of a friend, which he would do well to accept. Abai was prompt to agree. Word was accordingly sent to Losovsky through Andreyev and the invitation to Abai was soon extended.

When they learned of the cause of the further delay in the town Yerbol and Baimagambet ceased to importune Abai with their complaints about the heat and dust of the town. They had been waiting to go for more than a month and had seen little of Abai in the interval. He had spent most of his time at the library, with Mikhailov, or poring over books at home and meditating on the things he had read.

It was only on rare occasions that Yerbol could induce him to visit Tinibai's home on the other bank.

Saltanat and her mother were still there, and Abai had an opportunity of talking to the girl alone one day.

Perhaps it was Yerbol's doing or mere accident, but whatever it was, they arrived one evening to find that Makish and Saltanat's mother had gone away on a visit and the girl was alone. Yerbol stayed in the front rooms, and kept the servants occupied.

The two were sitting on a high coffer covered with rugs and a thick corpeh. The twilight was deepening and a soft breeze stirred the curtains. Both were loath to light the lamps. Since they were in the dark, invisible to the passers-by in the street, Abai parted the curtain, laying one side of it over the bed. The pale moonlight filled the room, revealing the long arches of the girl's brows over her large eyes, and shining softly on her white forehead.

Saltanat had greeted Abai like an old friend. She asked him about his family in the aul and chided him for

neglecting his kin. Didn't he miss them at all, she asked.

Abai admitted that he missed the children and added that his marriage with Aigerim was disapproved by his relatives. In his turn, he asked about her life and future.

She seemed to have lost her former reserve and spoke of herself, her long fingers playing with the tassels of her sholpy. The fire in her eyes seemed to be extinguished and came alight again only when they narrowed as though with pain. Abai was not like other djiguits she knew; she felt that she could trust him.

"My freedom is worth nothing. I, too, am a captive, though the fetters can't be seen. I'm like a falcon primed for hunting, but fastened to his master's wrist by an invisible thread. Soon I shall be the property of another man. My betrothed is to visit me in the autumn. You know how many unhappy girls there are among us Kazakhs. I have let my father know through my mothers that I do not love my betrothed and would prefer to be married to anyone but him. Still, Father won't change his mind. I have been his favourite and they call me Saltanat. My home has been like a nest in which I have always been petted by my parents. Even now they will deny me nothing but this. I am doomed, as you see, and my house is no better than a cage. It seems to me, sometimes, that I desire nothing and care for nothing. At night I weep and pray to God to take my life. Death is better than such captivity. I have nothing to regret."

She pressed her kerchief to her flushed face, trying to repress her tears. Abai made no comment; his heart was heavy.

"You, I am sure, understand how a young heart reasons," Saltanat went on calmly, though her voice faltered. "In my place, others would say, 'Why think of the future? I'm free for the time being and shall make the best of it and throw all caution to the winds.' That's what usual-

ly happens. But I can't do that. Revulsion and fear deprive me of all desire. My affection wilts as soon as it appears. What for? I say to myself. If I'm to be pushed over the precipice just the same. I'm like a sparrow fascinated by a snake; no matter how the poor thing flutters, it will be drawn into the snake's mouth."

For a time both were very still. Abai had heard sad confessions of young people before, but had never been affected so deeply. He remembered having read similar confessions in one of his Russian books. But these were words created by the heart; and once they are uttered the heart must die.

Abai leaned forward and took her hands into his. They were soft, warm and somewhat moist. When he kissed the tips of her fingers, she withdrew them.

"Saltanat, my dear, I have never heard a sadder story. Such sincerity deserves to be matched with sincerity, and it would be a sin were I to utter one word that might deceive you. Let me tell you about the grief that rends my heart."

Saltanat made a scarcely perceptible movement towards him.

"You're afraid of the future, weighed down by the thought of one you do not love, while I am tormented by the past, by sorrow for a beloved. I shall never forget that far-off time, the dawn of my life. Now those brief moments of happiness are gone for ever, like the moon that has set. Her name was Togzhan. Many years have passed since I saw her last, but the memory of my beloved still lives within me—it is a song written in my blood. You have heard it—Makish told me you liked it."

Saltanat nodded, her head swaying as if she were humming the song to herself, the golden pendants trembling in time to the rhythm as though repeating: "We've known, we've heard, we've seen."

"I was then united with a woman I did not love," Abai

went on. "There were children and they gladdened my heart, but anguish would not leave me. Then one evening when I was dreaming of Togzhan I heard a voice very much like hers. I was awakened by that voice and its owner, Togzhan's twin sister in appearance, came to be my song, my joy and my support. We have a beautiful child, a symbol of our love for each other. People think that I live in town for pleasure, but they do not know how much I miss my second Togzhan."

Saltanat nodded her head, without speaking. There was no need to say more.

With this their heart-to-heart talk came to an end. Saltanat reached for a dombra and handed it to her companion.

"Would you sing that song for me? Softly, only for me."

Abai needed no coaxing. He sang in an undertone, first the song written to Togzhan, but then other words to the same tune. They sprang to his mind by themselves, and he sang of the face of Saltanat in the moonlight and the bond of sympathy that had been woven that day. The akyn's dombra would long sing of this bond, and their hearts would always cherish it. Their parting was inevitable, the song went on, but even so his memory would preserve the image of his friend. Their secret would be treasured by their hearts like a precious stone.

Meanwhile, Yerbol had been waiting in the next room expecting some sign from his friend. When he heard the singing, he ordered Baimagambet to light the lamps, entered Makish's room with a lamp in his hand and looked at the two with undisguised curiosity.

Abai and the girl were sitting exactly as he had left them and the former was singing softly. His face wore a peculiar expression—not that which Yerbol had expected. Yerbol was displeased and even hurt.

Baimagambet and some servants also entered to lay the table for tea. Makish and Saltanat's mother

soon returned, and Tinibai's baibishe arrived shortly after.

Abai and Yerbol sang all the evening, singly and together. At the baibishe's request they sang a variety of songs. Saltanat was quiet, listening to the tunes of the Tobikty, so unlike those of her own people. It was only towards the end of the evening, when no one but Abai, Yerbol and Baimagambet were present, that she broke her silence.

"An unforgettable evening," she said to Abai. "How quickly it flew by! I am deeply grateful. I knew that you were not like others and I do not at all regret that which did not come to pass. I wish you happiness as long as you live."

Abai was once more impressed by her frankness. He said nothing, but inclined his head and put his hand to his heart. Saltanat realized that he did not wish to mar the evening with a single unnecessary word. She nodded and went to the window, where she stood watching him go with tear-filled eyes.

At last came the day for departure. Abai had been visiting Mikhailov daily, and on one occasion Mikhailov received him with an open book in his hand. He greeted Abai, took him by the arm and led him to his room.

"I've prepared some books for you, Kunanbayev. Here they are." He pointed to the pile on the table. "Besides Russian fiction, I've picked some books on general knowledge as well."

"And what are they like, Yevgeny Petrovich?"

"There are some on world history, the history of Europe, and geography. You should study them well this year. Some of them are mine and the others are kept for you in the Gogol Library by Kuzmich. I've given him the list. You seem to have studied history before. Yes, history is the mother of all wisdom."

"I've read the history of Islam—the books required in

the madrasah and others which I found myself. Since I have met you, however, they seem to have lost their importance. I am not even sure they were history at all. You've swept them away, as though they were but mist."

"Not all, I hope," Mikhailov laughed. "The history of Islam is a science, of course, a great science, but one should never forget by whom and how this history was written."

And Mikhailov began to outline a theory entirely new to Abai. The culture of the East had influenced world science for several centuries and had greatly contributed to the human knowledge, he said. Between the ancient world and the Renaissance in Europe lay several centuries of mental darkness which would have been complete if not for the light from the East. The East thus became a link in the chain of mental development, imparting much of its own character to it.

This talk especially heartened Abai and he could not conceal his elation from Mikhailov. Hitherto he had believed that the East had stood apart, for all its culture and knowledge. But now his friend had gathered all these treasures, which Abai had thought were poles apart, into one whole. Of course, this was the right way to look at things! Were there only a few people in the world who thought about the common weal, justice, truth and conscience? Each era, each nation, produced its own scholars and teachers, who though speaking different tongues were all deeply concerned for the future of mankind. Surely this was why he and Mikhailov understood each other so readily. It was perhaps this understanding that strengthened their friendship, in spite of the fact that one was in possession of culture and the other had only just begun to draw on its riches.

Mikhailov continued. His prominent brow, penetrating eyes, and thick well-kept beard were all marks of a scholar, of a wise teacher. Abai hung on his lips; every sen-

tence sounded like a maxim. Mikhailov spoke in a simple, easily understandable way, but brought out bold and far-reaching conclusions. He reiterated his opinion that the study of Islam was a serious science and put forward the idea that the Kazakh people had gathered a treasure of culture as yet unknown to science and not duly appreciated by Abai. It was still hidden in the people's midst like gold in the bowels of the earth.

The talk had brought the two even closer to each other. Mikhailov was like an elder brother, nearer to him than a kinsman by blood.

"I've learned more about you today than ever before," Abai told him at parting. "I can truly appreciate your qualities now. I thought you were concerned only with the Russian people, that I must seem like a man from a strange world to you, a creature of the steppes with outlandish thoughts. You have brought me to a peak from which I can view the positions of all nations and times. You have shown me that all people are kin, no matter how distant. I am glad to hear that even my Tobikty have not been forgotten. I am both glad and proud."

Mikhailov responded with a friendly smile, placing his hand on Abai's shoulder.

"Let us hope that our friendship will be useful to both. Only keep your promise. Don't forget the library and old Kuzmich."

Before Losovsky's departure for the steppes, Mikhailov met him at Andreyev's house.

"Kunanbayev has a great thirst for knowledge," he said. "It is good to see an immature people striving for knowledge with such fervour."

Losovsky was not convinced.

"One man is not a nation, Yevgeny Petrovich. His people are too far removed from culture and are actually in a state of hibernation. As to Kunanbayev, I think his

urge is simply due to his youth. All growing human beings strive for knowledge."

Mikhailov did not argue, but hoped that Losovsky would get to know Abai better.

"Kunanbayev has an interesting feature. He likes to talk about justice, about people and serving the people. These ideas are deeply rooted in him and they're close to Russian culture, too, aren't they? He is the first such nomad I have ever met. I would like to know your opinion. You know the steppes and the relations of the people far better than I. I'm impressed by his humanistic leanings and wonder what will become of him in a few years."

Mikhailov had never said this to Abai himself, but now he spoke with conviction, and Andreyev was prompt to agree.

"You've always complained that Kirghiz rulers are mostly obtuse and dishonest ignoramuses," he said to Losovsky. "Let Kunanbayev introduce you to the men suitable for the job. There's no harm in trying. Put them through the elections and see what they're like."

Losovsky did not object, but expressed some doubts.

"The elders of the Kirghiz tribes are not only a mystery to us, the officials, but also to Kunanbayev. I'm not sure that his friends will prove any better than the others. They'll hardly be able to put the life of the steppes on the right lines. Unless the steppes have changed very much, we shall have a good deal of trouble. But as you say, there's no harm in trying." He smiled ironically and concluded, "Let's hope that in two years Kunanbayev and I will see the success of our experiments. I have my doubts."

In a few days Losovsky set off for the elections. Abai and Yerbol followed him to Kzil-Moly, dispatching Baimagambet to the zhailyau with the news. A cartload of books selected by Mikhailov went with him.

Losovsky kept his promise. Consulting Abai during

the elections in the Kzil-Moly, Konir-Koksha and Chinghis volosts, he did his best to strengthen the young man's authority everywhere. In all the auls they were received with great honours; yurtas were duly set up, cattle slaughtered and food cooked. Abai could be constantly seen in the company of the district chief, and the people were convinced that Abai had returned from the town more trusted and respected by the authorities than ever. Some, indeed, got the idea that he was a counsellor.

There was no disagreement as to the nomination of biis, volost rulers and their deputies. In every volost Abai first spoke to those he knew to be honest and just and then himself proposed one candidate or another. These men were invariably elected.

Though his experience in the town had taught him to mistrust the nomads, Losovsky so respected Abai that the two grew very friendly after a month together.

"Be careful, Ibragim Kunanbayevich," he said jestingly. "It is you who are holding the elections and not I. I only take your advice and approve your candidates. What if they too turn out to be corrupt and arrogant; what if they draw up false statements and foment tribal warfare? How will you face your friends Mikhailov and Akbas then?"

There was no need for Losovsky's admonitions to make Abai conscious of his responsibilities not only to his friends, but to the people, whose life he was trying to better.

He succeeded in elevating three young men to volost rulers though no one had ever expected to see them in such a post, themselves least of all.

For the Chinghis Volost, Abai suggested a friend he had respected from childhood for his humanity. Asilbek, Togzhan's brother, was elected to the office which Takezhan had hitherto regarded as his own domain—to the great chagrin of the Irgizbai and especially the older generation.

In Konir-Koksha, Abai prevented the election of the rich and ambitious Aben, who tried to obtain the office through bribery, and instead proposed the steady and intelligent djiguit Shimirbai.

As volost ruler of Kzil-Moly Volost, he suggested his younger brother Iskhak, a man of his own cast of mind. The young man was the son of Ulzhan, but had been brought up by Kunkeh with Kudaiberdy. For a long time he had been under Takezhan's influence, but not long ago had grown friendlier with Abai, whose sense of justice and sincere good-will he appreciated. Abai was sure that he would prove reliable.

Such was the outcome of Abai's duel with the authorities which began in Yeraly. The people now believed that he was the victor and his fame spread further over the steppes than ever.



Hard Roads

I

AH, ABAI, ABAI! May happiness flee from you for ever. Why have you deserted us in the desolate steppes, alone without kinsmen and friends? The house is without its master, the wife without her husband, the children without their father. What have we done to deserve this? Allah has punished us with blazing heat—the heavens must surely fall to earth. Is this a fitting place to stay, where the flies give us no rest? Each day it becomes hotter and hotter, and it is you who are to blame. There will be no happiness for you. What are my sins that I am being so punished?”

Such were the words Dilda chanted in her harsh voice as she walked through the aul until she reached Aigerim's yurt. The latter received Dilda as one should an elder and rose to meet her respectfully.

Dilda now looked an old woman—thin, restless and cantankerous. Child-bearing had aged her prematurely; her face was wrinkled over her protruding cheek-bones. Angular even when she was young, she had now grown haggard.

Her visit to Aigerim and her vituperation against Abai were not in keeping with her usual scornful attitude to her rival. Dilda had her reasons for this.

Manas, who had arrived from town the night before, had brought a salem from Abai and a message to the effect that he would be away for the rest of the summer. Helping himself to refreshments, he had then discussed Abai in the presence of the neighbours and servants gathered in Dilda's yurt.

"His old mother sent me all that way with orders to keep galloping day and night. 'My son must be wasting away in jail. Try to learn whether he is in good health.' I galloped like mad. And what did I find? He turned out to be free and enjoying himself."

Manas chattered on—guardedly at first, fearful of arousing Dilda's jealousy, but then noticed to his surprise that she seemed even pleased.

"Don't hold back anything, my son, and may Allah grant your wishes," she coaxed. "Tell us all you've seen and heard. God will surely punish you if you hide things from us."

Subtlety was unknown to the rough and ready Manas. He had seen Abai and Saltanat in a half-darkened room and drawn his own conclusions. Rambling on, he was finally trapped in his own words.

"I don't blame Abai, though I gave him a piece of my mind right then and there before the girl. I couldn't help thinking about you, kelin, could I? Why shouldn't I talk to him as man to man? 'Your wife and children keep awake at night,' I said, 'pining for you. They can neither eat nor drink in peace, and here you are, embracing Aldekeh's daughter.' Wasn't he angry when I said this!"

Dilda extracted all she could from Manas and saw him ride off to zhailyau in the morning. She then went to Aigerim to cause what trouble she could with her chatter.

At first Aigerim was completely bewildered. Dilda was excited, laughed and even embraced her rival—something that had never happened before. But at last Dilda came

to the point without concealing her glee, veritably smacking her lips over the details and exaggerating a story already exaggerated by Manas.

Although she had been suffering from the intolerable heat, Aigerim suddenly felt chilled to the marrow; it seemed to her that a vicious whip had struck at her heart. She seized Dilda's hand with icy fingers.

"What are you saying," she whispered, trembling. She stared intently at Dilda, unable to say more. It was only pride that restrained her tears, though large drops had frozen in her dilated eyes. Her colour changed, as though she were about to faint.

"Just listen, Aigerim," Dilda shrilled triumphantly, moving closer to her and pressing her knees to Aigerim's. "I haven't told you the main thing. That hussy Saltanat came rushing to town in a carriage with three bays to find a husband. 'Marry me,' she said. 'Don't you know the proverb: "You'll be cleansed with her with whom you've sinned."' How can I look people in the face when everybody knows that it was I who dragged you out of prison. Even my betrothed will not have me. I won't let you disgrace me before everyone.' 'But I have a wife and children,' Abai says. 'Your wife is no obstacle,' she says, 'that harpy of the steppes is no match for me. She'll do the chares for me. I am your equal, not she. I'll have my way, I tell you, and you shall marry me. Meanwhile you are to stay in the town all the summer just for my sake.' All this means nothing to me, of course. I've given him up long ago. But you... You have been betrayed to be left in a winter place like a beggarly zhatak! I have felt all along that there was something keeping him in town and there you are. May he perish like a dog!"

Having unburdened herself, Dilda stalked out of the tent, leaving a dark cloud over Aigerim's yurt. The days dragged into weeks, but there was no sign of Abai.

After the elections, Abai had gone to visit his mother at the Great Aul and was there detained for two weeks, his mothers, brothers and the relatives refusing to let him go. He was in a hurry to go home and was worried about Aigerim, but tried to show nothing of this. It was only when the preparations for the final wandering to the Chinghis were underway that Abai was able to set off, accompanied by Baimagambet, Yerbol having decided to stay on until the auls moved to their autumn stays.

Setting off at dusk, they crossed the desolate range at night. Despite the intense heat, they did not dismount until midday, when they reached the winter place at Akshoky. When Abai had left here in the spring, only the walls of his future abode could be seen; but now he saw a large building on one of the slopes.

They dismounted and entered the winter house. Baimagambet was impressed with the height of the walls and the sturdiness of the roof. Abai inspected the rooms carefully, beginning with the two larders for winter storage and the special room with a chimney for smoking meat. These premises were located on the right of the building.

The construction had been supervised by Aigerim and Ospan but it was Abai who had planned the living quarters and out-houses. He had done this very carefully, indicating the length and breadth of the rooms and the positions of the doors. Now he compared every wall with the picture he had had in his mind. Baimagambet grew impatient and darted about restlessly.

"Abai-age, come here. This is a fine room, a real city room. And there's a ceiling of boards—and what a stove!"

Abai too was pleased. The best room was the bright and spacious corner room, which was reached through a long hall and lay next to another small room, the last in

this wing. Abai and Aigerim had intended one of these rooms for Dilda and her children and the other for the mullah.

Abai then inspected the rooms meant for himself and Aigerim. According to his plan, the door to these premises was to lead from an ante-room at the entrance. This had been altered by Aigerim, however, who had ordered the door to be built into another ante-room leading to an exit in the other wing. Abai realized that this was in order to avoid a meeting with Dilda. A separate entrance would give them more privacy.

It would be delightful to rest in so cool and comfortable a house. Abai stopped in Aigerim's room and in his mind's eye sought the place where the bed would stand. He could visualize shimmering silken curtains, changing from red to blue and back again.

Baimagambet kept running about and soon appeared again. He had been all over the house, had inspected the rooms intended for himself and the other servants and was greatly pleased. Abai followed him, peering into every nook and corner. The cattle compound had a separate gate. There were stables for the camels on the one side and on the other a cowshed linked with two large sheep-pens ventilated through apertures in the roof. There were also spacious stables for the horses and a shed, abutting on the house, for storing sledges in the winter and all kinds of implements and equipment.

Finished with the inspection, Abai sat down to rest in the shadow of the high walls.

"Thank goodness that we've been spared all the troubles connected with the building of such a house. Good Aigerim coped with the job very well." He rose to his feet. "Bring the horses and we'll ride on—home!"

He was suddenly overwhelmed with nostalgia for Aigerim and the children. Baimagambet took a long time with the horses. They had been watered at the well, had been

hobbled and set out to graze, but had wandered far over the hills. Abai was annoyed at the delay and stared about in the direction of his aul.

There it was—his aul. It had not yet wandered to zhailyau, but stood alone in a desolate valley, in a yellow desert far from the noise of the other settlements. Only the empty expanses of the steppes lay around, the sultry air above them trembling in the heat and creating strange misty shapes. Abai tried to guess the exact place of his aul, but was defied by the mirages.

As though to confuse a man, who was so sure that the steppes lay empty and uninhabited, the mirage filled them with mysterious life—conjuring up phantom consolations from nothing. Now one could see a huge city with a multitude of blue domes rising over the valley of Yerally, but suddenly the houses split away from the ground and continued an independent existence in the skies. And what lay over there, on the other side? Herds of cattle or the thickets of karagach? A host of shadows were moving to and fro, luring the onlooker towards them.

"Dreams and mirages are like hopes," thought Abai. "They constantly change and allure one with their play of colours." Staring at those shadows which could bewitch and deceive a man, Abai could still visualize his small aul and thought wistfully of his little ones and of Aigerim.

The feather-grass had dried during the summer and now stood rustling in a southern breeze as it shone in the sun, a gently rippling surface. One hardly noticed the individual blades—it was a white sea changing from silver to yellow and to darker hues like a huge cloth of silk. These were the tints of autumn: the feather-grass had turned silver, the wormwood yellow and the steppe kurai, once resplendent with its green shoots and blue flowers, was now a reddish brown. Everything here spoke of ebbing strength, frustration and decay. Abai suddenly felt

tired and lonely. His heart was seized with pangs of longing for his aul and his kin, and he was overcome with a feeling of melancholy tenderness for them.

In this reverie Abai summed up many of his earlier thoughts. Unhappy and weary were the Kazakh people whose homeland lay in these broad lonely steppes, he reflected sadly. There was nothing permanent—only infrequent auls scattered over the wide expanses like a handful of boursaks laid on the table-cloth by a thrifty housewife. There were no teeming cities for them—only desolate wastes.

Abai arrived at his aul just before sunset. The children scampered to meet him and Baimagambet, while the grown-ups stood waiting to greet them at the entrances of the yurtas. Abai looked anxiously at Aigerim, who held the reins of his horse. She looked frail and even ill. She was unusually pale, as though someone had extinguished the fire that had formerly burned in her rosy cheeks. Abai kissed Abish and Gulbadan, hugged Magash and picked up little Turash, who greatly resembled his mother, Aigerim. After questioning Dilda briefly about the affairs of the aul, he turned to Aigerim.

The usual tenderness which had so gladdened him in the past was gone and some great burden of grief appeared to be weighing her down. He kept looking anxiously at her as he entered the yurta and paused to talk to the Kishkineh-Mullah, Dilda and the neighbours. He was struck by Aigerim's extraordinary pallor, which now and then gave way to a feverish flush.

He could not wait any longer.

"Look at me, Aigerim," he said to her in a low voice. He could see that she was shivering, as though from cold, and was barely able to restrain her tears.

They had not so far said a word to each other, but Aigerim was nonetheless moved by Abai's usual tenderness. She smiled sadly, as if to say, "I am glad you have

noticed how I feel at least," but the tears glistened on her lashes.

"What would you wish to say to me, Abai?"

Abai was startled and stared, surprised.

"Are you ill, Aigerim? What is the matter with you? You're as white as snow. Has anything happened?"

Dilda's rasping voice cut in with the reply:

"Why such anxiety?" she asked with a malicious smile. "It's not illness that torments us but grief. And the cause of it must be well known to you." She smiled again.

Dilda's tone to Abai was always resentful, but especially so now. Abai could feel that there was a serious accusation in her tone. Perhaps his family were displeased because he had not left the town as soon as the trial was over. He controlled himself, however, and continued to speak to the men, avoiding both Aigerim and Dilda.

Before that day he and Aigerim had never quarrelled. Her heart had been always constant and her love unchanged. Whatever was troubling her, he could not discuss it before the others, and he forced himself to talk to the children and the neighbours about the new house.

Neither Abai nor Aigerim slept during that long weary night of misery. Aigerim was obsessed with jealousy and a sense of injury, and immediately they were left alone, she told him the story brought by Manas, and wept without restraint.

"How could it have happened, Abai?" she asked again and again between her sobs. "Was it so long ago that our house was a palace of happiness? But you have burned it down. My tears have put out the joyful light of this house. There is no remedy for my illness and there are no words to console me. My days are over."

She sat sobbing by Abai throughout the night.

Abai did his best to explain that Manas's words were merely a stupid conjecture, a downright lie. But nothing

would console her, neither words nor caresses, and he suddenly realized with horror that all his efforts were in vain. The very earth seemed to quake beneath him and he saw himself amid the smoldering ruins of his happiness.

He lay awake, silent and crushed, till the pale dawn. Aigerim sighed, her words full of bitterness.

"May the lot of an unfortunate woman be cursed and its ashes scattered to the winds. What other consolation has she but scalding tears? But tears are nothing. Let them stream over my cheeks to the end of my days. The terrible thing is that they have washed everything from my heart. Now nothing matters. I have never concealed anything from you and may now tell you frankly; I have no more heart, no more fire. There is only emptiness within me."

This was not his bold and beautiful wife. This was a woman mourning over a departed happiness.

Abai half rose, alarmed.

"What are you saying? Take back your words, cast aside such thoughts. Have pity on my past, which is clear of guilt. I believe we have a happy life before us. Do not sacrifice it, take back your words, Aigerim!"

In the half-light, Aigerim seemed even paler than before. Saying nothing, she rose, wrapped herself in a black silk chapan and went out into the dim light of dawn, leaving Abai alone in the white yurta.

The days passed, but Aigerim was unchanged. Her outburst of grief was followed by silent torpor, and Abai could do nothing.

Aigerim had been his favourite wife and priceless friend. Their separation was unbearable, a wound that would not heal. Their happiness had been killed by malicious slander and Dilda alone was the cause. For the first time in his life, Abai knew what it was to grieve over an irretrievable mistake. How could I have married Aigerim

without divorcing Dilda? How am I any better than other men who are ignorant, stupid and violent? I must suffer for this now and drink the poison I prepared myself.

Tormented by loneliness, Abai spent his days and nights over his books. They were as necessary to him as breath itself. Soon he had read everything he had brought from the town and sent Baimagambet to Kuzmich to fetch a basket full of new books.

Nature itself seemed to respond to Abai's joyless mood. It was a grim autumn. There was incessant rain over Yeraly and Oikodik, cold winds swept in from the steppes, and the long nights were damp and chilly.

The auls with winter places in the Chinghis valleys had wandered from zhailyau to the autumn pastures where Abai's aul was located, and were huddled together in the valleys of Oikodik and Akshoky, both rich in grass and water. Everything was being done to fatten the cattle for the winter.

Abai's aul, which had stood alone during the summer, was now surrounded by a host of his kinsmen's tents. There was no end to the visits and the feasts. Only Abai and Aigerim kept to their yurta. Like a scholarly recluse, Abai hardly ever raised his eyes from his books and it was as though the chill of autumn had penetrated his heart. He seemed resigned to loneliness which he came to regard as an affliction—serious, but one to which he had become accustomed. At times, towards evening, he mounted his horse and circled the herds aimlessly. When he returned after dark, he would feel that someone was waiting for him. Who could it be, he would wonder.

"I always feel that someone will dispel this gloom, but for whom am I waiting?" he thought one evening. "Perhaps Aigerim has come to life again. No. That is unlikely. Who am I waiting for then?" And suddenly, he knew. "It is Yerbol—I wish he would come to spend these bleak days with me!"

On that rainy evening he felt a special longing for his stalwart companion. Never had he appreciated Yerbol's friendship more. They had ridden the winding paths of life, suffering heat and cold together, and there had never been any differences between them. Only recently had they been compelled to part from time to time.

When Abai married Aigerim, Yerbol too had celebrated his wedding with Damely, and his baby son Smagul had been born at the same time as Turash. Abai was as concerned with Yerbol's affairs as with his own. For a long time Yerbol had been dependent on Suyundik and other kinsmen, but now he had a good herd of his own and was not compelled to follow Suyundik's aul. He had united seven households into one independent aul surrounding the bright pentagonal yurta of his own family, and had enough milch and draught cattle. Each time he went home after a long stay with Abai, he was enriched with a gift of a cow or some sheep from his friend.

Just now Yerbol was living at his winter place in Karashoky; he had delayed leaving the hills for a time to prepare fodder and take measures against the oncoming cold. Abai had not troubled him, realizing that Yerbol would come to see him as soon as all this was seen to.

In the distant Chinghis, Yerbol must have sensed that he was needed. One evening when the lamps were being lit in the hushed yurta where Abai sat over his books, the door flew open and Yerbol's cheery voice was heard.

Abai sprang up, rushed to his friend and hugged him fiercely.

"How good that you've come," he kept saying as he led Yerbol to the place of honour. "I've needed you like air itself. Take off your things. Please lay a corpeh on the floor, Aigerim, and don't forget the cushions!"

He was as overjoyed as a child might have been. Even Aigerim laughed a little at his antics, but quickly re-

lapsed into silence again. She remembered how Abai used to meet her in just this manner after a day's separation. Something akin to pity and sympathy stirred within her, but only for a moment.

The young heart seized with jealousy is sometimes vindictive, unjust and capable of mistaking a precious stone for a bit of worthless glass. Thus she mistook Abai's exhilaration for something else; she thought that he was not rejoicing to see an old friend, but an accomplice in his affair with Saltanat.

She had always greeted Yerbol as joyfully as Abai. His friendship had been a necessary part of their happiness; but now she felt that the two were linked precisely by the thing which separated her from Abai. "Saltanat has brought me grief and Yerbol contributed to it. Who knows what common secrets they have!"

Yerbol's arrival nonetheless dispelled the customary gloom. No sooner had he drunk his piala of kumys than he began to joke as usual.

"Serve both tea and dinner at once, Aigerim. Nothing has passed my lips since the tea Damely gave me in Karashoky. Meanwhile, I shall pay my respects to Dilda, Alshinbai's daughter, who'll be screeching otherwise. I also want to see the children. . . . Are you going to stand there staring at me all day?"

Yerbol visited every one of the yurtas as though this were his own aul, everywhere greeting the elders. Soon he returned, and applying himself to the food, he told them the latest news. Preparations were underway for Umitei's wedding in Eskhozha's aul. This favourite of her clan, famous for her beauty, kindness and lovely voice, was soon to leave for the aul of her betrothed, Dutbai of the Kokshe.

Sure enough, the very same evening, Abai's aul received an invitation to the wedding. The women set off with Aigerim in the morning, while Abai, accompanied by Yer-

bol and Baimagambet, reached Eskhozha's aul by the time of the midday meal.

The festivities were at their height and the Guest Yurtas were crowded with newly arrived visitors. The friends first went to the Great Yurta to salem Eskhozha and to wish happiness to the newly-wed. There they were invited to stay for dinner. From the yurta of the groom and his suite could be heard the songs of the girls, daughters-in-law and young men, until suddenly everything was drowned in the sound of loud chattering voices and laughter. Something extraordinary was afoot. Young people and children were running past the Great Yurta and even some of the elderly folk were contributing to the general commotion. There was a tumult of voices.

"See, the seris have come!"

"Where have they come from?"

"Look at their dress—you can't tell whether they're men or women. Look, some are all in red and some all in green."

"There goes the eldest seri. See how he has decorated his dombra. There's never been such a seri before."

The children were milling about in the crowd, screaming with laughter.

"Look at those hats. Just like saukeleh.* They are not seris, but a bunch of brides."

"And look at their trousers. Aren't they like skirts? And that one's pantaloons are dragging behind like sausages."

The people were jostling each other, shouting and laughing with excitement.

"The sals and seris have come," was the general cry.

Izgutty, who was also present in Eskhozha's yurta, apparently felt that it was beneath his dignity to address as sal and seri some unknown vagabonds who had dared to present themselves here with such ado.

* Saukeleh—a bride's headgear.—*Ed.*

"Who are they? Where are they from?" he asked disapprovingly.

"They're no strangers. It's all a trick of your Amir," Es-khozha explained, having been forewarned, it appeared.

Abai and Yerbol had heard that several young djiguits headed by Amir had been riding over the steppes during the summer, visiting the auls as real sals and seris, though no one had given them such titles.

The friends, therefore, went out to watch the antics of Amir and saw a great crowd of young people in vivid and motley garb heading for the three yurtas set up for the groom.

The middle yurta was octagonal, its upper *koshas* fringed with red and ornamented with designs cut from red and green cloth. The girls at the door were splendidly dressed, wearing sable hats topped with owl feathers, their heavy sholpy emerging beneath. Umitei's dress was especially conspicuous; her hat of dark otter was set at a mischievous angle. She shone like Sholpan, the brightest of the morning stars, as she led the girls to receive the seris. Among the singers there were also young women.

"Are there women seris too?" Baimagambet was surprised.

Yerbol had already recognized the party.

"Don't you see? Our Aigerim is among them too. They've taken our women into the secret."

On the eve of their arrival the unusual guests had sent messengers ahead—elaborately dressed youths with daggers in their belts. It was they who had raised the tumult and led a bevy of young women to meet the seris, who dismounted and continued in procession, their arms round the girls, and proclaiming their presence in song. The company was led by the senior seri, a young woman on either side of him, each with a hand on his shoulder. He was the tall and impressive Baitas, the eldest of the young people. His *dombra* was decorated more luxuriantly than

the others with an abundant tuft of owl feathers and jingling bells, as a sal-dombra* should be. He began each refrain by lifting and shaking the instrument over his head, a sign to the other seris to raise their decorated instruments as well and join in the refrain of "Zhirma-bes."

Abai and Yerbol were surprised to hear them singing in chorus. A song was usually sung by no more than two, even if a yurta was crammed with singers, and this novelty greatly appealed to them.

*Make haste and be merry while still twenty-five,
While real is the pleasure of being alive*

ran the song. It was the very call of youth.

Led by Umitei, the girls sang the same song until the two processions met and finished the refrain together. Those of the girls who had been walking with the singers withdrew to the background, while each of Umitei's train took a seri by the hand. Baitas again found himself with two companions, while Umitei walked at Amir's side.

The crowd was heading for the middle yurta. The messengers dismounted and ran ahead, jestingly brandishing their ornate whips to keep the curious onlookers at a distance. The wedding yurtas were surrounded by a great throng, among which were Abai and his friends, the suite of the groom and the matchmakers. The messengers obeyed only the orders of their seris.

"Keep back! Make room!" they shouted, edging back the crowd to make way for the procession.

When someone moved forward, they would assume a ferocious attitude and roll their eyes in imitation of shab-armans. The tall batirs at times even gave the more venturesome a taste of their kamchas, something which no

* Sal-dombra—a professional singer's dombra.—Ed.

one seemed to mind, the victims laughing as they dodged the blows.

The pageant had attracted people from many auls; riders from great distances were pressing at the rear. No one had ever seen so many seris gathered at once—there were about forty of them. Their festive array, their unusual antics, and their singing delighted everybody.

Tall, ruddy Baitas with a red, sharply pointed beard, stalked on unperturbed, as though oblivious to the eyes turned upon him.

He was followed by Amir and Umitei, walking closely behind and pressing to one another like lovers after a long parting. It was they who led the chorus. Baitas was the leader of the procession, but the singing seris took their cue from these two, a handsome pair who attracted general attention and, in the language of the seris, seemed to have been painted by the hand of Allah himself.

Umitei's attire, from her owl's feathers to her pointed leather shoes, enhanced her loveliness; she was radiant with happiness.

Amir, too, cut a dashing figure. His blue satin garb sat well on his tall figure and well became his fair young face with its small moustache. He was obviously blind to all but Umitei, who seemed almost to float along on a current of joy. It looked as if their hearts already belonged to each other.

Yerbol interrupted his jesting and regarded the pair dubiously. Abai too was seized with foreboding. He suddenly lost all interest in the procession and began elbowing his way out of the crowd. Exclamations of surprise pursued him.

"Look at Amir and Umitei. They seem to think they're alone," an elderly woman was saying to her husband.

"Whose wedding is this—Dutbai's or Amir's," a greying man asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"They look like lovers after a parting," said a voice behind him.

"Have they no shame at all?"

"If I ever fall in love, I'll do it as these two!"

"How can young people hide their feelings?"

"Poor children. They're in love."

"They know they are to be parted. Where passion triumphs, reason flies to the winds."

The whispers running through the crowd were sure to touch off unsavoury talk. Abai was uneasy. He was ashamed for Amir and Umitei, ashamed before the crowd and Dutbai, Umitei's groom. Though the groom was a young man, he enjoyed the respect of everybody, including Abai. Should the slander reach him, things would go hard for him and the other two. Abai could enjoy neither the singing nor the merry-making, and when the djiguits mounted after their repast and the games and races had begun, he found his own horse and slipped off alone.

He could still see the faces of those two, aflame with passion. He was annoyed and yet pitied them; condemned them, yet felt that they were urged on by something stronger than man's will, by something he had found in books many times. Abai rode over the steppes, lost in thought. Rhymes and rhythms vaguely came to his mind. A new melody appeared of itself; it was slow and melancholy, well suited to the words that were on his lips.

*No words does the speech of lovers know,
The language of love is such:
A flash of the eye, a stir of the brow—
No tongue can express as much.*

He could not get these lines out of his mind all day and when he returned to the aul they were still with him.

Only the first day of the festivities passed gaily and noisily as a wedding should: but the next day was charged

with impending disaster. From the moment Amir had entered the bride's yurta with Umitei on his arm, Dutbai's wedding became a triumph for the young singer and from that very instant the gossip flew over the steppes like fire on a windy day.

There were visitors from the Kokshe, those who were to receive the bride, as well as guests from the Irgizbai, Anet, Zhigitek and Mamai, who lived on the nearby autumn stays at Oikodik and Yeraly. The rumours about Umitei and Amir had spread through all the clans. "Amir's behaviour has disgraced the Irgizbai in the eyes of the Kokshe," hissed those who bore a grudge against the Irgizbai; while others, eager to settle scores with the Karabatir, said that the youth had been led astray by Umitei. "Sing me into marriage with your songs," she was supposed to have said as she invited the young man to her wedding.

Be that as it may, Amir and Umitei were inseparable, singing the whole time. Aigerim sang a great deal too, as if releasing all those songs which had been pent up within her for so long; they flew from her like nightingales freed from a cage.

Dutbai, Umitei's groom, was one of the cleverest, most eloquent and famous djiguits of the Kokshe. Though young he enjoyed renown and respect among his kinsmen. His present position was a blow to his pride and ambition. And it was Umitei who was to blame. At first he had curtly cut short the hints of his friends, then tried without heat to persuade Umitei to withdraw from the series. He did not reproach her, but Umitei would not listen.

"I am taking leave of my kinsmen, perhaps for ever," she answered. "I know it is not pleasant for you either, but let me make merry for the last time with the friends of my youth."

She knew how to get her own way, especially by coaxing, and was not used to obeying anyone.

In spite of his youth, Dutbai had a good knowledge of people and was sufficiently self-possessed to preserve his dignity under the circumstances. It was these qualities, indeed, which had so distinguished him among the younger generation. After some deliberation, he decided that direct action could only worsen matters and bring about an open rupture. He was unwilling to lose Umitei, whom he had loved long and dearly. Had he not boasted: "I'll marry the best girl of the Karabatir!" He decided, therefore, to suffer the company of the seris and to pay no heed to the growing slander.

But on the fourth day his patience was exhausted when in the morning he accidentally witnessed something that Umitei and Amir had regarded as their secret, and theirs alone. Wrapped in a black chapan, they stood locked in embrace beside the bride's white yurt. Dutbai tore the chapan from their heads and saw their tear-stained faces, united in a long farewell kiss.

Dutbai ordered that the horses be fetched from the pasture at once. Everyone of his party was immediately awakened, including the chief matchmaker and the eldest kinsmen. "Let them mount their horses without so much as a sip of water," he commanded. His tone brooked no contradiction, and at sunrise the groom and his suite left Eskhozha's aul without taking leave of anyone.

It was not only the bride who was disgraced, but the entire aul. The groom had deserted his bride, contemptuously returning her to her people. Eskhozha gathered the elders and tried to overtake Zhanatai, the chief matchmaker. "Don't fan the flames; don't invite trouble. You can say that you merely went off ahead of the general party, that everybody was asleep and no one saw you leave. We can still save the situation—we'll dismantle the wedding yurt immediately and send Umitei with you. Why should we part as enemies?"

Zhanatai spoke to Dutbai, who had now recovered himself and agreed for fear of the inevitable consequences. Eskhozha then galloped back to the aul, where the bride's yurta was dismantled and bundled off to the groom's aul together with Umitei, accompanied by an escort and the dowry caravan.

At the end of that troubled day Aigerim returned to her aul. Abai and Yerbol, who met her by the yurta, were struck by her expression, happy and animated as in the days of old. She alighted and, handing her coat to Zlikha, asked Abai and Yerbol how things were in the aul.

"Just look at her, Yerbol. She seems to have come to life again. This is what her beloved songs have done for her." Abai regarded her with delighted surprise.

"Very true," Yerbol agreed. "She is like a red fox who has rolled in the virgin snow."

Aigerim smiled.

"Why did you leave me then, alone with my songs, and why are you now jesting at my expense?"

"We're not joking, my dear. We're perfectly serious," Abai reassured her gravely. "You were born for singing and we have hooded you like a falcon. Now you look like a bird, one circling over the aul in the winds after a long flight. It's a shy bird at such a time, and won't easily alight on one's wrist. It has been dreaming too long of the free skies to forget its brief spell of freedom at once. Am I right, Aigerim?"

At first smiling with the two, Aigerim then added with some bitterness, "You're still joking. Now you call me a fox, now a falcon. Who am I then? I know only that I am hooded to keep the truth from me." She frowned and went into the yurta.

Umitei's departure could not cool Amir's ardour. When she had left to follow her groom, he set off from Eskhozha's aul with his seris by another route. As soon as the aul was out of sight, he slumped over the neck of his horse

and abandoned himself to grief. The djiguits tried to console him and one of them proposed that they overtake the wedding train to enable Amir to take leave of Umitei for the last time.

Amir, who never heeded gossip, was not at all afraid of it now. He had no idea how the slanders had grown and what the consequences of this fresh venture might be. The mere thought of it sent his spirits soaring at once, and he sat up in saddle again.

"She is united with this Kokshe by the ritual of marriage alone, while I am united to her by Allah himself," he declared. "Don't think that I'm speaking lightly, or because I'm young. I know that I'm destined to be consumed in that flame. It may be a sin, but I can't do without her. Turn about and let us overtake the train."

The rosy-faced, light-eyed djiguit Muhamedjan, one of Amir's closest friends, sympathized with the young lovers most of all. He brightened as he heard these bold words and laughed with pleasure.

"That's well said. I know a song that fits it." He sang in a high, clear tenor:

*My spirit is roused, its manacles fall,
I am ready for fearless deeds.
To horse! They have stolen the light of my soul!
Friends, on with your light-footed steeds.*

Amir and the other seris caught up the song and spurred their horses to a gallop. Except that of Amir, who was riding a bay, all the animals were white, having been specially picked for the occasion. Over the broad steppes the riders went, giving their horses free rein and their song rang out like a war-cry until they caught sight of Umitei's wedding train from the slope of a hill. There were ten camels packed with the dowry and horses ridden by festively dressed men and women. Racing for the

lead, the djiguits headed towards the procession as it approached the auls of the Kokshe.

Even the abrupt departure of the groom had failed to bring Umitei to her senses. She had done nothing to conceal her grief either on taking leave of Amir or on the way to the groom's aul. Her eyes red with tears, she sobbed continually, looking back hopefully from time to time. Suddenly she noticed a party of riders in motley garb rapidly overtaking them. The elders at the head of the train saw them too.

"Now what has brought them here? Are they out of their senses?" said Eskhozha to Izguty in surprise.

A lone rider led the group at a distance of an arrow's flight.

Umitei reined in her horse, convinced that it was Amir.

The young man galloped to her side and pressed her to his breast, while his companions surrounded the couple, forming a living yurta of white horses around them. The seris struck up the "Kozy-kosh," Birzhan's farewell song, slowing the tempo to impart a special solemnity to the words.

*Farewell, farewell, young friends! In truth,
Being with you returns my youth.
And when again we have to part
Old as before becomes my heart.*

Amir and Umitei continued to weep in each other's arms. Hurrying to them from the head of the procession, Izguty and Eskhozha cut through the living barrier, shouting wildly:

"Stop that at once. Haven't you caused trouble enough?"

"Come to your senses, Amir. You've said your farewell and now go your way."

Izguty seized the reins of Umitei's horse and pulled

them furiously towards him, so that the pacer leapt aside and tore Umitei from Amir's arms.

"Amir," she pleaded, trying to check the horse. "Don't leave me. Accompany me to the fire. Stay with me, all of you."

Her tears were instantly dry. She swept the company with her eyes and exclaimed with odd vehemence:

"And let him go mad, if he likes. Let him dare thwart me!" She clutched at the reins of Amir's horse, drawing him on.

"Dear moon of mine," he said leaning towards her again. "I would rather die than see you set. I'll go with you even if it costs my life." He then addressed the seris. "We shall all go."

The party of seris surrounded Umitei and Amir, jostling Eskhozha and Izguty out of the way. The elders and matchmakers returned to the head of the procession, helpless to alter the course of events.

The festive octagonal bride's yurta had already been taken to the groom's aul and the young kelin entered, supported by Amir and Baitas. A silken curtain was carried unfolded before her, since the seris did not wish to break the custom. The aul, however, received the party with anxiety and even hostility.

The spirit of enmity, nonetheless, did not cross the threshold of the Young Yurta with them. Both the young people and the elderly baibishes met the new kelin with best wishes, showered gifts on her head in the manner usual at weddings. Nobody seemed to heed the odd fact that Amir was there.

This solemn and dignified reception was the work of Dutbai. He had taken counsel neither with the elders of the Kokshe nor with his father Alatai. Patiently and manfully, he had carried out his own decision—to turn the slander from Umitei's name and to accept her hospitably and joyfully.

On the same evening, however, he entrusted his guests to his mother, a calm and tactful woman, mounted his horse and rode to the chief of the Kokshe, his uncle Karatai, who lived in the neighbouring aul.

When he arrived, he requested everyone to leave the yurta and then told Karatai of how his pride had been insulted.

"Can you go to Kunanbai and explain all to him?" he concluded. "Let him restrain the boy or the friendship between the Kokshe and the Irgizbai will crumble."

Since the day Karatai had come to head the Kokshe, he could not remember any young man so ready to oppose one of the strongest tribes of the Tobikty. He regarded Dutbai with pride; a tall sturdy man with a prominent forehead and bold eyes as fiery as those of a falcon. It was clear that he was ready to hurl himself into the fire if the honour of the tribe so required. Karatai, at the same time, appreciated his self-possession and composure; anger had not dimmed his reason. "You are a real Kokshe," the old man thought, "and will some day take my place at the head of the tribe."

Karatai looked at the young man intently, thinking over his decision.

"Tell them to bring my horse," he ordered briefly. "Also ask someone to accompany me. I shall go to Kunanbai."

Dutbai sent a messenger to fetch his father Alatai and Bozambai, one of the leaders, requesting that they accompany Karatai.

Kunanbai's aul stood all by itself on Korik. The old Hadji had separated from the Irgizbai, who were now in the winter places in Oikodik. Nurganim had not been willing to forget the insult from Ospan and all the summer had insisted that a separate winter house be built. She wanted to be away from her rivals and their grown-up and impertinent sons. This request, it so happened, fitted in well with Kunanbai's hankering for the

solitude necessary to his old age. During the summer he wandered to Korik before the others; taking a party of djiguits with him to build a small winter house for himself and Nurganim. Now he was enjoying the death-like quiet he wanted.

Karatai and his companions arrived by nightfall. The aul seemed asleep, though there was a light in Kunanbai's yurt. On hearing their horses, Nurganim decided that the visitors must be strangers, since everyone gave the aul a wide berth even by day. The old man never emerged from behind his curtain to join in worldly conversation; his guests, therefore, were usually bored and anxious to get away.

"Karatai has come," said Nurganim quietly to her husband when the newcomers entered the yurt. She had peeped through the curtain from her place at Kunanbai's feet.

Kunanbai was reclining, propped up on pillows, and telling his beads with lowered eyes. He looked up quickly, his expression of repentance and humility vanishing in a flash. The guests had hardly reached the place of honour when Kunanbai jerked aside the curtain which had not been moved since the morning, and fixed his one bleak eye upon Karatai, who at once took stock of the cruel, wary and malicious features of the repenting Hadji. No one had seen him look just that way for ten years. Karatai felt as if he had stumbled into the den of a sleeping beast of prey and awakened its occupant.

Karatai's visit was no surprise to Kunanbai. On her return from Eskhozha's aul the night before, Aigiz had called upon her husband with bitter complaints. She had left the wedding highly indignant. Eskhozha was a close kinsman of hers and she had remonstrated with him angrily before she had left for allowing the seris to take such liberties and turn the wedding into a disgraceful spectacle. Eskhozha was no less indignant than she and

asked her to convey his protest to Kunanbai, explaining that he had permitted Amir's presence only because the young man was Kunanbai's grandson.

Aigiz not only passed on his words to Kunanbai, but added many remarks of her own.

"They've become brazen; they think no one can restrain them," she had said, white with anger. "They did their best to disgrace our aul when you were in Mecca, they were ready to dance on our heads. Your gaze has not yet grown dim, but our house is a nest of witches."

She relieved herself of her long pent-up hatred for those who were younger than she, and did not leave until she was satisfied that her words had struck home.

A candle was flickering at Kunanbai's bedside and his eye seemed all the more evil in that reddish light. It seemed to exude malice; it was stubborn, alert and ready for both defence and attack. As he turned from Karatai, his gaze took in Alatai, the bridegroom's father, and fastened itself upon Bozambai, a rich man of the Kokshe. The others were of no account—they were ordinary djiguits.

Kunanbai knew straightaway that the old men had come here on behalf of the entire Kokshe clan. The late hour, the grim faces and frowns boded evil times for the Tobikty. Kunanbai was the first to speak, as he sat there, his hand crushing the edge of the curtain.

"What hurricane has brought you here? What has happened? Speak up!"

The two old men understood each other instantly. Staring at the cold angry mask of Karatai's face, Kunanbai knew that his old crony had made up his mind as stubbornly as he himself. His wrongs were such that he could not be appeased.

And Karatai, who in his turn read the Hadji's thoughts, felt that he could give free rein to the anger that had had him in its grip since the night before.

He told all he knew about Amir, Dutbai and Umitei. Some lechers, devils and jinn calling themselves seris had suddenly appeared; these were the wayward spirits of evil in a declining world and had brought disgrace on the whole tribe. All who had looked upon them, who had seen how they had behaved, were seized with anger. Shamelessness itself had come with them, in the form of song, setting itself up as a shining example to all. The youngsters had been led astray by those demons in red and green with feathers in their hats, who had been singing their evil songs and jeering at everything people held sacred.

"If it were my honour alone that were at stake! But they are disgracing our ancestors, desecrating their ashes. They are dancing on their tombs, they are besmirching us with their filth to make us appear as black as they are in the eyes of Allah. I pity you, but can no longer hold my peace. To whom else shall I complain? Who shall be my support in these blasphemous times. I have never brought my complaints to you nor even to the meanest dog in your aul. But now I demand that you put an end to all these outrages. It is time you passed judgement."

Further discussion was unnecessary. Kunanbai told Nurganim to accommodate the guests in a separate yurta and ordered a rich repast. He also demanded that her brother Kenzhakan be summoned without delay.

"Take two horses and gallop to Alatai's aul on the Sholak-Terek," Kunanbai told him. "Seek out Izguty and give him this message. He must bring Amir to me before sunset; if he resists, then let him be brought by force."

Kenzhakan, a strong and determined young man, listened attentively, as though drinking in some of his malice and indignation, and then rode from the aul.

Kunanbai continued to sit very still with the hem of the curtain still in his hand until the very morning. The

lines of his face were deepened by the cold hatred and impotent rage within him.

The first pale streaks of dawn became scarlet ribbons of autumn over the broad yellow plain. The first rays were flooding the yurta with crimson sunlight when Izguty and Amir entered. The young man was deathly pale, and his eyes were dull and lifeless.

It was a long time since Kunanbai had seen his grandson. He gave him an ominous look and beckoned him nearer. Amir discarded his hat and whip, approached his grandfather and kneeled before him. The old man's bony fingers suddenly released the hem of the curtain, closed round the neck of the youth and squeezed his bare throat. The aged hands had not lost their former power and the iron grip became more terrible, until Amir grew livid, gasped for breath and collapsed. Kunanbai dropped to his knees, but the iron claws gripped tighter. Another instant and everything would have been over, had not Izguty hurled himself at Kunanbai.

"What are you doing? Even if he is a dog, he is your grandson." But he quailed at Kunanbai's look. Then Nurganim seized her husband by the hands.

"Hadji, oh light of our eyes, come to yourself! Forgive him!" she screamed, and tore Kunanbai's hands from the young man's throat by her sheer weight. But the old man thrust his knee into her chest with such violence that she sank to the ground unconscious.

At that moment the felt door was thrown back and Abai appeared. He saw Kunanbai pounce upon Amir again as Nurganim fell. In one leap he was at the old man's side.

"Don't!" he snapped, ripping his father's hands from Amir's throat.

"He's an infidel," roared Kunanbai.

"I won't let you kill him!"

They stood facing each other with burning eyes, as if ready to fight to death. The younger man was filled

with revulsion, and his words came as sharp as daggers.

"Allah is on your lips and blood is on your hands—and what for? In the name of the Sharia again? But does this Sharia forbid love? Or is it the same Sharia in the name of which you once shed innocent blood?"

Again the scene of Kodar's death flashed before Abai's eyes. Then he had been a mere boy, but now he would not permit such a thing.

"And so you're going to murder a man against the law of the Sharia now? Was your pledge of silence and prayer given in a state of humility or not? Or was it done only to conceal that vulture's heart within you?"

Kunanbai recovered his tongue at last.

"Get out!" he shouted. "Out of my sight!"

"I will not go!"

"Abettor of evil-doers! Seducer! Everything is on your conscience. You'll lead them all astray!"

"Be that as it may. But why should you not die in peace? This is my time, not yours, and why should you interfere in our lives?"

"Just look what depths you've sunk to! How dare you speak to me in such a way?" hissed Kunanbai and suddenly stopped short.

He stretched out both hands, palms outwards, as though trying to push someone away—motioning towards Abai and Amir who had only just regained consciousness. Then Kunanbai brushed his face with his knuckles—an unspoken prayer for vengeance.

Nurganim and Izgutti cried together:

"Reject his prayer, O Allah."

"Hear him not, O Lord of the Creation. Woe is us! He is cursing his children," they repeated in horror.

Kunanbai seemed oblivious of them. Kneeling by his bed he clearly enunciated the curse, pointing now to Abai and now to his prostrate grandson.

"On this crimson dawn and early morning, I lay my paternal curse on this tainted blood, on these two miscreants of my tribe. I beseech Thee, the great and omnipotent Allah, Thou who hast not let me put him to death, heed the prayer of Thy slave, my one and only supplication. Take the lives of these two; send Thy certain death upon them; destroy these infidels before they contaminate others!"

Once more, he raised his knuckles to his face.

"Begone!" he shouted hoarsely. "Even if my blood flows in your veins, you are evil-doers! I shall make a sacrifice of both of you, so that you may perish more quickly. Begone!"

Abai listened, looking at his father with contempt.

"I will go and for ever!" he said tersely.

Kunanbai drew the curtain and leaned back, his beads moving swiftly in his wiry hands—once more the Hadji had given himself up to prayer and repentance.

Amir stumbled to his feet and picked up his hat and whip, but suddenly collapsed again. Mustering all his strength, he turned towards the curtain.

"You have called for my death, but I am not afraid. I am not afraid, do you hear? Even if you burn me alive!" he cried desperately.

Abai helped him to his feet and led him into the open. How fortunate that he had come just at that moment. The disquieting tidings that Izguttly had taken Amir to Kunanbai had reached him shortly before dawn. The messenger was Murzagul, Amir's friend, sent by Baitas of the Kokshe. Abai, who knew his father's wicked temper, did not wait for his horse to be saddled, but at once sprang upon Murzagul's horse and arrived at the old Hadji's aul in the very nick of time.



October had come and the auls were finishing the sheep shearing. The day when they should wander from the autumn pastures was drawing near, but no one seemed to be in a hurry to move to the winter places. Though much of the grass, once thick as felt, near the auls in Oikodik had been devoured and ground to dust by the cattle, there was still abundant fodder farther on. Now that the heat had subsided the cattle seemed to be growing fatter by the hour and the thrifty aul masters preferred the hardships of the autumn rains and winds for a while.

The larger of the summer yurtas had been dismantled and dispatched to the winter places, and the smaller and warmer tents had been set up in their place.

The walls of Aigerim's new yurta were overhung with carpets and decorated koshmas. The tall bed had been replaced by several thick corpehs laid on the floor. The space before the bed where meals were eaten was covered with long-haired sheepskins, while the hearth and the cauldron occupied the centre of the yurta.

One rainy day, Abai sat on his bed, leaning back against the folded blankets and pillows with a book in his hands. He was wearing his winter clothes, with a light fur coat over his beshmet and his feet comfortably shod in roomy felt-lined boots. Aigerim, who sat at her husband's side as always, was well wrapped up in a light beshmet of fox paws trimmed with marten at the collar and round the bottom. The fastenings were of red semiprecious stones, the silver buttons the work of a well-known handicraftsman. She was busy with embroidery as usual, while Yerbol and Baimagambet played togiz-kumalak,* leisurely sipping the autumn kumys. The din-

* Togiz-kumalak—"nine marbles," a Kazakh game somewhat resembling draughts.—*Ed.*

ner was ready, the cauldron had been removed from the fire and the acrid smoke from the cinders stung the eyes and gave a bitter taste to the mouth. When the hostess invited them to wash their hands and take their places around the cloth, Abai shut the book he had been reading since morning and raised his eyes to the shanrak.

"We should open the tunduk," he observed. But just then drizzling rain could be seen through the crevice left as an outlet for the smoke.

"What weather!" he said with a frown. "When you open the tunduk, you get the rain, when you close it, you get the smoke."

Low voices could be heard outside and soon two men entered the tent. One was Shakke, Abai's nephew and Amir's elder brother, and the other Bekpol the hunter. The former seemed preoccupied, and addressed himself to Abai as soon as the meal was over.

"I've come for your advice, Abai-aga," he began. "I should like to talk to you about Amir." Shakke paused, and Abai and Aigerim wondered what the trouble was.

"Is he in good health?" Aigerim demanded. "The poor boy lives like an outcast."

"Is he still pining as of old?" Abai asked sympathetically.

"He keeps to himself," answered Shakke vaguely. "I don't think he is ill. He seems well enough. But he is sick at heart. That's why he's wasting away. What I'm really troubled about, Abai-aga, is this: he used to walk about like a ghost, but now, out of stubbornness perhaps, he has taken to his old ways. Without consulting his kinsmen, he yesterday summoned all his old friends, these sals and seris. They've dressed themselves up in their old clothes again and are preparing to do something mad. Only this morning I heard some of them say that they were going to go to the Kokshe—but that would be an open chal-

lenge, wouldn't it? What will the old Hadji say? He has just put his curse upon Amir, as you know. And the Kokshe are just waiting for a chance to revenge themselves upon Amir. They may do something desperate. How can I prevent it? Give me your advice."

Abai listened intently, weighing every word of these anxious tidings. His decision came as a surprise to all.

"We cannot abandon Amir to his grief," he said. "If he had lived in other times, he might have been head and shoulders above the rest of us, the generation that has cast him out. I sympathize with Amir with all my heart. He has suffered enough and let him do as he pleases now. Let him at least not say that he is being driven from pillar to post by pursuers on horse and on foot. Place no obstacles in his way, Shakke. Let him go to the Kokshe if he wants to. Father will not remove the curse, no matter what he does. Besides, the Kokshe are calm now. His heart may be lightened by a song or two."

Yerbol and Shakke pondered Abai's words and then agreed, but Aigerim disapproved.

"What avails it to receive honeyed words from one's kinsmen unless they are supported by deeds?" she exclaimed and turned away.

Since Abai's return from Semipalatinsk, he had felt that his former Aigerim was gone. She had never been wont to say much, but had always been of his mind. She seemed to have lost her old ability to catch the meaning behind Abai's words. Now her remark seemed discordant and indifferent.

Worried as he was over Amir, Abai's sense of loneliness was intensified by his estrangement from Aigerim. The old happy days of warmth had given way to a grey humdrum existence. Dreariness had come to stay in his once cheerful home. It seemed a bleak autumn of life full of hurts, reproaches and accusations—and the cause was the innocent Saltanat.

Aigerim's words now stung Abai to the quick, but he made no reply and began to turn things over in his mind. "Supported by deeds," he mused. But hadn't he openly faced his father to shield Amir? He recalled Kunanbai's curse and smiled bitterly; on the one hand there was his father's hatred, which had driven the old man to plead with Allah for Abai's death, and on the other there was this estrangement from Aigerim, the only person whom he had thought to be utterly devoted to him. And why this estrangement? What crime had he committed? He had never betrayed their love and Aigerim was wrong to think that this was so.

It was true that Abai often thought of Saltanat, but always with the deepest respect. He was indeed proud of the fact that he had conducted himself with discretion and was sure that he would act in the same way if he met another such as Saltanat. Was his behaviour not a newly acquired virtue, a consequence of his education, a rare instance in the Kazakh society of his time? He knew that the Russian books had taken root within him and brought forth new fruits of purity and kindness. He was lonely, but his conscience was clear. It is not only an education I have acquired, he thought, but a new outlook too. The result is my attitude to Saltanat, an attitude which seems so ridiculous to the djiguits.

Aigerim could understand nothing of this, of course. A djiguit and a girl could not be mere friends, in her opinion. She understood things in the old way. How could he explain?

A person could only come to the viewpoint he had reached through experience, and as a result of adopting a fresh attitude towards people and life. That, indeed, was the crux of the matter. "We would understand each other at once if she had a broader view of things. As things stand, it is impossible," he thought, recollecting how many times he had tried to heal her imaginary wound, how many

times he had attempted to get her to think of Saltanat in a different light. Yet, every time he had met with silence as she had withdrawn into herself with a gloomy, resentful expression. They seemed to stand on opposite banks of a river with no ford between them; they were divided by a chasm. He was truly alone and sighed deeply.

Aigerim now turned, realizing that her remark had hurt him. Abai looked at her sadly and spoke to Yerbol.

"Ah, Yerbol," he said wistfully. "How stifled I feel! Give me your advice. Shall I go into the steppes for a change?"

As ever, Yerbol found a good solution.

Shakke and his hunting friends, he said, intended to ride over the Chinghis Range for salburin, the autumn hunt, and he advised Abai to join the party.

Two weeks later, Shakke came back to fetch the two friends. Baimagambet and several djiguits accompanied them to tend the horses. Sufficient stores of provisions were duly loaded and soon they were off to Kirghiz-Shaty. Bekpol, Shakke's young friends and the eagle hunter Turganbai were waiting for them in this deep, wooded valley having set up their camp near Mount Kshi-Auliye (Younger Holy Man). This mountain had got its name from the great hermit's cave at its summit. There were only two such caves in the Chinghis Range, and the larger, which lay a day's journey from Kirghiz-Shaty, was called Konir-Auliye (Humble Holy Man).

Three hunting huts of twigs, a trifle cramped, but warm thanks to their double layers of felt, stood on a bank overgrown with birches, poplars and bird-cherry trees. Behind them rose a huge overhanging rock. The morning hunting was good at this time of the year. There was no heavy snow, only the thinnest layer on the ground, and the tracks in the virgin snow were very helpful.

The hunters went to sleep at dusk and arose with the dawn. Abai soon felt at home in this life of theirs. Ten days of hunting with eagles and dogs went by and the

huts were piled with game and fox-skins. Shakke and Bekpol, who were excellent marksmen with their old-fashioned flintlocks, had especially distinguished themselves.

At the first streak of day, when Baimagambet and Masakpai were just about to kindle the fire and prepare the tea, Yerbol awakened Abai with a touch on the shoulder.

"Just look, Abai! What's he going to do? What sort of hunting is this?"

Abai looked up and saw Bekpol carefully aiming with his old flintlock which he had thrust through the crevice of the tunduk. Both jumped to their feet as Bekpol's long muzzle loader crashed in the silence and blue smoke filled the hut.

"There he goes! I've hit him somewhere about the shoulder," shouted Bekpol, rushing outside.

His friends grasped at the hems of his coat, with shouts of "What was it? What's the matter?"

But Bekpol gained his freedom in a leap, shouting as he ran.

"It's an arkhar! A buck as big as a yurta. He's rolling down the hill. Come with me!"

They could hear the shouts of Baimagambet and Masakpai.

"Oi-bai! It's coming this way! It'll crush the hut!"

Abai peered out through the low door of the hut. The black carcass tumbled over the rock above them and crashed to earth near the hut. The animal's death gasps could be heard. Abai and Yerbol quickly drew on their boots, donned their coats and rushed out. Bekpol was dealing the coup de grâce with his dagger. The hunters crowded around him, talking excitedly.

"What a buck! As big as an ox. How did it get here? Perhaps it was ill. You'll never find such a big dry-horned buck if you go out looking for it, yet this one came to call on Bekpol in person."

No one could understand how so cautious an animal

as an arkhar could have blundered upon them so blindly. Abai examined the carcass for a long time.

"What's the mystery? Perhaps he was blind or just very old," he speculated.

Bekpol, who had managed to finish off the arkhar and feel its horns and body, now laughed scornfully. He was too proud of his ability as a hunter to admit Abai's supposition.

"If he were blind, he would surely have rambled right into the hut to give you and Yerbol the chance to kill something for a change. You can knock my nose off if his ribs aren't finger deep in fat. You had better admit that you are just envious of Bekpol's gun, the sort of gun that can hit an arkhar any time of the day or night."

This event was regarded as an unusually good omen by all the huts; the animal had come to find its death amid the hunters.

"That's a good sign. It shows that the hunting will be good today. We'll get at least three herds of nine head apiece," said the hunters to one another.

"Fetch the horses and meanwhile make the tea," ordered Turganbai, the senior hunter, eagerly. Shakke was still busy with his eagle, feeling its muscles.

"Saddle the horses, we'll see what eagles can do," he repeated impatiently.

But Abai and Yerbol could not be induced to leave the dead arkhar. As members of the hunting party, they were obliged to obey the orders of Bekpol and Turganbai, who were more experienced, but they were always late and exasperated everyone by their tardiness.

"Just wait a while!" Yerbol said to Turganbai, looking at the buck. "Couldn't we first have a bit of kavardak?"*

But hunting has its own laws and it is the most experienced hunter who leads the rest. Turganbai's word was

* Kavardak—a Kazakh dish.—*Ed.*

law for all three of the huts. The chase easily aroused his temper and Yerbol's words irritated him—they seemed so lacking in respect for serious hunting.

"You're always dawdling somewhere," he muttered. "Have we come here to hunt or to stuff ourselves? It's easier to get an old nag on its feet than you two on your horses. Well, curl up then, and wait for the best bits of meat, while we climb up to Younger Holy Man Cave and hunt round in the rocks."

He placed his eagle on his wrist and went to his horse, which had already been saddled. Abai and Yerbol sighed with mock sorrow and returned to the hut to put on their hunting things.

The hunters ascended the gentle slope of Auliye as the sun, rising from behind the mountain pass, shed its fiery rays over the dazzling white of the hills. On one of the peaks, Turganbai unhooded his eagle. Shakke on a nearby peak did the same, while Smagul, Abai's younger brother, stood with his eagle on his wrist on a third peak.

Abai and Yerbol were with Turganbai as usual. His beater, this time, was agile Baimagambet who deftly kept his saddle. The bird on Turganbai's wrist was the famous Karasholak,* the envy of the hunters throughout the neighbourhood. The bird had been trained by Tulak, the well-known Siban eagle hunter, himself.

Just before he joined the hunt, Abai had made inquiries as to where he could obtain the best eagle. Turganbai had told him that Karashegir** was the best one, but that its owner, Zhabai, Bozhei's son, a keen hunter himself, had refused to sell the bird. Turganbai and Shakke had then found another bird. Tulak of the Siban had Karasholak, the eagle of eagles! Even if it cost the price of a kalim, the bird was well worth it. Abai had bought it for ten head of cattle and handed it over to Turganbai,

* Kara—black; sholak—short-tailed.—*Ed.*

** Shegir—grey-eyed.—*Ed.*

who had watched it moulting in the summer, kept it in his aul and trained it in the autumn. Finally he was sure that it was ready for hunting as never before.

Karasholak had justified his master's hopes, catching more than twenty foxes in ten days. He had often seized two foxes on the same day and on at least two occasions had laid his deadly talons on three foxes in a single day.

The bird glared about with bloodshot eyes and suddenly rose from Turganbai's wrist. The hunters had detected no game, but the bird had heard the "Kehu," the signal Baimagambet had given from the valley below. He had seen the fox, which must have been near, judging from the cry he uttered. The three hunters closely watched the progress of Karasholak's flight.

By its first flight, Turganbai could gauge the state of the bird as surely as a doctor can judge the state of his patient by the pulse. The rapid and nervous flapping of the wings made Turganbai laugh with satisfaction and exclaim: "My Zhanbaur* is in fine form today." He knew that the bird would overtake and kill the fox before he could reach it on horseback. From his boot, he drew a yellow horn shaksha, then took a pinch of snuff and walked leisurely towards the bird, humming his favourite song:

*Nothing escapes my true Zhanbaur,
His flight is steady, his blow is sure.
The sweat on my horse's sides never dries,
The blood on my game-bag, too, never dries,
When my Zhanbaur at his quarry flies.*

Turganbai was sure that Karasholak was a descendant of the legendary Zhanbaur and called him by that name.

But on that day the famous Zhanbaur-Karasholak flew worse than on other days so that Turganbai had no oc-

* Zhanbaur—a legendary hunting eagle.—Ed.

casion to repeat his customary words and reach for his snuff-box. Lashing his horse, he galloped in the direction in which the bird had disappeared.

"What has happened to him?" he said again and again.

Skirting the outcroppings of the Auliye Peak, he approached the precipice. He rose in his stirrups to watch the progress of the eagle whose flight was plainly disturbing. Abai and Yerbol dashed by him, thrilled with the chase. They had seen that eagle swoop upon its prey day by day and yet they were as excited by the scene as ever. Though their horses slipped and stumbled over the slippery rocks, they never checked their pace, hoping to see the final duel. But they had yet much to learn about this sort of hunting, for they were galloping in the wrong direction.

"Where are you riding to, you madmen?" barked Turganbai. "Look at them. They'll spoil the whole thing, the fools!"

And so they did. If they had not ridden upon the fox, the animal, darting up the slope, would have been obliged to take to the open. Frightened by the sound of horses' hoofs, it turned and dashed between Turganbai and the two erring riders, towards the peak. The berkut continued to circle overhead, waiting for the fox to reappear. Now, however, it had to soar up towards the peak to pounce upon its quarry amid the rocks.

But it was an old fox, white-bellied and wily; of the two evils—the winged enemy with eight talons and the man on horseback—he chose the latter. In spite of all his efforts, Turganbai could not drive the animal into the open.

Things then went from bad to worse. Instead of flying up to strike from on high, the eagle scudded over the earth slowly and heavily, almost touching the ground with his wings. He did not in the least resemble Zhanbaur now,

but looked like the commonest berkut in the world, old and flabby to boot.

The fox continued to lurk amid the rocks between the three hunters, waiting for the approach of the eagle, which could scarcely flap its wings with weariness. Suddenly, it shot forward, leaving its enemy far behind. Karasholak, apparently exhausted by the ascent, could go no further and alighted heavily on a rock.

Turganbai sprang from his horse, quickly squeezed a bit of snow into an oblong icicle and put it into the bird's beak, in order to make the eagle feel its hunger more acutely. He held the bird by the neck with his fingers to melt the snow. Then he mounted and rode on in silence. This was the first time that Karasholak had disappointed his teacher. Abai and Yerbol both realized that Turganbai was angry with them and followed him abashed.

When they came to a suitable hill, Turganbai unhooded the bird again and signed to Baimagambet below to begin beating along the stony ravine. Abai and Yerbol cautiously approached the eagle hunter from the rear, but were waved aside.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted. "You're always pushing ahead. Can't you keep still? Who's going to take the fox, you or the eagle? Stay where you are."

The two reined up and stood still like boys reprimanded by their teacher.

There was another short "Kehu" from below. Karasholak soared up, obviously aroused. His wing-beats were brief and powerful and the circles he described were far smaller and completed far more swiftly than before as he winged his way up. Then he folded his wings and dropped like a stone, head first, to the very foot of the hill beneath Turganbai.

The hunter said nothing, but Abai and Yerbol, though they had not seen the quarry, forgot their recent reprimand, lashed their horses and shot ahead.

"He's on to it, on to it! He's got it!" And down they dashed to the place where they thought the fox was. Abai's saddle crept on to the neck of his light bay, but he did not mind it in the least; he could see Karasholak clutching the white-bellied fox no farther than an arrow's flight away.

So loose was the saddle by that time, that Abai might have fallen at any moment. Sliding back to the rump of his horse, he continued to gallop to the spot nonetheless.

The red and black of the fox and eagle tumbled over the dazzling snow. Abai was fascinated, mechanically repeating, "He's got it, he's got it!" Karasholak had the fox on its side and was pressing it to the snow with his talons. The bird's wings heaving over the white belly of the fox somehow made him think of the black hair of a swimming girl, flowing over the rosy white of her body.

Joyous play of lithe nakedness!

The line sprang to his mind and vanished.

Turganbai fastened the game to his saddle and made for the hilly Kirghiz-Shaty, dark with thickets. No one dared to ask him for explanations during the hunting and they all followed him obediently.

As he approached the hill, the eagle hunter sent Baimagambet to the foot of the eminence and himself rode upwards. He refused to return to the huts without unhooding Karasholak once more. Baimagambet was waiting patiently below for the beginning of the chase. Turganbai reached the peak, unhooded the berkut and at last gave the sign. Only then did Baimagambet start off.

"That's the way to do your hunting," Turganbai admonished Abai and Yerbol. "If there's anyone I like to take with me, it is Baimagambet—may his wishes be fulfilled!"

The swift and cunning Baimagambet was moving slowly along the edge of the ravine, halting now and then

and rapping his saddle with the butt-end of his whip. The silence over the hill and the ravine was complete, undisturbed even by the slightest breeze. All nature seemed to be hushed in anticipation of Karasholak's new victory. Turganbai saw how Shakke had unhooded his eagle on the other hill and could just make out Smagul on the distant ridge beyond.

Baimagambet at last gave the familiar short "Kehu" and the berkut took to the air. Now he was again flying as in the morning with slow heavy strokes. The fox was running far below, skirting the very foot of the hill. The berkut soared over the peak, seemed to freeze in the air and then swooped down the slope.

But suddenly another berkut appeared on the right, flying from the neighbouring hill. It, too, seemed to be heading for the fox below. Abai and Yerbol could easily see that it was not a wild eagle by the telltale thong on its foot. Shakke and Smagul must have released their birds as well. The two friends exchanged glances, thinking of the same thing. The birds might fight.

The new eagle had started from a point nearer the prey and could have reached it sooner, but his flight was even lazier. Karasholak, on the other hand, flew faster at the sight of a rival, seeming to forget his exhaustion.

Karasholak was the first to pounce upon the fox, which was flattened against a rock. Rising into the air with its prey, the bird alighted with it before Baimagambet, who had been galloping furiously, fearful that the two birds might clash. Tumbling from his horse, he brandished his whip to keep the circling intruder away from Karasholak and the fox.

"That must be Karashegir," Turganbai exclaimed when he saw the other bird, and rushed down the slope.

Abai and Yerbol followed closely, lashing their horses to release an avalanche of small stones as they slipped

downwards. Neither they nor Baimagambet knew the habits of the hunting eagles when they had thought that the two must fight. Turganbai, however, was descending for quite another reason. By the flight of the bird he had realized that it had come into captivity when fully grown and for that reason alone would never attack a more fortunate rival. The eagle hunter had merely wanted to watch Karashegir's flight and landing.

Karashegir had not interfered with his rival or alighted in his vicinity. He continued to circle over the ravine as if trying to detect another fox and inviting the eagle hunter to watch his flight.

Turganbai was at first elated. Karasholak had taken the game from the famous Karashegir. His triumph was short-lived however. He soon noticed something unusual about the other eagle's flight which had soared high as swiftly as a free eagle. Besides showing excellent condition, this proved the skill of his trainer. It is rarely that a trained eagle can fly up and down with equal swiftness. Turganbai, too, noticed that Karashegir had gained the heights of another hill without a single stroke of his wings. Yes, indeed, the opinions of the eagle hunters were justified. He remembered what everybody said: "After Shor of the Zhalair tribe, an eagle hunter who lived in remote times, the best trainer of eagles is Kul of the Kerei tribe." It was Kul's sons who had caught Karashegir, and the training of the bird had taken ten moultings.

Baimagambet, Abai and Yerbol, meanwhile, took the fox from Karasholak's talons.

"Good for you, Sholak! You've got the better of the famous Karashegir," said Yerbol, stroking the bird perched on his wrist.

Turganbai paid no attention to them; he was still watching Karashegir, who flew low over the hunters for the last time and then darted back to his peak. He reached the

heights with easy and graceful strokes and alighted among the bare rocks.

"What does it matter if he didn't get the fox," remarked Turganbai taking his eyes from the bird at last. "Did you see how he alighted? Just like a falcon or a hawk."

He had not the heart to say outright, "His training is better than Karasholak's."

The hunters then rode towards the hill where Karashegir had perched and soon came upon the other party, consisting of five people. They were led by the portly, broad-faced Zhabai, Bozhei's son, who was wearing a lambskin cloak. Karashegir was on his wrist. The others were his younger brother Adil, Abilgazy, Zhirenshe and the beater. Without the preliminary of a greeting, Abilgazy showered Turganbai with questions.

"How did Karashegir fly over the pass? How did he go for the fox? Tell us the truth—could he have got the fox before your eagle?"

"What did you think of his flying after Karasholak got the fox?" interrupted Zhabai, losing some of the dignity imparted to him by his broad black beard, which made him seem older than Abai and Abilgazy who were really about the same age as himself. "Tell us honestly, because Abilgazy and I have been arguing about it. He says the bird has been poorly trained."

Zhirenshe, though a great lover of eagle hunting, seemed indifferent to the argument, but when the two beset Turganbai, he could not help winking and smiling broadly at Abai and Yerbol, his teeth flashing. "Just see how they've pounced upon him."

Turganbai told them that Karashegir had been nearer to the fox than Abai's berkut and could easily have overtaken it if he had not been flying so lazily. Nevertheless, he thought the bird's training excellent. The truth was that it had been difficult for him to compete with Karasholak, who in spite of his disadvantage caught the

fox and even flew across the ravine with it, bringing the prey to Baimagambet.

He could not help embellishing the story towards the end and this did not escape Abilgazy, who grinned and glanced at Abai significantly. The latter laughed heartily, pleased at his friend's sagacity. Now it was Zhabai's turn to boast.

"You should see the fox he caught just now. He just stunned the little devil."

"But where is the little devil?" Abilgazy burst forth.

"Didn't you see? Adil didn't get there on time," cried Zhabai pouncing on his younger brother. "Whose fault was it if not yours? I should have wiped that pout off your face with my fist. You couldn't have dismounted and caught it of course! No, you were too lazy to make another step when you saw that the place was overgrown with shengel. Karashegir, of course, got himself tangled up, and the fox got away—just because of you."

Zhabai was ready to blame anyone but Karashegir for the failure which had started the argument between himself and Abilgazy. When he heard Zhabai justifying the bird again, Abilgazy at once took up the cudgels.

"It's not Karashegir who's to blame, of course, but the shengel bushes and Adil. You don't want to admit that it was you who spoiled the bird in the first place. How many times have I told you that a berkut is not something to be yelled at like Abilgazy or Adil from morning till night. How is he to know that you belong to a high-born family and that Bozhei was your father. He needs special care. Do you think it was just an accident that Karasholak beat him to the game. No, he was too late, because he was flying clumsily, and here is Turganbai saying the same. To think that Karashegir was nearer the fox," he clicked his tongue and shook his head. "What a pass you've brought that poor bird to. Disgraceful! And at his first meeting with Karasholak too."

And Abilgazy laughed again.

"You're just saying any trash that comes to your head." Zhabai was outraged at such conduct from a kinsman! His resentment against the Irgizbai had never died. "If that berkut has really been spoiled, it's you who are to blame; you poke your nose into everything, don't you? I wish you would take your hut and move on!"

He had gone too far, but his outburst was greeted with laughter. Abai was now able to have a good look at Karashegir. He had never been at close quarters with the bird before, and he asked Zhabai to unhood him. As he looked at the eagle, he took out his new leather cigarette-case, lit a cigarette from a match proffered by Baimagambet and leisurely took several puffs.

"Now why did you give him such a long name when his flights are so short," he remarked casually, and asked how many foxes the bird had caught recently. When the beater told him that there had been more than a dozen, Abai smiled.

"Is that what you call hunting? We have three huts stuffed with fox-skins. When we find a fox, Karasholak is sure to get him in the open, and if he's in the bushes, our beater will drive him into the open."

Pleased to see that this had made Zhabai even angrier, he turned his horse and rode off.

Very much annoyed, Zhabai clicked his tongue and shook his head as he watched Abai go.

"What did he mean?" he said to Zhirenshe frowning. "He may be Kunanbai's son, but my father was none other than Bozhei. He may be Abai, but I am Zhabai and no worse than he. How dare he talk to me like that! And all on account of Karashegir."

He was working himself up into a rage. Zhirenshe neither approved nor disapproved; he never took such hunting quarrels seriously. Wasn't it all a game after all? Yet this time he was a little anxious. Riding on in

silence for a while, he suddenly smiled, prodded Abilgazy with the handle of his whip and motioned to him to fall behind.

Zhirenshe was known for his practical jokes. Clever and eloquent, he had come to be one of the most influential djiguits of the Kotibak. He was in fact known throughout the Chinghis Volost and among the neighbouring tribes as well, the Mamai, the Kerei and the Uak, whom he had visited in the company of Abai, who had done his best to win him the respect he himself enjoyed. But no matter how grave the circumstances, Zhirenshe could not desist from his tricks and pranks. His ingenuity seemed inexhaustible and he could play with his victims as long as a berkut with a fox.

Now he had thought up something new. If the thing were properly done, Abai and Zhabai, who looked like a sitting target in the circumstances, would look pretty silly. His face was wreathed in smiles as he leaned back in his saddle.

"I don't blame Zhabai for being angry," he confided to Abilgazy. "Abai was really a bit too high and mighty. We ought to teach him a lesson. I can't do it alone, being no more of an eagle hunter than you a mullah. I can't fool Abai; he's not as simple as Zhabai but still, if you help me, we'll play such a trick on him that he'll never brag again about his Karasholak."

Abilgazy hesitated. He was fond of his old friend Abai.

"Do you think we should?" he asked dubiously. "He may be offended, you know. And then, I wouldn't like him to know that I had anything to do with it."

But Zhirenshe only laughed.

"It's not a girl, but a bird we're talking about. And then remember that Abai is not Zhabai who gets excited over jokes because he's too stupid to understand them. And there's nothing to feel offended about anyway. It will

just be a little practical joke to break him from boasting."

"Oi-bai, do you think you can fool Turganbai?" Abilgazy scoffed. "He knows every bird, inside and out, damn his eyes. You won't get past him."

But Zhirenshe had thought things over well.

"He knows the birds, of course; but he's awfully stubborn and slow-witted. You just keep an eye on the berkut, see how he is and tell me about it. Leave the rest to me. I bet I'll rope them both like three-year-olds in a noose."

Zhirenshe then explained his scheme.

Abai and his companions had meanwhile returned to Kirghiz-Shaty. Yerbol had hinted that it was high time to return to the huts for a dish of arkhar kavardak at last, but Turganbai would not hear of it.

"I'm not satisfied with Karasholak's showing yet. I think I'll unhood him again. If we go to the huts, it will be too late. We had better go to Kirghiz-Shaty."

Having said this, he sent Baimagambet back to the gully, but no more game was to be had. It was rapidly growing darker. Twice the bird was unhooded, but it darted aimlessly from side to side on both occasions, unwilling and lazy. One of the foxes took to a burrow, while the other hid in a crevice amid the rocks.

The hunters could not understand what was wrong. "Perhaps the bird hasn't been looked after properly," they thought. "Or he has just got tired. He didn't last to catch a third fox." All four examined Karasholak in turn. The berkut ruffled up his feathers and gave them a wary glance. His name, Black Short Tail, fitted him well just now; with his head drawn in, he seemed to be wider than he was long—something like the chock of wood used for driving in poles.

When Abai got back, he found Zhirenshe and Abilgazy waiting for him in the hut. They explained that they had quarrelled with Zhabai and had decided to hunt here.

The moment Karasholak was brought in, Zhirenshe nudged Abilgazy stealthily; the latter placed the berkut on his wrist, stroked him, slyly feeling his muscles, and asked questions about his training. To spare Turganbai's feelings, Abilgazy made no allusion to the failures of the day, though he had heard about them from Abai.

The fire was soon going in the warm and cosy hut, and Abai handsomely treated the guests to a proprietary brand of tea.* Once or twice, he invited Abilgazy to have another look at the berkut and unhesitatingly handed him the bird. Instead of saying what Abai obviously wanted him to say, he merely praised the bird, clicking his tongue with affected delight.

"What's that you're chattering about pedigree?" Abai burst out at last. "Perhaps you could explain what was the matter with him today? What should be done, do you think? Have we been feeding him wrongly?"

But Abilgazy would not commit himself.

"How would I know? Surely Turgaken here knows more."

But Turganbai was annoyed with Abai for having asked Abilgazy's advice. He tore a leg from the dead fox and began to prepare food for the bird, while Abilgazy watched closely.

Turganbai was going to feed the bird with the fresh, bloody meat, the usual thing for exhausted berkuts, which indicated that he thought the bird was losing weight. So it had seemed to Abilgazy too, but his sensitive fingers had found under the wings a thin layer of fat which Turganbai, who could easily have mistaken it for the layer in which the feathers ended, had not noticed.

Now Abilgazy knew why Karasholak had failed with the third and fourth foxes; the eagle was not hungry enough.

* As distinct from the loose tea packed and sold by the local merchants.—*Ed.*

Turganbai was making a mistake to give him fresh meat with the blood undrained; this could only make the bird worse and might even spoil it. Abilgazy was on the point of saying so when Zhirenshe, eager to carry his scheme through, stealthily pinched his friend's leg.

"I'd like to have a look at him too," he said, reaching for the berkut. Stroking the bird casually, he declared firmly, "It's a good bird, but you don't know how to take care of him."

Turganbai bridled at once, but said nothing and again busied himself with the eagle's food.

"I see you suffer from a swelled head," Abai said, interceding for the eagle hunter. "'Zhirenshe will look, Zhirenshe will know,' everybody says and so you've decided you know more than anyone about birds. What you know, even I know, let alone Turganbai. You'd better sit still and drink your tea."

"How can I know so much? I don't read Russian books," parried Zhirenshe. "I imagine those books have it all written down in black and white: 'Abai ought to do this or that to make the berkut better.' I wish I knew the writer of that book. Is it that Poshkin or Tulstoi you're always talking about. Well I suppose Abilgazy and I have said enough. We'll go out to see that our horses are put to grazing."

When the two friends went outside, Zhirenshe asked what was wrong with the eagle. When they returned, the eagle hunter was regarding the fox's leg dubiously, while Abai was asking him if he was doing the right thing to feed the bird with it and what such feeding was called.

"Oitamak,"* Turganbai grunted.

By this he had perhaps meant that it was a matter which required thought, or had merely said it to rid him-

* Oitamak—literally—"thought-food."—*Ed.*

self of his questioner. Abai who had never heard of such a name for food before persisted with his questions. This gave Zhirenshe the chance to whisper to Abilgazy, "Do you think he'll fly well if he eats it?"

"He'll probably catch the fox, but let it go," the other answered.

Zhirenshe stretched himself leisurely on the place of honour, put a pillow under his head, stroked his dense reddish beard and looked at Turganbai who was still undecided.

"Let him have the oitamak," Zhirenshe said at last. "But mark my words he'll catch the fox tomorrow, and won't be able to keep it." With which he closed his eyes and pretended to doze before the evening meal, continuing to watch Turganbai from under his half-lowered lids.

The hunter would probably not have given the meat to the eagle and had been about to consult Abilgazy, whose opinion he valued highly. But Zhirenshe's smug prophecy so incensed him that he gave the whole of the leg to the eagle, which stuffed itself so that its crop grew swollen. Zhirenshe drew a blanket over his head to conceal his laughter and pinched Abilgazy who lay at his side. The scheme had been intended to play on Turganbai's irascibility. Zhirenshe had violated the hunters' code on purpose, trying to annoy and confuse the eagle hunter as best he could; no hunter worthy of the name would have dared to tell the man who had been training a bird daily, "Don't feed him that way or you'll spoil him!"

Zhirenshe and Abilgazy went hunting with the rest the next morning. As it happened, there was no game until evening, when one of Zhirenshe's djiguits frightened a fox into the open from the underbrush on the slope. Zhirenshe kept his own bird hooded to give Karasholak a better chance. The eagle sped from Turganbai's wrist and overtook the fox in an instant.

"Just see him fly," Abai teased Zhirenshe. "You're not much of a prophet, are you?"

"That remains to be seen. Don't boast until you have that fox by your saddle."

The fox was near some willows when Karasholak pinned it to the ground.

"He's got it! He's pinned it down!" Abai and Yerbol exulted, galloping forward, followed by Zhirenshe and Turganbai.

Wriggling furiously, the fox drew the eagle towards the brush. When the riders were near, Karasholak unhooked his talons, unable to maintain his hold. His prey promptly broke away, limped behind a bush and darted for the willows.

Abai and Yerbol slapped their thighs with disappointment and reined in their horses. Zhirenshe rocked in his saddle, trying to stifle his laughter. Turganbai could not bring himself to blame either the bird or himself and instead complained about the bushes.

"Zhanbaur's blood runs in Karasholak's veins," he insisted. "No one knew more about birds of this kind than Uali-tyureh, who used to say, 'Even Zhanbaur cannot strike a fox in the bushes.'"

It was hard to say whether his own arguments had set his mind at rest.

The hunting was over; there were no more foxes, so the party returned to the huts, Zhirenshe teasing Abai all the way and telling him that he did not know the habits of his own bird.

Abilgazy again examined the layer of fat he had discovered under Karasholak's wings, which was now more pronounced. The two conspirators wondered whether or not the eagle hunter would change the food he was giving the bird.

No. Turganbai was going to continue feeding the eagle as before for two or three days. If the bird grew fatter,

he would be sure to notice this within that time and could then change its feeding accordingly. The biggest danger when birds were putting on fat was not to notice this immediately—a lapse of seven to ten days might spoil the bird for good. In view of this, in his anxiety to check whether the food he was giving the bird was really making it fatter, Turganbai continued to feed it with oitamak.

Zhirenshe had consulted Abilgazy again and when Turganbai finished feeding the eagle he at once observed in an even more knowing tone, "Karasholak will not catch a single fox tomorrow. He'll just fly over him."

Even Abai grew angry this time.

"Gibberish! Where did you get that from? The devils? Are you the new baksy* in Kirghiz-Shaty? Karasholak will show what he's worth tomorrow."

Zhirenshe turned his back on the others and pulled up his lambskin.

"I don't mind telling you that your eagle will not take a single fox for a week," was his parting shot.

Next morning the impatient hunters set out earlier than usual, but the game was startled into the open only towards evening. Zhirenshe's prophecy proved literally true. Karasholak overtook the fox, but instead of swooping down upon it, alighted on a nearby rock.

Zhirenshe had done what he had set out to do, and Abai, Yerbol and Turganbai did not know what to make of it. The former summoned his beater and galloped off to his hunting camp, calling Abilgazy to come with him. The djiguit, however, conscience-stricken, had decided to stay.

"You've wronged Karasholak," he said to Turganbai when Zhirenshe was out of sight. "Let me have that bird for three days and I'll put him in good shape. Now don't be stubborn!"

* Baksy—shaman, witch-doctor.—*Ed.*

Abai could also see Turganbai's mistake now.

"Better do as he says," he advised. "We're both to blame. We've been overconfident."

Abai spent three or four days in the hut while Karasholak was being put in shape again. He now realized that this had been a prank of Zhirenshe to punish him for his boasting and was not angry, but merely a little ashamed.

He had brought an entire korzhun of books with him from the aul and now he ordered the hut to be well heated and kavardak to be prepared from the game. Then he spent his time reading.

Soon Turganbai and Abilgazy announced that Karasholak was in excellent condition and that the hunting could be resumed. They were not very lucky however, running down only two foxes in four days, though they employed two beaters.

The hunters put their heads together and finally advised Abai that it would be better to move to Mount Mashan, as there were no more foxes to be found here. It was hard going through those roadless hills, but the winter had only just set in, and the snow was not yet deep. Bekpol also decided to join them. He was an arkhar and deer hunter, but there were none left in the neighbourhood. He was sure that the game had gone to Mashan for the winter.

Mashan was not in the Chinghis Volost. A small section of the Tobikty lived on these lands, which bordered on those of the Karakesek tribe. Abai had never been to these parts before and the long journey past the winter places of strangers did not appeal to him at all. If there were no more game, he thought, it would be better to turn for home. He had returned to his reading, moreover; and his ardour for the chase had cooled. But he knew that his companions, all inveterate hunters, would say that he was leaving them because he was lazy and faint-hearted, and for this reason he forced himself to

face the journey in order to finish the hunting in Mashan. From there he would cross the Chinghis and emerge near his own winter places in Zhidebai.

It was impossible to reach Mashan in a day's ride and the party decided to spend the night at the stays of the Orazbai, then located in Karasu Esbolata among the nearest spurs of the Bugaly. The camp of Abilgazy and Zhirenshe would be pitched there too. Abilgazy suggested that the entire party rise at dawn and make for Mashan through the ravines of the Bugaly. If all went well, they would reach their destination before dark.

This suggestion was approved, and Abilgazy at once made for his hut to prepare for the journey.

The three huts were dismantled at dawn. The belongings of the party were to be sent on with Turganbai, Smagul and the other hunters to Abilgazy's camp, while Abai set off by a short cut to Karasu, accompanied by Yerbol, Shakke and Baimagambet.

By noon, the four friends were descending to Botakan Valley where there was still not much snow. This region was familiar to them, since Abai's kinsmen had been coming here every summer. The strong, well-fed and well-shod horses were ambling along at a bulan-kuiruk pace.* The surface of the snow had not yet been hardened by the cold and the winds. The snow was soft, but did not impede the animal too much, though it reached to their fetlocks. To save the strength of their mounts, however, the riders advanced in single file, with Shakke in the lead; he was a renowned rider in spite of his youth and had made hunting trips to these parts on at least two occasions before.

The morning was hazy and grey and though the mists finally parted over the hills there was no sun—camel-

* Literally: the wagging of a horse's tail—the name of one of the paces.—*Ed.*

humped clouds scudded across a leaden sky. The cold was moderate and did not nip their faces.

Abai, who had appointed his nephew to guide the party, was sunk in thought, scarcely noticing where they were going. It was here he had spent his childhood. Memories arose on all sides, joyous and bitter, happy and sad.

With affection he recollected his dead grandmother, Zereh, and his mother Ulzhan. He at once recognized the valley where the white yurta had stood so many years ago. Was it not here, in these places that were now so desolate, that his kinsmen had first acknowledged him as an adult. He could remember the morning when Yerbol and he had returned from the memorial feast of Bozhei and had tumbled into bed utterly exhausted by so many sleepless nights. When he had woken up, his mothers had for the first time presented him with the dish bearing the head of a sheep, a mark of special respect. They had wished him all that was well and had said that he was henceforth to be regarded as a grown man.

To Abai it seemed that he could almost feel the small wrinkled hand of his grandmother in his own. How often those fingers had stroked his head. His eyes welled with tears and he whispered the mourning text of the Koran, passing his palms over his face.

Those who were devout said the memorial prayers over the tombs of their departed or in memory of them on the prescribed days. Abai, however, said the prayer for his grandmother whenever he thought of her or missed her. He looked back and regarded Karashoky and the Kazbala Range for a long time. "I must never forget how they look in the winter," he thought.

His train of memories gave rise to another:

In the low clouds overhead, he suddenly caught a brief vision of Togzhan. There was the hill where Yerbol had

brought him such glad tidings. He recollected the journey through the night and the return; his meeting with Togzhan after a long parting; their embraces in the thickets of Zhanibek, bathed in the moonlight. The whispering breath of the past touched his heart. He forgot where he was and knew not whither they were going. Shutting his eyes, he tried to read the book of his unfulfilled dreams, written with his heart's blood. He was oblivious to time and his surroundings.

He was suddenly brought back to reality with a start. The horse beneath him stood immobile like the others around him. The driving snow had all but blotted out the sky and earth and swept over the travellers who had their backs to it. Abai was astonished by this abrupt change.

"It's a ground blizzard, isn't it?" he said to Shakke.

"It's hard to say. It's coming down from above and tossing from below—a regular hurricanel!"

"The main thing is not to lose our way. Are you sure we're going the right way?"

Shakke was not so sure. He had stopped the party to consult the others.

"I didn't notice from which side the wind was blowing," he admitted, crest-fallen. "We know this district so well; we used to come here every summer and I was dreaming and forgot. It seems to me that the wind is coming direct from Karasu Esbolata."

The young man looked at Abai hopefully, confident that the older companion would surely know. Instead came the surprising question:

"And when did the wind come up? I've only just noticed it." He looked like a man just awakened from deep sleep.

Baimagambet, red from the frost, laughed heartily. He seemed to be the only one of the four who knew which

direction they should take by the course of the wind, the only aid in a blizzard.

"We've got to go against the wind, just letting it press a little harder to the right," he assured them. But Shakke could not agree.

"Why? We ought to face it squarely, I think."

An argument ensued, until Shakke turned to the eldest of his companions.

"We'll lose our way altogether if we keep standing about like this. You lead the way or let me do it. I'm sure we should push straight against the wind. Make up your minds!"

Abai felt convinced that Shakke knew better than the others, including himself, and no longer hesitated.

"You're sharper and quicker than any of us, so lead on!"

"Let's go then! Follow closely and wrap yourselves well. See that your timaks are pulled down properly; the wind may get even worse."

Shakke lashed his horse against the wind. The animal reared and plunged ahead.

Abai followed, pulling his timak over his eyes and drawing the folds of his cloak closer round him. The rump of Shakke's horse in front of him was as broad as an overturned kumys bowl. With his eye upon the leader, Abai kept his horse close behind. As the four riders advanced into the seething ocean of white, the blizzard folded them completely in its icy embrace.

For a long time Shakke led the way. The frost grew more bitter, and it was no longer powdery snow that swept over them, but stinging flakes as hard as hail. To move on in the teeth of that wind grew more and more difficult.

Shakke's grey kept tossing his head to one side whenever the reins were slackened, hoping that the horses which followed might overtake him. The wind ripped at his forelock as though tearing out hair after hair. Shakke

had to use his whip again and again, something he had always been reluctant to do.

Abai noticed that his bay seemed anxious to cling as closely behind Shakke's horse as it could, the clever animal sensing that this was its best protection against the wind. This did not shield Abai, however. His moustache, beard and even eyelashes were white with frost. Leaning forward was of little avail against that wind, which easily pierced his timak and seared his temples. Whenever he tried to dodge the gusts, his collar filled with snow.

Afraid that his cheeks might get frozen, Abai rubbed them with his hands, which promptly grew so numb that he could scarcely hold the reins and the whip. Squirming in his saddle to the left and to the right and pressing forward over the neck of his horse, he exhausted himself completely. He had been determined to show no signs of weakness, but now he could not help shouting to Shakke to stop.

The moment they halted, the horses huddled together with their heads lowered and their rumps to the wind. The riders dismounted and hid on the lee side of their animals.

"That's what I call a blizzard," shouted Yerbol.

"Let's hope it passes soon or things will be bad for us," answered Abai. "It's impossible even to look against the wind."

All four drew forth handkerchiefs which they tied securely around their heads under their timaks.

"It'll die down soon, don't worry." Baimagambet was optimistic as always.

Weather-hardened Shakke, though purple with frost, seemed fitter than the others.

"If we've mistaken the direction of the wind, we've lost our way for certain and nothing will help us. If the direction is right, we ought to reach Karasu Esbolata by evening. We should keep going, whatever we do. The frost won't be any easier to bear if we hang back. We've got

to stick it out, Abai-aga," he concluded, tightening the saddle girths of his horse and mounting. The others followed his example.

The travellers fought their way on, trying to keep their animals going at a canter. The wind lashed again and again, deafening them with its howling and as voraciously persistent as a pack of wolves crying for shelter or for blood. "Were these his mother steppes?" Abai wondered. They were as heartless as a stepmother. This zhailyau, once fresh and green, the golden cradle of his life, now seemed an icy tomb.

There was no earth, no sky, no hills, no valleys—only the dense wall of snow, the howling wind and the four horsemen. The world had grown so small that it could be held in one hand. This was difficult to express in Kazakh and he recalled two words he had found in the Russian books: "chaos" was the one and "elements" was the other. He remembered other books which had said that the world had been created out of whirl of elements. It was as if seething waters were piling monstrous waves upon waves, hurling them into an insatiable abyss. And to those who were struggling in such waves, the world had seemed no more than a handful.

The wind dropped with breath-taking suddenness. "It's over at last," Abai thought hopefully. "It seems that I am to be spared."

Shakke reined in his horse and the others halted behind him.

"It's calm," he exulted. "The weather is on our side now. But where are we?"

The snow started again, this time in gentle fluffy flakes which as before hid everything from sight. The riders went on at a walking pace in order to rest their horses and talk things over. The short winter day was drawing to a close. How were they to get their bearings?

They all stared about hopefully and now and then

caught sight of what looked like some winter places. Weren't those cattle grazing in the distance?

"What's that—the bit of black over there. There's something behind us too," they said; but again and again found that it was the gloom and the snow curtain that were playing tricks with them. The dark winter place turned out to be a boulder protruding from the snow and the black dots that they had taken for grazing cattle, the tops of willows or tobilga.

Their hopes fell again; it was still impossible to say where they were. Baimagambet was now ready to swear that Shakke had led them wrong—at the pace they had been going, they should have reached Karasu Esbolata long before.

"This doesn't look like Karasu at all," he repeated whenever they passed a ravine, a valley or crossed a riverbed. "We should be coming to a mountain, a rocky hill or gently sloping ridge, and not to this low plain with fields cut by rivers and springs. We're far out of our way; mark my word!"

The little party moved on, though in doubt. The day was over and it was quite dark. Stopping at the bank of a stream, they dismounted to let the horses nose for fodder under the snow. Abai sank down to rest. Like the others, Yerbol had nothing very hopeful to say, but his good spirits were stronger than fatigue and anxiety.

"Let's stop racking our brains," he joked. "If this were a nice broad highway, we could find our way, I am sure. The trick is to find a few miserable huts, small as a few balls of wool. We've got to do this in bad weather too. We had better stop bothering Shakke!"

No sooner had they mounted than the wind came up again. The wrath of the blizzard broke out anew. The bitter frost once more drove them frantic and now they were hungry too. They hadn't eaten since the morning, and it seemed to everyone that the journey would never end.

"I can't feel my feet," Abai shouted to the man behind. "How about you, Baimagambet?" The other seemed in a similar plight.

"Shall we stop for a while and have a doze?"

The party halted to confer again—their world once more shrank to a small circle of horses as tired as their riders.

Shakke suggested that they look for a boulder to shelter them from the wind.

"There's no shelter here," Yerbol waved his hand at the idea. "Let's trust in God and take cover behind our horses."

They at once lay down in the snow, huddling together.

The cold wind whistled about their ears as if punishing them for their evasion. Abai's head rested on Yerbol's knees. It seemed to him that he was being swallowed by the snowy whirlwind, together with the horses, and that the whole of the earth was tumbling into nothingness. His head was spinning; he felt sick, and there was an insistent ringing in his ears. He lost grip of reality like one in a delirium and his thoughts raced on in confusion. At last he fell into a deep, death-like slumber.

The four of them had no idea how long they had slept. Yerbol was the first to awaken and he immediately aroused the others:

"Get up, djiguits! We shouldn't be sleeping. It will be the end of us!"

They stumbled to their feet, shaking off the snow that had drifted over them. The night was pitch-dark.

"I don't remember ever being so numb," Abai groaned.

He began to stride quickly to and fro, stamping his feet. Caked with the snow, the horses looked like woolly sheep. In an effort to get warm again, the others swept the snow from the animals with their whips.

"It's clear that we're lost," Yerbol concluded. "Let's keep going—and at a gallop, to keep warm."

They mounted with difficulty and went on. Soon the fast riding set their blood racing again. For hours they pressed ahead. Eventually the sun slowly rose, its rays hardly piercing the veil of snow. The travellers said nothing, but each in his heart of hearts hoped that with the coming of dawn the storm would abate. Shakke now set the pace at a trot to spare the horses.

But by midday on the second day of their ordeal the sun was still barely able to penetrate the white pall.

The horsemen were moving through strange ravines, over hills and hummocks, halting every hour to let the horses graze and rest, with the same thought in the mind of each: when would it all be over? Finally it was decided to change direction and ride as Baimagambet had first advised—moving against the wind at a slight angle.

Abai knew he was ill. Now and then he felt warmer, but the chill within would not leave him. When they halted to rest by evening, he dismounted with difficulty, and collapsed beside a boulder.

He wondered if he would ever rise again and the earth drew him like a magnet. Was this his last hour? he mused. How strange that he was so calm. Some inner voice seemed to say, "Let this be the end and the sooner the better." The memories of which he had been robbed by the blizzard now returned to him. Once more he could see his grandmother, once more he saw Togzhan. She stood out in his memory bright and shining, the one and only Togzhan, as lovely as the full moon. The two beloved faces grew more and more distinct. Was this to be his final parting with them?

A voice broke in upon his reveries. He started, but then thought that it too was a part of his dream. His friends lay huddled together, sleeping at his side. But then he heard the voice again, and was convinced that it was no illusion. He rose to his feet with a surge of unexpected strength and shouted three times as loudly as he could.

The exhausted horses raised their heads, pricking up their ears. Yerbol and the other two young men sprang to their feet in alarm.

"What's the matter?" Yerbol asked Abai, fearing for his friend's sanity.

"Shout! I heard a voice somewhere."

The four shouted together and listened. They thought something moved in the gloom on the windward side, and they all shouted again. Above the howling of the wind they managed to distinguish a feeble answering cry. A tall rider, still shouting, suddenly emerged from the chaos. Both man and horse were white with snow. Behind them was a spare horse.

"Where the devil are you?" he shouted cheerfully. Abai was the first to recognize the voice.

"Abilgazy, good friend, may Allah fulfil all your wishes! What are you doing here?"

Abilgazy dismounted into Abai's arms.

"What am I doing here? Looking for you, of course! May merciful Allah always send us such luck! What were the chances of finding you in such weather? But I just could not sit still. You've had a hard time, the four of you! You must be frozen stiff. And how are the horses? Can they go on? Into your saddles, we'll find the huts before dark!"

Encouraged by his cheerful voice, the four of them at once mounted their horses and set off behind him.

It turned out that they had reached the slopes of Mashan. Yerbol rode ahead at the side of Abilgazy, while Abai followed closely, on his bay. Was he ill or not? He ached all over and at times felt that he was standing still while the rocks and the hills were floating by. He was utterly befuddled, but in rare moments of clarity tried to get his bearings in this maze of sensations. "Am I asleep," he wondered, "or am I seriously ill?" Snatches of conversation sometimes penetrated his consciousness.

"How did you manage to find us?" Yerbol was asking Abilgazy. "Was it a sign from on high? How could a mortal being come out to look for anyone in such a blizzard?"

"I don't know what to tell you. I can't understand it myself. I'm not like a man, but like a wolf of this valley today."

"But even a wolf will keep out of a blizzard, you know, pouncing only upon whatever happens to pass him."

"It must have been my heart that showed me the way. I was ready to do anything to make up for our silly joke; Abai is probably the only man of the Tobikty I'd be sorry to hurt. Well, I saw you going towards Botakan in the morning and when the storm began, I realized that you were sure to lose your way. We reached Karasu just in time and called to you all night to help you to find us. This morning our people went to Mashan, and here am I looking for you all day long. . . ."

"But where did you expect to find us?"

"I just wandered at random. . . . I was hoping that you'd finally find the right way after sticking to the wrong direction long enough. You had to turn up near the slopes of the Bugaly or Mashan sooner or later, and so I kept moving between the two hills all day. I found your tracks before dark, but lost them again in the blizzard. I just picked a likely direction and set off yelling. And I didn't have to ride for long either—not as long as it takes for a tea-kettle to boil."

"But you might have lost your way too. No, Abilgazy, you're no ordinary man, but a baksy at the very least."

Abilgazy did not laugh at this. He faithfully believed in telling fortunes with beans and assured everyone that he had himself inherited this gift from his grandfather. But he was sure that this had nothing to do with his ability to find his way about in the steppes. Even in the worst of the rainy days he could accurately guide a party to any point they desired, be it a lone bush of tobilga or

the brush of karagach. In the winter he could find his way across the steppes as straight as an arrow.

"I am not a baksy," he explained to Yerbol. "But I never lose my way. Blind old Tokpai has passed on his skill to me. As you know, he always walks alone between the auls and across the mountain passes in all weather. 'How do you manage to walk alone, Tokau?' I kept asking him. 'You find your way by the road and I by the wind,' he told me. And aren't we like blind Tokpai in the dark or in heavy weather? One should first forget that one has eyes and then feel for the wind. The main thing, of course, is to have a head on one's shoulders. That's all there is to my magic." He laughed and reined in his horse to give the others a chance to catch up.

"This is what I say, djiguits. You're frozen. We won't find the huts anyway and had better go to the winter places of the Zhuantayak and Motish in the Mashan gorge. We're sure to come upon one of them soon and find a comfortable if not very rich place to stay. I've also heard it said that the Motish now have several well-to-do auls and if we're lucky we'll run into one of them. Whatever happens, you'll be warm before very long."

"Lead on," he was told by the riders, who were numb with cold. "May your words be fulfilled! Find any hut you like."

They had been riding along the edge of a gully, overgrown with underbrush, for a long time when they heard the barking of dogs.

"Allah be praised. We're saved! Ak-sarbas, O Allah, Ak-sarbas!"* everybody repeated, overjoyed.

The travellers reached the edge of a wood, white with snow and fringed with birch saplings. The baying of the dogs reverberated through the hills. Abilgazy darted

* Ak-sarbas—a white ram. It was slaughtered as a sacrifice after the undertaking proved successful.—*Ed.*

ahead of the others and halted at a bend in the path. Reaching his side in an instant, Abai and Yerbol at once discerned a reddish glimmer from a nearby aul.

"There's an aul there, and people, and they're not asleep!" Yerbol shouted to Shakke and Baimagambet, who were just coming up.

"See how many windows! It must be a big place, a wealthy aul! We're lucky, djiguits!" Abilgazy again spurred his horse, quickly reached the first house, sprang from his saddle and began to pummel the door.

Abai was not even aware that he dismounted, and he absently threw his reins to Baimagambet. His body refused to obey him; he could not put one foot before the other and Shakke had to take him by the arm. Everything swam before his eyes: the horses, the winter place and the white steppes. The humming in his ears prevented him from hearing what was said by his friends and the two who had come out to meet them, except for some names that seemed vaguely familiar—"Motish... Dogal... Naiman... Akkozy."

Leaning on the arms of his friends, Abai followed the two djiguits into a spacious but dark passage. A door opened somewhere and a shaft of reddish light stabbed the dark.

"Take him to the otau," a woman's voice said. "They're asleep in the Great Yurta and so we've been told to take him there."

Still guided by Shakke and Baimagambet, Abai entered a large room. Blessed warmth, the pungent odour of cooking meat and sheep kizyak still smoldering on the hearth pervaded their senses. One of the djiguits opened the door leading to the next room, which was equally large and comfortably furnished with bright koshmas and striped rugs. After Yerbol and Abilgazy had entered the room and greeted the hostess, who stood by a bed of carved bone, Abai too came in, helped by Shakke, his eyes wandering

absently over the fringed curtain half concealing the bed built high with rugs and cushions. His gaze finally rested upon the hostess.

"O Allah!" His knees seemed to give way.

The young woman, who was wearing a white dress and black beshmet, the usual dress of young daughters-in-law, rushed to Abai, her sholpy tinkling.

"Can it be Abai!" she cried. "So Allah has let me see you again!"

Abai stood there very pale, listening to the last rush of her sholpy, with eyes closed from weariness. He leant against the door-jamb, his legs shaking. He wanted to embrace her, but his arms would not obey him. He could only look caressingly at her face, unable to say anything, and then the strength went out of him and he slipped to the floor.

Yerbol and Abilgazy lifted him into a sitting position, his back to the wall. Shakke and Baimagambet unfastened his belt and removed his cloak.

"I knew he was ill," Shakke said anxiously.

"Ill?" wailed the hostess.

She quickly seized the cushions from the bed and put them behind the sick man's back; then she unfastened his collar, seated herself at his side, placed one braceleted hand over his forehead and rubbed his chest with the other. Large hot tears streamed from beneath Abai's closed lids. He was murmuring—not words but whispers from his soul.

"Togzhan . . . I want nothing more. Let my breath cease at your side."

It was only now that Yerbol recognized his kinswoman.

"Togzhan, you! Light of my eyes! I can hardly believe it. Don't you remember me, Yerbol?" His voice shook.

Togzhan embraced Yerbol and wept, her eyes still on Abai.

The two djiguits who had accompanied them into the room and had watched the scene in bewilderment were reassured when they saw that Togzhan had welcomed Yerbol so heartily, and decided that the newcomers must be near kinsmen of the kelin. The djiguits were not kinsmen of Togzhan's husband; one was a mullah and the other a distant kinsman of the aul usually entrusted with the reception of guests.

"So you are Togzhan's kinsmen," they said to Shakke throwing up their hands in astonishment. "We've been wondering what made you travel in such weather."

"How she must have longed for her kinsmen and home aul. Yes, the golden cradle is never forgotten!"

Abai and Togzhan devoured each other with their eyes, but could say nothing in the presence of the others. Now an old cook, now another young kelin came in to get orders from Togzhan. Two djiguits brought in a round folding table, set it up in the middle of the room and lit a lamp.

Abai was still reclining on the high cushions. Now that he was no longer wearing his hat his broad forehead seemed extraordinarily pale above his weather-beaten features and inflamed eyes. His breathing was laboured, he was feverish, chilled all over. And yet he watched her every movement.

She was still more beautiful than he could remember. Every feature had reached perfection. The slightly upturned tip of her small straight nose lent her a carefree expression, which was belied by the shining eyes under her arched brows; eyes which seemed more thoughtful and earnest than of old. And, whether it was the sign of lost hope or whether she had acquired the habit of concealing her emotions, her face, though more soulful, had lost the play of expressions which had so delighted him once.

The lively talk going on around them was lost on Abai and Togzhan, who heard nothing and understood nothing.

Yerbol, Shakke and Baimagambet were out-talking one another, telling the mullah of their two days' ordeal. They explained how they had come to the neighbourhood and impressed their hosts with the story of how they had been found by Abilgazy. Tea was brought in, and Togzhan set a piala in front of each of them, beginning with Abai.

Abai sat up with some difficulty, but overcome with dizziness he leaned back again. His second attempt was more successful and he leaned forward over the table, his head propped on his hands. Togzhan's words came to him as from a great distance. "Please, do have some tea." He compelled himself to take a few sips, but could not tell whether it was hot or cold. To him it tasted like rusty metal, and he realized that he was definitely ill. Returning the piala, he pressed his hands to his temples. Togzhan became more and more anxious.

"Your face is hot and your eyes are watery," said Yerbol, "and in general you're fit for nothing. It looks as though you've got a nice cold. Wrap yourself round more warmly, put on your hat, have some more hot tea and go to bed."

Togzhan rose, helped Abai with his hat and cloak and gave him another piala of tea, to which she had added a spoonful of butter and some sugar. Abai swallowed the mixture with difficulty.

"I really don't know what is happening to me. My head is splitting and my bones ache. I think I'm feverish," he said, squeezing his head.

"Oh, Allah, why punish me so?" he groaned as if anxious to express his thoughts before losing consciousness. "To be ill at such an hour!"

His grief rent his heart more than any illness could have done, and this Togzhan understood. Utterly exhausted, Abai fell back limply, while Togzhan put a quilt over his cloak to keep him warmer.

"My one and only one," he whispered, closing his eyes.

He seemed to be asleep, but his brain was a whirl of visions, hovering on the brink between sleep and delirium. Thought at times vanished and the world sank from view. Now he saw Aigerim.... No.... He was riding along the streets of Semipalatinsk behind three bays.... Or was it deep night and he was riding into the black cave of Kshi-Auliye with Karasholak on his wrist. Wasn't his bay stumbling under him? He was falling into the precipice, but clutching at the eagle....

Abai suddenly opened his eyes. For an instant he knew them all, the people around him, but then again forgot them.

What a strange world this was—neither sky nor earth. And the plains ahead so disturbing in their fiery red! He found himself flying through a strange world filled with inhuman shapes. There were evil jinn, horrible to behold. "Come with us. You're travelling the same road," they chided. He was carried along with them until restrained by the clutch of Togzhan. "Don't leave me alone! Take me with you," he could hear her say. Wasn't that her cheek against his burning face?

"I won't leave you," he said loudly.

"What shall we do? He's really very ill," said Yerbol sadly. "His mind is wandering. It's the result of the blizzard. He's caught a bad cold."

Abai threw off the cloak and blanket and stirred restlessly.

"I'm on fire. Take these things away."

Togzhan covered him again.

"He's so feverish," she said to Yerbol. "It almost burns one's hand to touch him. I haven't seen him for so long and here he is—weak and helpless."

"Have we to suffer always?" she whispered into Abai's ear. "I've longed so much for you, but now what joy is there in our meeting? There's only fresh suffering, fresh grief."

The evening meal was served, but Abai could touch nothing; he was gasping painfully. Yerbol, Shakke and Togzhan led him to the couch prepared for him in the front corner. But at the first step Abai collapsed again, in the grip of a relentless fever. He was lifted by his friends and laid on the bed.

"He was taken ill yesterday," Yerbol said to Togzhan, shaking his head. "And we were fighting the blizzard all day. No wonder he's ill. I'm worried about him."

Yerbol was as tired as the others but could not sleep for anxiety. Nor could Togzhan, who had gone to the room of the elders.

After midnight Abai was again delirious, and gasped for breath. As though divining how he was suffering, Togzhan returned to his room very quietly, pressing her sholpy in her hands to keep them silent. She stood at the foot of the bed watching. Abai's breathing seemed even more difficult. *She knelt by his side and placed a cool hand on his brow.*

Again he was tormented by visions. Once more he saw the tossing hell of the blizzard in the steppes. Was this snow or a shroud, endless, slimy, all-enveloping. He seemed to be rocking with it and falling away with it somewhere, perhaps into the mire of a bottomless pit, into a morass which would swallow him up. "Help! Save me!" he called hoarsely. And then it seemed that Togzhan was flying towards him. She did not reach out to him, however, but stood by, saying, "Sing that song you made up for me." In a hurry to comply, he brought the words out all wrong, faltered and fell silent. He could not remember the words. "What were the words?" He awoke with a terrible cry.

He saw Togzhan bending over his face, whispering something. "I'm going to faint," he thought, and lost consciousness again. It seemed to him that Togzhan was waiting for an answer. If he did not answer, she would

be gone for ever; but the words eluded him. He could not remember a line.

"What has happened to them? I've lost them all and now you'll leave me," he mumbled. "Where are they?"

Togzhan instinctively guessed his meaning, and pressed her cheek to his, full of pity.

"Don't worry about that, Abai-zhan. Don't trouble to look for anything," she said soothingly.

Abai closed his eyes and lay very still. But then his mind began to wander again.

"You don't know those words," he repeated excitedly. "You've never heard them from anyone. I'm sure I knew them. Let me think, but don't let them take me away!"

He clutched at the air with twitching fingers. He had found them! His mouth opened, but no words came. The blizzard was howling in his ears again and he was still in the morass.

"Save me, Togzhan," he shouted desperately, and regained consciousness.

Togzhan's face was over his. So it was no dream and he must really remember those words. He closed his eyes, but the words would not come back. Suddenly he recalled them in a flash.

*...Though she, my dear, may find a better lover,
No love is left for me until I die...*

He sat up suddenly, his collar unfastened; he was breathing heavily and large tears again welled into his eyes. Now he realized at last that Togzhan was really with him, and he pressed her fingers to his forehead, eyes and heart.

Yerbol noticed that his friend had regained consciousness and quickly lay down, pretending to be asleep.

Abai seemed to be in a hurry to say what he had to say before the delirium would return.

"I've been wandering through life, cold and homeless until now, when I have come to you. You are the sovereign of my soul. Do you command me to live?"

He let her hand drop, closed his eyes and fell back.

The blizzard had begun again. "I'm falling," he cried desperately. "My horse is down again! They are leading me away!"

For a while he was quiet, as though resting.

Togzhan's heart quailed at his cry: "They are leading me away!" Was this a sign that the end was near?

She was blinded with tears. At this moment, when Abai was struggling with death, he was thinking not of his mother, his father, his children or kinsmen, but of her alone. It was as if he had waited all his life to tell her just these words before he died. This was his last salem. Togzhan knew the words of his song, of course; she had heard them from Karashash, who once visited her. Abai could not remember the opening line, the line that had sounded the refrain of broken happiness.

*The sun and moon shine brightly in the sky,
But full of grief and black despair am I.*

He had just breathed the final two lines.

"My darling, those were my words and not yours. You only expressed what I felt," she sobbed. "If I could have died then! It would be better than living on now."

In one of his lucid moments, Abai asked for a drink. Togzhan could not make out his words and looked at his face wonderingly, trying to suppress her weeping.

Yerbol was lying on his side, his face to the wall, but listening intensely to every word and sound. He jumped up now and gave Abai water. Abai took a gulp and lay back again.

"What is happening to me? I must be very ill. I'm simply burning up," he said distinctly and closed his eyes.

He tossed about in a fever the whole night, and neither Togzhan nor Yerbol left his bedside for an instant. Togzhan sat weeping until dawn. Only when daylight came and she was told that the elders had risen in the Great Yurta did she get up and slowly leave. By morning, Abai seemed calmer and even fell into a doze. Baimagambet, who had awoken early, was struck by Togzhan's features. Her face was bloodless, her eyes swollen and she could barely walk with exhaustion.

Abai was confined to his bed for ten days. During the first week his condition greatly troubled his friends, and even the entire aul.

The master of the aul, Naiman, a well-to-do old man, made detailed inquiries as to the identity of his guests and whence they had come. On the morning after their arrival, the entire party, with the exception of Abai, presented their salams to him in the Great Yurta and gave an exact account of all the events that had brought them there and told him about Abai's illness. Naiman and his baibishe duly visited the sick man and wished him a speedy recovery.

There was no one in the aul who did not feel for the suffering djiguit. By midday, however, there were rumours about the strange behaviour of the young kelin. The mul-lah and the djiguit had begun to wonder about the kinship between Togzhan and Abai. When they learned that it was a very distant kinship indeed, they decided that there was something strange about the young kelin's ardent sympathy. They told Togzhan's mother-in-law that the young woman had spent the entire night sitting up with the sick man, that she had left the room in tears.

Since that day, she was no longer permitted to tend Abai.

"I'll take care of Kunanbai's son myself," Naiman's old baibishe declared. "I'm not a stranger to him," she said. "We are all kinsmen and are sorry for him. We must do more than just place a pillow under his head and give him a drink. Let him stay until he recovers."

For three more days Abai lay unconscious. Togzhan came in to see him from time to time, but was afraid to stay, for each time her mother-in-law bundled her off to the Great Yurta.

"You had better go and take care of Father," she admonished.

Togzhan's husband Akkozy, the young master of the aul, returned within a few days. The Motish were known among the Tobikty for their sturdy figures. They were big, solidly built men with fair hair, large eyes and regular features. Akkozy was typical of them. He too was large, sturdy, blue-eyed, with a snub nose, a heavy round face and hair that was nearly auburn. Nature had been unstinting in the creation of his cheeks, brow and head. He appeared to be a silent and serious man of Abai's age.

With his arrival, little seemed to change. The sick man was as carefully tended as before, but Togzhan appeared no more.

Within a week, though still very feeble, Abai was on the road to recovery and was eating and sleeping well.

Yerbol and Abilgazy were surprised at Akkozy's attitude towards them. He did not trouble to show up even once and paid absolutely no heed to the guests. As soon as Abai had recovered a little, the old baibishe broached the subject of their departure.

"Now that Abai feels better, why should you delay any longer, my dears? Your auls are not far. You'll reach them by stopping at the winter places of other kinsmen on the way. You had better take Abai to his mother. The poor old woman must be so anxious!" she would

say again and again, hinting that it was time for them to go.

After three days of such advice, Abai decided to leave the next day. At midnight, Togzhan came to him, awakened him and took leave of him, sitting at his side. Abai reached out to touch her, but she eluded him.

"Abai, I wanted to take leave of you."

Her self-restraint surprised him.

"What are you talking about? Are we strangers?"

He wanted to embrace her, but she would not let him.

"Fate did not wish to unite us," she said sadly. "If you had not been ill, when you came here, I should not have hesitated to claim what life has taken from us, even if I were to burn with shame afterwards. But fate itself has sealed its decision. You came here ill and helpless and I have realized in these past days that the heart cannot be consoled with a few brief moments of joy. My dream shall remain unfulfilled. Let it go to the grave with me. I love you and I must go, though in tears."

Abai understood.

"Well said, Togzhan. If you did otherwise, you would not be true to yourself. I shall always treasure your words—words from a loving heart."

Abai kissed her on the forehead and then sat down, his head on his palms. Togzhan arose and walked out slowly. The door creaked, and for the last time the sholpy tinkled. Abai sat without stirring until dawn, at times his shoulders shaking like the rushes, as the wind sweeps through them.

When he arrived home, Abai moved to his new house at Akshoky. All the winter he pored over his books, sending Baimagambet to town from time to time for great piles of new books, his only solace.

Aigerim distracted him no more. She had learned that her husband had spent ten days at Togzhan's aul, but she

had said nothing about it, concealing her jealousy and pretending that she knew nothing. The first blow to her happiness caused by Saltanat had cooled her affection for Abai and his meeting with Togzhan estranged her from him altogether.

Abai did not trouble to explain anything to her, though he well realized the cause of their estrangement. He could not bring himself to re-open his wounds by talking of Togzhan. At the same time, he could not forgive Aigerim for having drifted from him. He, too, was deeply hurt.

His only friend and faithful companions were now his books.

Through the Pass

1

April had begun. Spring had set in early that year and everything had turned green at once. Lambing time had come and the lambs and kids were frisking about their mothers, grazing on the hills around the winter place at Akshoky. Abai's aul had not yet moved from the winter houses and only Aigerim had so far set up her yurt nearby.

Old Baitory and the stable hand Baikadam went out to watch the lambs towards evening, but changed their minds and joined the circle gathered about Abai and Baimagambet on their favourite hill, confident that some interesting tale was being told.

Only recently, Baitory had been a little more than a beggar in Kunanbai's Great Aul, confined to his sick bed. But things had changed since Abai had transferred him and his family to his own aul. Another who had come with him was Burkitbai, while Baikadam, who had eked out a bare existence in Kunkeh's aul, had also begged Abai's leave to live in his aul. As for Baimagambet, he had come here even earlier, after years of poverty with his little brothers. Abai's aul had long been regarded as a haven of the poor, who lived together as a friendly family and suffered no hardships.

Hobbling to the top of the hill, Baitory saw that the story-teller was not Abai, but Baimagambet.

"The people of the Netherlands used to have a court in the city of Leyden, a court which they called the Inquisition."

Baitory was pleased to have come in time to hear the story from the beginning; he knew that Baimagambet could never be induced to repeat a story for those who came late.

Baimagambet had always listened attentively when Abai, during the winter evenings, had talked to Yerbol, the Kishkineh-Mullah and his elder children about the books he had read. The plot of every story with its host of characters and places was easily remembered and he could vividly and accurately retell everything that he had heard. His fame as a story-teller had thus spread not only over Korik and Akshoky, but throughout the whole area from the Chinghis to Semipalatinsk.

The sun was going down and the evening breeze grew cooler, but no one stirred to go. The children too were listening breathlessly; Abish, the most diligent pupil in Abai's family school, Magash, an unusually gifted youngster who was the favourite of all, and grown-up Akilbai, who had come specially from Nurganim's aul and was staying for the night to hear Baimagambet. They were all so engrossed that no one noticed the approach of a rider, until he sprang from his saddle in their very midst.

It was Asilbai, one of the herdsmen of the Great Aul, on his way back to Ulzhan's aul from Semipalatinsk. His bay was wet with foam.

"What's the news in town?" Abai asked after the exchange of salams.

"Haven't you heard?" Asilbai was genuinely surprised. "Terrible things are being said, Abai-aga. The white tsar who ruled us, they say, has died—and by a violent hand too. Someone killed him with a gun."

The Kishkineh-Mullah's lips began moving silently as he reverently swept his face with his palms. Baitory did the same, though he did not know why he should do it.

"Whatever happened?" Abai was all ears. "Where did you hear such a thing? When was he killed? And by whom?"

"It was more than a month ago, they say. That's all they can talk about in Semipalatinsk. The churches are full of Russians and in the mosques too they are saying namaz. The people are having to swear to be faithful to the new tsar. It's bedlam, I tell you! The tsar's son has ascended the throne and the murderer has been caught, they say. I had no time to hear any more."

Abai digested the news and began to think things over. Those who had arranged the killing of the tsar could be no ordinary murderers, he was sure. "They are the sort that cannot be intimidated," he thought. "The men who did that must have been people who were clear-sighted and firm of purpose, afraid of nothing. They must have wanted to do something to shake the whole of Russia."

Meanwhile, Baitory and Baikadam were talking animatedly.

"People are sometimes killed by the tsar's orders. There's nothing unusual about that. But whoever heard of a tsar being killed? Not I!"

"That murderer's heart must have been as hard as horn. How else could he have dared to lift his hand?"

"He was no ordinary murderer, you may be sure. If not a tsar, he must at least have been one of the high and mighty. I'm sure he must have thought, 'Am I worse than he?' And there you are. A common man would have never dared to lift his hand upon the tsar."

"And I think you're wrong. It was just a thief trying to get into the treasury when he was caught by the tsar—and so he had to shoot him," Baikadam suggested brightly.

"That may be true," Baitory reflected. "There are many such thieves in the tales. A cunning thief, as you know, always gets the better of the khan, robs him and even brings him to the grave."

Seeing that they were more curious than saddened over the incident, the Kishkinch-Mullah decided to improve their minds on the occasion.

"The Sharia teaches us to revere him who rules us and our people, no matter what his faith. A funeral namaz was held at the mosque and this means that we Moslems are also in mourning. It's a truly sorrowful event. In no books have I ever read that simple people could kill their tsar. The end of the world must be near and these are the final days."

Abai caught only the last words of his sermon.

"Wherever there is great violence, there is sure to be great hatred," he said, rising with a faint smile. "How can you who live here know what wrongs and anger raised that hand?" He went to the yurt, beckoning Baimagambet to follow.

"Bakke," he said to him as they approached the tent, "I want you to take a letter to town tomorrow and you'll hear more about the news."

Baimagambet left the next morning and returned only in three days, carrying a basket full of books, the newspaper, *Regional News*, published by the office of the Semipalatinsk Zhandaral, and a message from Mikhailov.

The Russian had written briefly, citing official reports: As the tsar was returning from a walk on March 1, a bomb had been thrown at him. He was fatally wounded and died soon afterwards at the Winter Palace. The assassination had been planned in advance and some of the conspirators had been caught. The governor of Semipalatinsk had mustered the garrison and the employees of the town offices to attend a mass for the deceased tsar, after

which all of them, from soldier to clerk, had been compelled to swear allegiance to the new tsar, Alexander III. At the end of his note, Yevgeny Petrovich said that he had been dismissed from his post by secret orders. "Such is the pass to which we have come, Ibragim Kunanbayevich," his letter concluded. "You will hardly be satisfied with the story that Baimagambet will bring you. No matter how comfortable you may be at Akshoky, it would be worth your while to come to town and get first-hand information."

The *Regional News* had nothing more to say about it than Mikhailov's letter, and Abai was surprised at the reserved tone of the newspaper. Less important news had often prompted editorial broadsides of threats and vituperations. Why were they so timid? Had they run up against some obstacle or were they bewildered like a rider who had flicked himself in the eye with the whip?

The next day Abai left for Semipalatinsk, accompanied by Baimagambet. The breeze that met them was fresh and invigorating. The ground was dry and the uneven muddy patches were gone. The spring verdure, as yet untouched by sun or dust, was bright and fresh. The low bushes of wormwood, the early tulips and the tobilga with its bursting buds were strewn over the hills from Akshoky to Semipalatinsk. Even the smallest puddle was fringed with soft silky grass.

Baimagambet was fond of swift riding and had three light bays, well kept and well trained, ready for the occasion. He set them at a fast trot, right from the house, and their swift gait and the wheels rattling over the stony road were pleasantly heartening. Lashing the horses with his long whip, Baimagambet continued the story that had been interrupted by Asilbai's unexpected arrival, hoping that Abai would set him right in the most tricky places.

He was retelling the story of *The Black Age and Martha*, and Abai was listening, impressed by the man's retentive memory. The heroes of this novel, which was so full of complicated events, were the famous djiguit Dick, who had professed his faith in the face of persecution, his fellow-believer, Red Beard—the bold giant of pure heart, the perfidious traitress of the Inquisition and, last but not least, the brave zhengeh Martha, her noble rival who sought to get Dick freed. The novel spoke of the cruel Inquisition in the city of Leyden, presided over by the priests who persecuted both Dick and Red Beard. The kindness and nobility of the heroes contrasted sharply with the cruelty of the priests, who shed the blood of innocents and subjected many to gruesome torture. There was a similar contrast between the pure love of the heroine and the unworthy sentiments of the villainess.

In telling the story, Baimagambet did not conceal his own partialities, interpreting the characters, their minds and their upbringing in his own way. He recounted the complicated plot without once faltering, as if he had read the book from cover to cover several times.

His former tales, such as *The Arabian Nights*, *Bakhtizhar*, the Persian tale *Forty Parrots* seemed elementary to him now, and he rarely told them, preferring the new stories he had just heard from Abai, stories sure to be unknown to anyone. His repertoire now included only such Eastern tales as those about Rustem, Jamshid, Sharken, the three blind men, and Seid-battal, and such Kazakh legends as "Edil and Zhaik," "Zhupar-Korriga and Er-Tostek." These were his favourites, which he loved to retell from twilight to tea before sleep. It was to this stock that he had added the few novels he had heard from Abai. He was particularly fond of *Pyotr Pelekei*,* *Dub-*

* Pyotr Pelekei—a distortion of Peter the Great ("Veliky" in Russian).—Ed.

rovsky, Sokhaty, Valentine Louis or Pure Heart, The Jaguar, The Lame Frenchman, and finally The Black Age and Martha.

Baimagambet knew no Russian and could not read or write even in Kazakh. Nevertheless the books read by Abai had finally influenced him, changing his behaviour and even his character. Abai could not help noticing that the man had become somewhat different from other djiguits, unconsciously imitating the actions and speech of his favourite heroes. He was an odd character in such an environment—an educated illiterate. There was something about his prominent aquiline nose and sharp blue eyes fringed with heavy lashes that distinguished him from other djiguits. To Abai he was not like an ordinary groom, but a fellow-traveller from some unknown country.

Abai now looked at his companion as though he saw him for the first time. This was a new man indeed. With what fervour he told of the valiant Red Beard, Dick's liberator. Baimagambet, too, was straightforward and truthful, unflinching in the face of danger and superior to trite gossip; one who never repeated anything which might hurt anybody. He could be trusted with a secret, and it was no accident that made Aigerim say that he would not even divulge what was said between Abai and his little son, Turash.

Thinking of the path this youthful heart had travelled, Abai for the first time realized how much books meant to himself and to Baimagambet. "We simply don't notice how much books do to educate us and form our characters," he thought. "Baimagambet is younger and shows it more than I. Looking at him, I can see as in a mirror how far my own character has changed, how far I have come from the age-old precepts."

After the riders had paused to feed their horses and refresh themselves at midday, Baimagambet resumed his

Black Age and finished it by evening, at the very gates of Tinibai.

During this visit to town, Abai met Mikhailov even more often and had longer talks with him. Yevgeny Petrovich was no longer hampered by office hours and they saw each other whenever they pleased. At their first meeting, Mikhailov told Abai those details of the events which he had thought ill-advised to set down in a letter. There had been earlier attempts to assassinate the tsar, the attempts of Zhelyabov and the Russian girl Sophia Perovskaya who had subsequently been executed in St. Petersburg. These men and women unhesitatingly sacrificed their freedom and their very lives. This time the authorities were seriously frightened, he considered. With a smile, he observed that the manifesto of March 4 stated that the government would give its attention to economic and social problems, something hitherto unheard of.

"If such a word as 'social' has found its way into their vocabulary," he said to Abai with mock horror, "it can only mean that the throne is tottering. Yes, in St. Petersburg they are certainly frightened by the spectre of revolution."

Abai plied his friend with questions—this was a subject they had never touched on before. Mikhailov told him that the assassination had been stimulated by a broad, popular movement against the autocracy, and he drew the conclusion that Russian society was heading for revolution, led by its finest people. This raised Mikhailov still higher in Abai's estimation. Abai tried to digest what he had heard and put more questions to solve the fresh problems in his mind.

"You have just said that the authorities are frightened. Then why don't they do something to relieve the lot of such exiles as you? They've even dismissed you from your post, haven't they?"

Mikhailov shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"I'm small game, I suppose, and the authorities don't think I'm worth bothering about. My wings were clipped, so to speak, when I was still in my third year at the university. And then, they tolerated me at my post not because they liked me, but because they had no alternative. Two years ago, you see, the governor received instructions from St. Petersburg to set up a statistical committee. Now the local officials had never heard of such a thing as statistics and, since I was rather good at it in the university and there was no one else, they had to put me in charge of a task which gave me little authority but a lot of trouble. I had nothing better to do just then and decided to agree. But unfortunately, I suffer from an incurable disease: I can't do anything in a purely official manner and so I plunged headlong into the subject and even acquired an inkling of the complexity of economic conditions here, by the time statistician Mikhailov, under police surveillance, was ordered to be dismissed forthwith as soon as the news arrived from St. Petersburg. Still I won't drop the work merely on that account. I may do some good to this region yet. There's a lot one can do if one keeps the people in mind and not the merchants and industrialists."

He had a good deal more to say on the subject.

To facilitate their meetings, Abai took quarters not at Tinibai's, but at Karim's. The small islands in the midst of the Irtysh were thick with green and the two friends often rambled along the riverside or at times boated to Colonel Island and talked for hours. Their conversations grew more and more interesting. Mikhailov was only four years older than Abai, but his crowded experiences seemed especially rich in their complexity. "It's an unwritten dastan,"* thought Abai and at once corrected himself, "No, dastan is not the word. A dastan tells the story of one

* Dastan—a lay.—*Ed.*

hero, while there are many heroes here and the dragon that they fight is a thousand years old; it's an earthly God attired in gold and precious stones."

Abai was eager to know when and how revolutionary thought had come into being in Russia. Mikhailov told him of the origin of the struggle against the autocracy, about Pushkin, Belinsky, Herten and the new upsurge of the revolutionary movement stimulated by Chernyshevsky. He spoke of the latter with special reverence, and Abai decided that this man must have been the teacher of his friend.

He also learned of the unsuccessful attempt of Karakozov and his death on the gallows. "How unlucky he was!" thought Abai. "He was so near and yet missed his aim." The fate of Ishutin, Karakozov's cousin and the leader of the group, shook him especially. He had been taken to Semyonov Square in St. Petersburg on a grey autumn day and heard the death sentence read. Then, when a hood had been placed over his head and the noose around his neck, another order was read commuting the death sentence to hard labour. This was the first time that Abai had ever heard of the real prisons the autocracy used to protect itself. They were a hell on earth, where people perished without bloodshed—the Fortress of Schlüsselburg, the Alexeyev Ravelin, the Irkutsk Alexandrov Central Prison where Ishutin went mad, though he had lived there for a long time afterwards and people had been unable to look upon him without tears. To Abai it seemed that only a beast of prey could play with its victim so cruelly, threatening it with death and tormenting it with hope.

"Can such things be possible, Yevgeny Petrovich!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible under the eyes of all Russia to torment and humiliate a man who is ready to sacrifice his life?"

Mikhailov told him that almost the same thing had been done to Chernyshevsky, whom he called the pride

of advanced Russian society and the champion of free thought.

"We have but one teacher, Chernyshevsky. His ideas have been inspiring the younger generation for the past fifteen to twenty years."

Chernyshevsky, he said, was taken to Mitnaya Square in St. Petersburg on May 19, 1864, and publicly received a sentence of seven years of hard labour. Though seventeen years had passed, he was still languishing in Vilyuisk Prison in Siberia.

Another thing, too, surprised Abai. He had taken for granted that the idea of assassination had come from Chernyshevsky, but was surprised to hear that Mikhailov's teacher had had nothing to do with the event of March 1.

"But didn't he prompt such a thing by his doctrine and ideas?"

Mikhailov had to explain at greater length.

"There is nothing of the sort either in the thoughts or the words of Chernyshevsky. The assassins were not able to comprehend Chernyshevsky's revolutionary ideas. On the contrary, this group decided everything in its own way, in a spirit quite distant from his."

Individual terrorism, Mikhailov said, was not the way to destroy the autocracy. There would be another tsar and nothing would change. According to Chernyshevsky, the peasantry must join the struggle against the autocracy. He told Abai about Chernyshevsky's leaflet to the peasants of Russia, the leaflet headed: "To the Peasants of the Landlords with Compliments from Their Well-Wishers." In it the author had called upon the peasants to go into battle, axes in hand, reminding them that the people were being kept in slavery, that the tsar had simply deceived them with the phantom of liberation in 1861 because he was not a people's tsar, but a landlord's tsar. Mikhailov remembered this leaflet from his university years and could repeat it almost word for word to Abai:



"He's pulled the wool over your eyes. . . . What is he but another landlord? . . . You're the serfs of the landlords and they are the serfs of the tsar. He's their landlord. . . . He sides with them, of course!" And then followed the words about freedom: ". . . that the people should be in charge of everything and that the chiefs should obey the community . . . and nobody should dare to act the master over the peasants." Mikhailov said with emotion that delivery from the tsarist system lay with the axes of the people and not with the actions of four or five solitary conspirators. The assassination of a minister or the tsar was futile.

Abai at once perceived the correctness of Chernyshevsky's ideas and agreed that it was the people who really mattered. "The real duty of the people's well-wishers is to stimulate the people to understand things and to rouse them to struggle against the hordes of evil and violence," Abai summed up his thoughts to himself.

He had learned so much that was new and thrilling from Mikhailov, and he never tired of asking him more and more about those who fought against the autocracy. Though Mikhailov had been in exile for many years, he could recount the events with the accuracy of a chronicler. He could describe every prominent figure, every group of revolutionaries, and from his comments Abai understood that while there were many groups fighting against the autocracy, his friend seemed to approve of very few of them. The lonely exile looked only to Chernyshevsky for guidance.

Meeting with the lawyer Akbas, Abai spoke of Mikhailov in glowing terms.

"Mikhailov is a real man," Akbas was glad to support him. "His civic conscience awoke very early. He was already a revolutionary at the age of 20, and his entire family is like that. Didn't he tell you what his sister did at the time of Chernyshevsky's public sentencing and mock execution. No, of course he didn't."

And he related that when the sentence had been read a young girl had elbowed her way through the crowd and thrown a bouquet of flowers at Chernyshevsky's feet, shouting, "Farewell, friend!" It was a farewell from all decent people and also a challenge to the autocracy. The girl was Yevgeny Petrovich's sister.

Abai was greatly impressed. So his friend had such a sister! It was most surprising that Mikhailov, who had told him about so many revolutionaries, had never as much as mentioned this. He set it down to his friend's natural modesty. Mikhailov never talked about himself or his activities. Abai could not remember him ever having said, "I acted thus or thus." The heroes of his stories were always others, while he seemed somewhere dissolved among the crowd. All Abai knew was that he had been exiled two years before Chernyshevsky was arrested.

Mikhailov's personality appealed to him more and more and gave him much to think about. "What a good, strong generation this must be if there are many such as Mikhailov," he thought. "What a force has accumulated there! It is as mighty and yet as patient as an elephant." He decided to get Mikhailov to talk about himself at the first opportunity.

The next morning found Abai knocking on the door of the same house on the bank of the Irtish, the house that had become a school for him. He heard displeased grunts behind the door as old Domna opened it, the merest crack, still grumbling to herself. At last she recognized Abai and opened up.

"Is that you, Ibragim? Come in, your friend is waiting for you," she said. "I thought it was that old cur again. He sticks to us like a burr, he does. 'Your master,' he says, 'is a socialist. If you know what's good for you, you'll tell me just who comes to see him and whom he goes to see.' He'll be wanting to know what we eat and

drink next. There's no getting rid of the slimy creature; he keeps nosing around everywhere."

Abai listened with amusement, but also with great attention as he removed his coat. He knew whom she meant—the district police inspector Silantyev. He must have been told to keep an eye on Mikhailov and had been pestering Domna for a month. Mikhailov, for his part, also kept a close watch over the inspector and always listened carefully to the old woman's complaints.

As he came out into the hall to greet Abai, the exile smiled at Domna.

"Silantyev has made you angry again, dear Domna," Abai said sympathetically.

"Of course! And not only he. He has put Sidorikha, our neighbour, on to us too. She wanted to know all sorts of things when I went to the river to do some washing. And it's not only about Yevgeny Petrovich that they ask. 'Who's that Kirghiz that hangs about him? Your socialist is trying to lead the Kirghiz astray too?'"

Domna went to the kitchen. Mikhailov paced the room frowning, then took a seat next to Abai on the sofa, apparently seeming quite calm, as though nothing had happened. Abai now decided to put the question which had been occupying his mind.

"I should like to ask you something, Yevgeny Petrovich, though I'm afraid it might not be proper to ask such a thing"

Mikhailov answered briefly. He had been carried away by Chernyshevsky's ideas while at the university and had joined the circle led by Shelgunov, his elder sister's husband. He was given some tasks to do, like others, and was arrested at a students' demonstration which he had organized with his friends to force the dismissal of the most bigoted of the professors. As a result, he was exiled to Petrozavodsk. A year later, on the advice of their comrades in St. Petersburg, the group of exiles there wrote

a petition to the tsar, requesting mitigation of their sentences. Instead, the group was exiled still farther away, to Siberia. Mikhailov ultimately learned the cause from Losovsky who, in his turn, had heard it from the governor. The tsar had been favourably impressed when he read the first page: "Such young people too! It's unlikely that they are ruined through and through. They've been in exile for a year and must have come to their senses by now." Then, unfortunately, he had come across a blot of ink on the last page. It had been carefully erased by one of the petitioners and yet it had decided the matter; it was interpreted as a sign of protest and contempt. The tsar had thrown the paper away in disgust, ordering, "They shall not be brought back. On the contrary, let them be sent still farther away."

Mikhailov had been talking calmly, adding humorous touches, but now he gravely began to speak of a matter which must have weighed on his mind for a long time.

"The police regard me as a dangerous man and think I am preparing to murder the tsar or at least to plant a bomb under the governor's house. But what can I really do? Ah, what couldn't I have done if they hadn't cut me down when I was young! You, too, regard me as something of a leader of social thought and the revolutionary struggle, but that's out of friendship. Actually, I'm a man of the ranks and one who is only in reserve."

"It is easy to see that you suffer," said Abai thoughtfully. "Yet your people are fortunate. I can see that the darkness is lifting from them and that the dawn is near."

"Why do you think so?"

"How can the people be unhappy if they have more men to defend them than to offend them? If their men of the ranks are such as you, Yevgeny Petrovich, what will happen when they rise to full stature? If they all go into action together? True happiness must surely then come to the suffering people." Silent for a moment, he added, "It

is not your people who are unhappy, but we, the Kazakhs. We are covered with a piece of felt to keep us in darkness."

Abai had often shared his anxieties over the fate of his people with Mikhailov, and today he was more sure than ever that his friend had given the problem much thought. Mikhailov sought to summarize their ideas on the subject.

The Russians had brought both good and evil to the steppes. The evil was plain for all to see, while the good was difficult to discern. The evil lay in the local authorities and the officials, deaf and blind to anything but promotion and bribes. The good lay in Russian culture, a matter which was still a closed book to the Kazakhs, who could only perceive the brute force in such Russians as Silantyev and the Tentek-Oyaz. Abai had managed to see what was concealed from the others. Russia possessed a treasure of knowledge respected the world over. She had her thinkers who had won universal recognition, but the Kazakhs knew little of this—it was all so far removed from them. And yet there were perceptible stirrings among the Kazakh people. There were still very few Kazakhs like Abai, men who were benefiting from the spiritual treasures of Russia. But the way lay open for the entire Kazakh people, the way of enlightenment.

"It is difficult, of course, to foretell the future even of an individual, let alone an entire nation," Mikhailov went on. "I remember a fine Kazakh proverb you once told me: 'The lone track is the birth of a road.' That's very true. It is always one who begins and many who follow. A single grain can beget an ear of grain and an ear of grain a wheat-field. 'A spark will kindle a flame.' These sayings are worth remembering. What should I advise you to do? The younger generation of Kazakhs should study, first of all. Begin with your children. Let them learn to read and write Russian. Secondly, pass on what knowledge you have. It will only be a tiny fire-fly in those vast steppes,

a feeble candle flickering in a lone hand, but you must carry it into the darkness. One thing more: there are many sores on the body of your people. You should learn to detect and expose them. In short, critical thought is necessary. You have a powerful weapon for that. As far as I can judge, your people are responsive to song. I would make their dombras, legends and songs speak of their needs and the causes of their afflictions. You must sing enlightenment and knowledge to them. That will be a great task indeed. Your people are fond of apt metaphors and would assimilate the essence of those songs much quicker than the sermons of the imams in the mosques of Semipalatinsk. As you know, the development of social thought in Russia has been greatly stimulated by our poets. True enough, we have a mighty ally which you have not, the printed word, but that would not stop me if I were you. It is necessary above all to enlighten the people, no matter how. There's a crowded programme ahead of you, as you see," concluded Mikhailov patting Abai on the shoulder.

Abai had once asked Mikhailov just what Chernyshevsky would advise for those few Kazakhs who had developed an ability for independent thought. Mikhailov seemed to be referring to this when he said, "If Chernyshevsky were here instead of me, he would be able to give you better advice, I'm sure. He would perhaps find my way a very slow one. But I've been prompted to say what I did by the historical backwardness of your people."

"I understand, Yevgeny Petrovich. It is difficult for the seed to germinate if the soil is frozen by deep winter. You mean that not all of the seeds cast by Chernyshevsky can sprout among our people."

Mikhailov appreciated Abai's quick reaction.

"I believe I have told you that Chernyshevsky pinned his hopes mainly on the axes in the hands of the people.

The development of a popular consciousness must lead to the same goal, for otherwise the uprising will be a mutiny and not a revolution. Chernyshevsky would probably put it more clearly than I. The fact is that I don't know your people well enough and can't see the short cuts to their emancipation."

Abai had so assimilated Mikhailov's thoughts that he was soon unable to separate his own ideas from those of his friend. They came to form his credo.

This conversation, which touched upon such great and vital problems, concluded with Mikhailov's applying his ideas to Abai's personal life. How did his children study in the aul? Abai explained that his sons Abish and Magash and daughter Gulbadan had been attending the family's Moslem school, but that he had decided to give them a Russian education. How could this be done?

"Bring them here and we'll arrange it somehow. If they stayed with a Russian family, they would be sure to master the Russian language in two or three years. But let this be understood: they're not to study in order to become officials. Let them memorize these words: 'I am the first swallow and am to study for my people alone.'"

"What if Abish and Magash were to become such men as Mikhailov?" Abai suddenly thought. He imagined them not in the Kazakh dress of the Tobikty cut, but dressed as Russian townsfolk, studying thick folios. Perhaps they would come to be bold defenders of the people, the leaders of the younger generation. That was a great future indeed. "If I could only live to see it!" he almost prayed. "If I could live long enough to tell them, 'I'm old and worn and must hand our cause on to you!' I would be the happiest of fathers if that were to come true."

A new arrival interrupted his reveries. It was the lawyer Andreyev, who came here every day.

He brought them news from the office of the district chief. The news, indeed, concerned the whole of the Tobikty and he thought it necessary to inform Abai. The office of the district chief, the magistrate's office and even the office of the zhandaral were crammed with statements made by the elders, accusations and complaints from the Tobikty. The papers bore the tamga, the finger-prints of the plaintiffs, and reported cases of arson, pillage and even of "causing the miscarriages of pregnant women."

"You have no idea, Ibragim, what your volost rulers are doing," Akbas concluded. "There's inter-tribal warfare again. Or it might be a scramble for posts, since the re-elections are scheduled this year."

Having worked in the zhandaral's office for a long time, Mikhailov knew very well that the statements drawn up by the volost rulers were frequently slanderous. "The tsar's administration has corrupted the Kirghiz steppes," he had once said to Abai. "Bribes and informers now have the upper hand. The laws of Russia are quite unsuited to both your lives and customs. There is mistrust and hostility between the people and the authorities, and the Kirghiz people, of course, now think it perfectly proper to lie, to slander, and to level false charges. This is a good example of how a people can be perverted by stupid authorities and mismanagement."

"Who is complaining?" he asked Akbas when he heard the news. "The volost rulers or the people?"

"All the complaints are directed against the volost rulers," answered Andreyev, smiling ironically at Abai. "Those same volost rulers you recommended to Losovsky at the last elections. If I remember correctly, you said they would be the friends of the people," he laughed. "There's one serious complaint in the pile, however. From the poor zhataks. Some of them asked me to intercede for them: 'Take on our case and bring it to the

knowledge of the authorities that the rulers are doing us a lot of harm.'"

Abai demanded to know the names of the volost rulers in question, but Akbas could not remember even one of them. He recalled, however, that he had seen a few of their statements accusing of theft those of the zhataks who had launched complaints against them.

Mikhailov interpreted this in his own way.

"It seems that the people on whom Ibragim Kunanbayevich pinned his hopes have finally learned to throw their weight about. They have forgotten about the interests of the people and are only trying to get votes for themselves. An opposition party has apparently sprung into existence, and the zhataks, it seems, have joined neither the one nor the other. They have obviously refused to side with the present rulers and so have been set down as thieves and bandits. And you, Ibragim Kunanbayevich, hoped these rulers would be the champions of the people. And there they are, slinging mud at their own people who, you see, do not obey the authorities. Your volost rulers are no fools, of course. They received their posts from you and feel that they have finished with you. They know very well that it is far more important to be on good terms with the governor and the district chief than with you. If that's the sort of protectors your people have, it must go hard with them! If they were able to pull the wool over your eyes, they will certainly do the same to the people. And of course they won't find it difficult to appear honest in the eyes of the authorities. They're just the sort that the authorities need most of all. The volost rulers play into their hands and the authorities care very little for the people who will make them neither rich nor poor.

"Poor? They'll get poorer only if the people are left to live in peace, but if they quarrel, the authorities rake in

the bribes and are duly promoted for pacifying the populace."

Abai was both shocked and pained to learn that the people for whom he had vouched, those whom he had recommended as the protectors of the people, had turned out to be no better than their predecessors. One of them, moreover, was his brother, Iskhak. Abai felt as if he too had had a hand in all the outrages.

He had no heart to take part in this talk. He sat gloomily silent for a while and then left.

2

Abai stayed in Semipalatinsk longer than he had expected. He was loath to leave Mikhailov and Andreyev, and his talks with them seemed more important to him than any of his studies.

It was midsummer when he at last set off for his aul. On the way he visited Yeraly and spent the night with the zhataks.

The morning tea was just over in Darkembai's yurt. With a shabby beshmet thrown loosely over his shoulders, the host sat facing Abai, shaking tobacco into his palm from his yellow horn shaksha and regarding his guest with satisfaction. He was pleased to have a talk with such a visitor. The hostess, a thin, elderly woman, was no less pleased—Abai had spent the night in their yurt. As she cleared the table, she tried to catch the jests between the two and her face too was creased in smiles. The sweet wrappings, scattered about the yurt, showed that ten-year-old Mukash had also good reason to be glad of the visit.

"They talk to us about nothing but obedience to the atkaminers and the volost rulers," Darkembai said, resuming a conversation started the previous night. "If it's a

high-born man, he speaks about his power and authority and boasts of his wisdom and prowess. If it's a poor man, he complains of his needs and his lot in life. Now, you, Abai, have told us about brave men who killed the tsar and suffered for it. We know now that the people have their champions who won't be satisfied until the people are happy. They're also the protectors of us, the zhataks, who are hiding in our holes like crippled wolves."

The old man took a pinch of tobacco, thought for a while and concluded:

"Yes, that is how it is. The strong boast of their oppression of the weak and the weak complain that they suffer at the hands of the strong."

Abai was impressed with the clarity of such reasoning.

"Well said," he exclaimed. "Your conclusion is as good as a proverb. I can see now that it is not the rich man with many herds who has the clear mind, but the poor man who has been taught to think by need."

Darkembai smiled.

"A clear mind alone is not enough to make you an elder. When a poor man is not clever, they are sure to say that he is brainless; and if he is clever and speaks well, they are sure to say that he is a chatterbox. No, Abai! It's not a clever tongue that helps to gain justice."

The neighbours came to the yurta one by one, among them Dandibai, Yerenai and Karekeh of the Kotibak, old men whom Abai knew. They had come to talk to Abai about the affairs of the aul, which now numbered 50 yurtas. Darkembai, too, had had things to say to his guest about the wrongs done to him and his neighbours, but had not wanted to trouble Abai with them the night before, having seen that he was tired after his journey.

Abai now asked the old men about their life in the aul, questioning them about the sowing and the harvest.

"You have enough good, arable land. Has much been sown this year?"

"My dear Abai, which of us could sow much?" said Dandibai emphasizing his words with an oath. "In our wretched life in which we have nothing but dogs to pull our ploughs and only twigs to drive them on with, no one has the strength to reap even the things that God has given us. We have nothing to boast about. The twenty yurtas which stand near Mialy-Baigabil have hardly sown twenty lands.*

"Has the wheat sprouted well?" asked Abai. "It may happen that a small plot of ground will yield a lot."

Dandibai, Yerenai and Darkembai spoke at once:

"A lot, you say!"

"Not likely!"

"A lot of nothing, I would say."

"What do you mean?" Abai turned to his host and Darkembai at last opened his heart.

"Didn't you say last year, 'Don't expect good things to come from the sky, but better work for them yourselves.' We took you at your word and did our best. And I must say that the results were not bad at first. Our hearts were gladdened by the crops on Sholpan, Kindik and Mialy-Baigabil. And what happened! Don't you remember the trouble we had after the elections in Yeraly?"

"Takezhan and Maibasars ruined our harvests then," interjected Yerenai. "'Don't quibble with the authorities over your rotten yurtas,' they said. And what a harvest that might have turned out to be! We were just going to gather it in, when they turned the herds of five auls loose upon it."

Abai remembered the event very well. When Takezhan was dismissed from his post as *volost* ruler, he had in-

* A land—a square measure.—*Ed.*

cited the Irgizbai and Kotibak, who had been wandering near the plots of the zhataks in the autumn. Through the new volost ruler Asilbek, Abai had made provision for compensation to be paid in cattle for the damage suffered by the zhataks. He had not known, however, that not one of the auls at fault had taken the trouble to make these payments.

Darkembai asked Abai's opinion as to their chances of success if they were to send a representative bearing a formal complaint to the inter-tribal council of the Sibai, Tobikty and Uak, which was to be held shortly.

Before answering, Abai asked whether they had any other wrongs to complain of.

"Have they trampled down this year's crops as well? Have any of the kinsmen helped you with horses during the sowing and the reaping?"

The old men laughed again.

"What are you talking about, O light of my eyes?" said Karekeh. "Help is given only to those who pay for it and not to such riff-raff as us."

"What talk can there be about help? And are they kinsmen of ours at all?" added Dandibai. "They trampled down Karekeh's plot this spring when the first sprouts came up."

"And they've driven off our poor old nags," Darkembai interrupted bitterly. "And why don't you tell him the main thing?"

He described the fresh wrongs perpetrated by the kinsmen while Abai was away. Abai was horrified to hear the story.

When the auls of Takezhan, Maibasara, Kuntu and Karatai had wandered to this district, the zhataks had approached them with the demand for compensation still unpaid. But this had only enraged them all and when the fields were green again, the horses were turned loose on the crops as before. And complaints to influential peo-

ple had availed nothing. True, they had sympathized with the zhataks, had agreed that it was an open outrage, but they would not support them openly for fear of spoiling relations with the powerful auls. Their sympathy for the injured people exhausted itself in whispers at the threshold.

In desperation, the zhataks, led by Darkembai and Dandibai, had fought with Takezhan's herdsmen and seized two horses. On the next day a hundred djiguits armed with soeels had raided the aul, taken back their horses and very nearly thrashed Darkembai. When the zhataks tearfully complained to Takezhan and Maibasar, they were heaped with curses and sent packing. "All you do with your ploughing is to spoil the pastures," Maibasar had shouted. "Beggars like you should be driven away. It was because of you dogs that I was dismissed from my post. What does it matter if we have common ancestors? You're not my kinsmen. To the devil with you! If you like to root about like pigs, then go to the muzhiks in Belagash and become Russians!"

"And that was not the end of the matter either," Dandibai interjected. "Seven horses were stolen from our people a month ago."

Yerenei sighed deeply.

"Now you may judge for yourself, Abai," he said slowly. "We don't even know whether there will be a harvest this year or not. And the scoundrels did not pay for the crops they trampled underfoot last year. We're as lonely as a chiy bush in a steppe fire. And whom are they treating so? Haven't we wasted our lives by their thresholds, may they be damned! Haven't we served their fathers? And now they won't even let us grow a bit of food. They are wolves, not men!"

"The four of us have been asked by the people to recover those horses that were stolen," Darkenbai went on. "And the thieves are just around the corner. They're in

Akhimbet, Kzil-Moly Volost. We have sacrificed everything to find the thieves, their abettors and even the horses. And we were sure we should get the animals back. The volost ruler is your brother Iskhak and this gave us the courage to demand that they return our horses, our property, threatening them with Iskhak's name if they did not. At first, they were frightened, but then finally decided to put us off: 'We did not take your horses ourselves; we received them from your kinsman Serikbai. He was indebted to us and gave us the horses in payment. First bring him here.' When we returned, we found that the rascal had been living in Takezhan's aul since last year. You can be sure Takezhan did not even let us get near the man. 'Let the zhataks stop wagging their tongues. Serikbai is a poor man and I won't let them hurt him.' Takezhan has suddenly become a protector of the poor, you see! Or, to put it more plainly, Serikbai does his stealing under Takezhan's protection. In short, the thief got away. When we returned to Akhimbet, we found fresh troubles waiting for us; Takezhan had sent a messenger to Iskhak: 'The zhataks are my enemies. Don't let them have the horses and throw them out.' And that is just what Iskhak did. He was even worse than the others. It's no wonder we are wailing with grief. That is why we are thinking of petitioning for payment for the damages done this year and last and for the return of the seven horses. We have no other draught horses. Is it not true that the biis and the volost rulers are afraid of the Russian authorities sometimes? Perhaps we shall be lucky and justice will be done. What do you think? It is not on our own behalf that we are telling you this, but on behalf of the zhataks of fifty yurtas who have been robbed."

Abai sat listening, biting his lips and white with anger. He was indignant with both of his brothers and ashamed for them before the people. Shame and revulsion fought within him. It was as though he had been caught

in a storm of filth that poisoned his mind with evil vapours, and through it all he seemed to hear new words again and again. The words of a new poem? "The clear mind will reject all that conscience has condemned." The greater the shame of those whose conscience is deaf, whose heart is frozen and whose maw is insatiable. What do they care for pity and injustice!

There was a general hush.

"And this evil was done by my brothers," Abai said finally. "And I too am guilty before you for that reason. It's no consolation, of course, if I say that the vengeful hand is regretted by the reproachful heart. What good would that do you?"

"I remember a good saying of yours, Darkembai: 'Those who have a common need have a common life. Real kinsmen are united by their common lot.' The truth of your words came home to me when I was talking to a wise Russian. It turns out that there are such kinsmen not only among the Kazakhs, but also among the Russians and, though the tsar and his officials are Russians too, these poor people will never regard them as their kinsmen. The Russian zhataks in Siberia and Russia have the same thoughts as the zhataks of the Kokshe and Mamai."

The company was astonished by this thought which Abai had gained from his conversations with Mikhailov, though it was now worded in his own way. Abai was pleased, in spite of himself. Darkembai nodded approval, though much that the young man had said seemed strange to him.

"And if you take a deeper view of things," Abai went on, "you'll see that the rulers of the tribes among the Tobikty, the Kerei, the Karakesek and Naiman are the real kinsmen of the powers of Semipalatinsk, Omsk, Orenburg and St. Petersburg. They are of one tribe and have one common cry. They're as thick as thieves with one an-

other. That is the answer to the riddle, my friends. There is a wise man, one who suffers for the people as if they were his own children, who has said that only the axes that the people wield can save them. And it is time perhaps to use these axes to strike at the root of the evil in the steppes!"

Carried away, Abai had said more than he had meant to. What these people required was action.

"The gathering will be held not in Arkat, but Balkibek," he said suddenly, sweeping the four with probing eyes. "It may have begun already. That is what they told me in town. I was not thinking of going there, but will do so to take your part before the chiefs. You must follow me in three days. We'll demand full compensation from Takezhan, Iskhak and Maibasars. I will speak for you, but you must help me too. You, Darkembai, will come to town and bring Dandibai with you. He is also determined and courageous."

Abai got up hurriedly.

"And so it's agreed. We'll talk about the rest on the spot. But don't be late. In three days—remember! And I shall go straightaway. Saddle my horse, Baimagambet!"

Baimagambet was only too glad to leap for the door, agile as always. Abai donned his waistcoat and a long summer coat, glanced at his watch and suddenly noticed that the old men seemed to be troubled about something. Dandibai was leaning towards Yerenai and whispering, his hands eloquent with gestures.

"What's the matter, Danekeh?" Abai asked. "Have you any doubts? Or do you disagree?"

Darkembai looked him full in the face.

"Your advice is good and your decision is just. We won't get anywhere unless we go to the gathering, but it is cursed poverty that holds us back again. Two of us should go, I and Dandibai. But how can we? Where shall we get the clothes and a second horse? They've taken the

last nag from us, you know. That's what they are whispering about."

"There are no horses, Abai-zhan," Yerenai agreed sadly.

"There's no getting away from our wretched poverty. It holds us by the leg. We cannot go to Yeraly, though it's only a flock's drive from here. And Balkibek is so much farther."

Abai took a quick decision.

"Darkembai has a horse, so let Dandibai take one of my side horses. You may keep it for the summer, Dandibai. You'll return it when we drive our herds to the autumn pastures. As for clothes...."

Abai opened his white coffer and produced two lengths of cloth.

"Here's the cloth and there's the lining, just enough for a chapan," he said. "Have it sewn at once, Darkembai."

There was a chorus of old voices; all were smiling.

"May Allah grant you a long life!"

"That's a wonderful gift!"

"He's helped us through! May Allah reward him."

"How queer it is, Abai-zhan," said Darkembai, accepting the cloth. "Takezhan robs us and you make the damage good. They won't pay heed to our petition," the old man went on, amid general laughter. "'You've already received a horse and a chapan without lifting a finger,' they will say."

Abai was relieved by their good humour.

"Never mind, Darkembai. You may regard it as a tiny part of what is due to you for the wrongs done by my fathers to yours. As for Takezhan and Iskhak, they'll have to pay for themselves. I'll be the plaintiff then and not the defendant. But let's have one thing clear: if you're going to fight, you must hit as hard as you can. I have heard that during the Tokpambet battle, Baidaly shouted to Suyundik, 'Take an example from Darkembai. There's a man for you!' That's why I want you and Dandibai to

come to town. But if you waver, I'll tell all the zhataks that you are no better than a pair of old women."

Baimagambet then entered to announce that the horses were ready. All arose to leave.

"If Allah does not lame their tongues, these two will not be silenced by the zhandaral himself," Yerenai boasted. "You've chosen the right men, O light of my eyes! If old horses such as they shy at the water, then the zhataks are lost."

The carriage, now drawn by a pair, was waiting by the yurla, and a crowd of men and boys were standing about to see them off. The horses set off at a fast trot, while the children scattered and the skinny dogs raised a great howl.

"Almighty Allah, this djiguit was the hope of our kinsmen even when he was a child," said Yerenai, his eyes wistfully upon the carriage as it grew smaller in the distance. "And it seems that this hope is to be justified. May he have happiness in his life. Only good can come from such as him."

The old man turned to the ragged crowd around him.

"He has promised to recover all the seven horses. He said that he would get them back, no matter how powerful those people are. And he'll make them pay for our crops too. He'll do it. See if he doesn't!"

There were expressions of incredulity.

"All seven of the horses?"

"And they'll pay for the trampled wheat? And for the second harvest too? May his words be fulfilled!"

"May his path be happy if what you say is true." They spoke to each other excitedly.

Touching belief, mingled with bitter disbelief engendered by grim experience, sounded in their words. All eyes were fixed on the clouds of dust behind the vanishing carriage. It was the embodiment of their hopes, and the entire aul stood staring even long after it had gone.

Abai and Baimagambet halted only one night on the way and by the next evening reached Baikoshkara where the auls of Ulzhan and Abai were located. As they went past Botakan they saw another large aul, which turned out to be Takezhan's. It had grown immensely with its droves of horses and flocks of sheep and there were more than a dozen servants' tents around the Great Yurta.

"We won't stop here," Abai had said to Baimagambet.

It was a flock's drive to his own aul and Abai hoped to get there before the children were put to bed. As they flew by the sooty tents at the edge of Takezhan's aul, Abai could not help remembering the avarice of his sister-in-law.

"Just look at them, Bakke," he said. "Probably a herdsman or a watchman lives in that yurta. What a wretched place to live in! Couldn't Karazhan give him some felt? May Allah curse her!"

Baimagambet's blue eyes flashed as he smiled.

"You'll have to wait a long time before she does a good turn to anyone, Abai-aga," he answered. "They all work for her, but she never thinks of helping the poor."

Just beyond the aul, the riders saw an enormous drove of horses sweeping down to the riverside.

"Can all these horses belong to Takezhan?" Abai was really surprised. "When could they have multiplied so?"

Suddenly, they discerned a man riding from the aul to intercept them. When he came nearer, Abai recognized Azimbai, the son of Takezhan and Karazhan. The strippling was riding a black three-year-old with a white spot over its eyes. It was a real argamak with a saddle shining with silver ornaments.

"Assalau-magalaikum, Abai-aga," he greeted his uncle when he had overtaken the carriage, and at once blurted

the message from Karazhan. "Mother has sent me to say this: 'Why didn't Abai stop at our aul? Perhaps he is sorry to part with some gifts? But I'll send someone to him in the morning for sweets, tea and dried apricots. Let his other sisters-in-law leave these gifts alone. They are for me!'"

And pleased with this dig at his uncle, the youngster laughed maliciously. He had a broad, dusky face and cold narrow eyes gleamed from under heavy eyelids.

"My dear boy," Abai said kindly, "if you are so fond of sweets, then let us go to my aul. You'll stay for the night and in the morning take with you all the sweets that you find in the carriage. I did not visit your parents only because it is too late. My father and elder mother are waiting for me and I want to give them my salem before they go to sleep. That's one thing. . . ."

Abai told Baimagambet to check the pace of the horses.

"You're quite a djiguit now, aren't you!" he said to his nephew when the rumble of the wheels abated. "And you should know that not everything your mother says is very clever. Think for yourself: was it proper of you to tell your uncle who has come from afar, without as much as greeting him, 'Give us the presents you've brought! Don't try to trick us out of them!' She may be your mother, but I am no stranger either." Abai looked squarely into the youngster's eyes.

Azimbai, however, seemed to have set his own meaning on these words. His ruddy face paled, his brow set in a frown. He did not answer until after Abai had spoken again.

"Can it be that all those horses belong to your aul?"

"Of course! To whom else?"

"How many of them are there, do you think?"

Azimbai did not reply. He knew the number very well, but to tell would be unlucky. At home, he had once mentioned the number of the animals he had counted in

the pastures, but had been stopped by his father: "Keep quiet! Don't shout about how many horses we've got!"

Baimagambet at once perceived that the boy was unwilling to reply and he decided to get an answer one way or the other.

"I have heard it said that you have at least 500 head, including the foals," he casually remarked. "There are at least that much here, if not more."

Azimbai was still silent and Abai sighed; this was not a nephew to be proud of.

"Takezhan and I separated from the Great Aul fifteen years ago with eighty head apiece," he said, addressing no one in particular. "Takezhan must have feathered his nest when he was volost ruler. And I'm sure he'll have even more horses unless he's beaten at the elections this time."

Azimbai giggled maliciously.

"What do you mean 'beaten at the elections'? Haven't you heard the news? Father has been elected volost ruler again. We've been celebrating for a week, arranging races and other things. You owe me a suyunshi for that."

Abai turned quickly to the boy. The election of volost rulers was an important matter in the steppes, but this time no one in town had seemed to know anything about it. Had it begun? And who had been elected? Abai had only heard that the local chief Kazantsev had gone to the steppes for the purpose.

"Who elected your father? For what volost?"

"Nachandik Kazansip,* that's who! Father is now the ruler of Kzil-Adir Volost," the boy answered proudly.

"Kzil-Adir? And whom have they elected for the Chinghis Volost?"

"Shubar-aga and Uncle Iskhak have been re-elected for

* Nachandik Kazansip—a distortion of "nachalnik" (chief) Kazantsev.—*Ed.*

the Kzil-Moly Volost. Now three sons of the Hadji are volost rulers. The whole of the Irgizbai are making merry and you haven't even heard about it. Well, Abai-aga, my suyunshi for the good news should be no less than a horse." Azimbai was beaming with arrogant glee; his father and two near kinsmen had been elected. It seemed that this boy was already poisoned with ambition, that he had been taught the advantages of wielding power. "You've learned the lessons of your elders well," thought Abai, showing no signs of pleasure at the tidings. "You'll be a cruel and ambitious djiguit before long, I'm afraid. You may even be more arrogant than your father!"

The boy was angered by his uncle's silence. He remembered his mother's frequent comment: "Abai is envious of our position, oh, so envious!"

Azimbai, therefore, mistook his uncle's silence for the angry silence of envy, and sought for words with which to hurt him.

Abai told Baimagambet to drive on and the snorting horses quickened their pace as they pulled the carriage over the smooth grass of Botakan Valley. It was time for Azimbai to go home; he had to return his three-year-old to the drove and it would not be able to find the herd in the dark. Furthermore the pastures neighboured on those of the Kerei. "What if they catch me and take my horse away?" he thought. But the desire to hurt his uncle was stronger than his fear.

He had another piece of news up his sleeve. It was the talk of all the zhailyau in the neighbourhood and only that morning his father had said that it would make Abai choke with anger. "He's always tried to help Bazaraly, but I'm sure he won't side with him again now," Take-zhan had declared. "That's my victory over Abai. He'll have to pocket his pride this time, whether he likes it or not."

Lashing his horse to keep abreast of the carriage, Azimbai leaned towards his uncle.

"I forgot to tell you. Kazansip kept telling them to catch and hand over Bazaraly. So he's been caught and the four volost rulers have passed sentence and sent him to town. They put him on a camel and fettered his hands and feet so he wouldn't run away!" Azimbai laughed spitefully.

Abai turned sharply.

"Accursed dogs! No sooner do they get to power than they turn to their old ways! You're just a bunch of snarling wolves."

The words came in spite of himself, or was it Azimbai's laugh that prompted them? Until then the boy had seemed like nothing more than a vicious whelp, but now the broad grin was like that of a wild beast baring its fangs.

Azimbai was now checking the stride of his horse.

"That's to keep you happy on the way, dear uncle!" he shouted after the departing carriage. He laughed again, turning his horse. The sight of the reddish lights of the distant aul made him feel hungry; he was always a voracious eater. He galloped home, especially elated and shouting into the darkness the battle-cry of his tribe: "Irgizbai! Irgizbai!"

The aul was still awake when Abai and his companion arrived in Baikoshkar, and Abai was happy to find that the children had not yet gone to bed. The sound of the carriage wheels brought them scampering outside. While some clambered on to the driver's box, others scrambled on to the rear. Magash and Turash struggled to get on Abai's knees, embracing him and raising a terrible din. Baimagambet headed for Ulzhan's yurt, knowing that Abai would want to see his mother first.

Ulzhan stood near her large bed as Abai entered with a cluster of children round him. She embraced and kissed

her son. Aigerim, Aigiz and other women were also present, as was Ospan, huge and broad, with a light velvet-collared chapan thrown loosely over his white shirt. He had brought his young wife, pretty slender Erkezhan.

Pleased to see Abai, Ospan shouted above the noise. He wanted his brother to know the glad tidings at once. Three members of their family had been elected volost rulers and it was only just that he should pay a suyunshi.

"I hope it will bring us happiness," said Abai in a low voice, looking at Ulzhan. "I see that you are all overjoyed."

Ulzhan at once understood that he was not at all pleased with the news.

"Yes, may it bring us happiness, my son!" she echoed.

Ospan continued his noisy rejoicing.

"Let this joy be multiplied by yet another!" he went on, hinting at the other piece of news, the arrest of Bazaraly.

Abai knew that the stubborn and straightforward Ospan hated the man no less than Takezhan. Though he was not capable of committing any crime, Bazaraly's exile would soothe his wounded pride. As always, he responded very exuberantly to what he considered good news. His sparse black moustache bristled even more and his pitch-black beard became as wide as a spade.

In the simplicity of his heart, he thought that the brothers owed their election to Abai.

"Our volost rulers think that the authorities have elected them for their fame and their influence. 'Don't turn up your noses,' I say to them. 'For the love of Allah! The authorities have never heard of you. Do you think that Abai has been sweltering in town and swallowing dust there from early spring to midsummer for nothing?

That's the only reason all these honours have fallen upon you from the sky. He's rubbing shoulders with the big chiefs! That shuts them up! They can't say a thing after that, I tell you!"

"Though you are nearer to me than the others, Ospan," Abai said, shaking his head, "you're as mixed up as a man lost in the dark on a moonless night. Shubar, perhaps, is not so bad. He is young and has yet to show what he is worth. He's a good djiguit, as far as I know. But how could I ever support Takezhan, who has used his office in the past only to increase his herd from eighty to five hundred. Or what could I say for Iskhak, who abets the Tobikty thieves in his Kzil-Moly Volost? I realize that you respect me so that you're ready to thrust all sorts of honours upon me, but you may believe me when I say that I had nothing at all to do with this. You're only confusing people with your talk."

Ospan was not convinced.

"Rubbish! You won't find a single Tobikty to believe you. Three of Kunanbai's sons have become volost rulers and you mean to tell them that you had nothing to do with it, though you were living in town all that time. You had better not deny it—you may as well accept the gratitude of your brothers. I shall go on saying that it was you who did it. They enjoy great honours as volost rulers, but you deserve even greater honours since it was you who made them such. Are you your own enemy? Allah sends you honours which you reject!"

It was clear that Ospan would not give in and Abai argued no further in the presence of his mother and children. Beckoning Abish to his side, he asked the boy about his studies.

"I've been learning Russian, too," the child said. "Ever since we left the winter place."

This bit of news had been kept by the family as a pleasant surprise for Abai.

"Is that so? But who is your teacher?" exclaimed Abai kissing the boy's fair forehead.

"When you went to town in the spring, a young Russian djiguit came to Zhidebai," Ulzhan explained. "He had served in town as interpreter for a year. That's why they call him Bala-Tolmach.* He told me he was ill and had come to the aul to heal himself with kumys. For this, he asked if he could live here with us and teach the children Russian. I remembered that this was just what you wanted and sent him to Akshoky. Not only Abish, but also Magash and Gulbadan are taking lessons from Bala-Tolmach Bayev."

Abai was greatly pleased.

"Have they made good progress? Are they as diligent as when they were taught by the Kishkineh-Mullah? Have you made the teacher comfortable?"

When Aigerim spoke, Abai suddenly realized how much he had missed her voice.

"The children are very enthusiastic and never missed a day, even when we were wandering to zhailyau. And the interpreter likes them too. When the lessons are over, he often mounts a two-year-old to race with Abish." Aigerim smiled kindly. "How funny these Russian mullahs are! There's nothing solemn about him. He teaches the children as if it were a merry game. They're always with him, the little dears."

Abai listened attentively, nodding approval. But then Ospan began to poke fun at his sister-in-law.

"See! She's not praising a mullah who knows the Shari'a and the ways of Allah, but some Russian tolmach. Before we know it, she'll start studying Russian her-

* Bala-Tolmach—a boy-interpreter.—*Ed.*

self." Here he imitated Aigerim, pronouncing a few broken Russian words.

Everybody laughed, Ospan more boisterously than the others.

Abai asked the children the Russian words for various objects in the tent and listened with pleasure to the eager clamour of their answers.

When the evening meal was finished, he went to Aigerim's yurt with the children. Abish, Magash and Gulbadan pressed to him, walking under his broad chapan. Abai was happy, gratefully comparing his brood with his nephew Azimbai, who had already learned how to do harm to others. These children of his were as good and pure as milk. He was proud of their eagerness to study.

"Darling light of my eyes!" He embraced little Abish. "I'm so glad you've begun to learn Russian. You've had enough of Moslem lore and I'm going to send you to a Russian school this year. Allah willing, you'll grow up to be an educated man. This is my greatest wish. And I'm especially glad that you've begun to study without me, all by your own will." Abai raised his eyes to the full moon. "Let his life not be ruined, O Allah! Let my sons have the things I could not have: knowledge and all that is best for a man. Make him happy and light his way." It was a silent, fervent prayer. He pressed his son to his heart again.

Abish did not answer, but it was clear that his father's attention had moved him deeply. The child was pale with emotion.

"I'm glad too, Aga," he said quietly.

Magash, with his child's sensitivity, at once felt that his father and elder brother had reached some unspoken agreement.

"Why only Abish, Father?" he reproached, clutching at Abai's belt. "I want to go to town to study Russian too."

"I'll go too, Father!" Gulbadan wailed. "I want to study too. Just ask Bayev. He's always saying that I'll learn to speak Russian before any of them. I'll go to the town by myself if you won't take me."

Abai smiled happily, stroking Gulbadan's head and kissing Magash's pouting lips.

"I'll take you both to town in the autumn, I'll take all of you, I promise."

Aigerim stood at the door of her yurta, watching them with a smile. She turned back the felt door to admit Abai.

At the Crossroads

I

BAI WAS accompanied to the gathering in Balkibek by his old friends, Yerbol, Baimagambet and Shakke. When they reached Yerbol's aul on their way there, they were joined by Asilbek, who had lost his post of volost ruler at the last elections, the post he had once received through Abai's intercession.

Abai was also joined by Akilbai, his eldest son by Dilda. Nurganim had dressed her adopted son as festively as she could. He wore a sable hat, a black velvet chapan, his saddle ornate with morocco and silver. He was attended by two servants, one of them Kazakpai, a hook-nosed Circassian with deep-set grey eyes, a man of about the same age as Abai. Nurganim had deliberately sent him to have an older man keep an eye on the boy. The second, a youth of Akilbai's age, by the name of Mamirkaz, was a big-eyed, fair-faced giant, cheerful and sharp of tongue and inseparable from his master.

Akilbai and Mamirkaz were riding together somewhat apart from the company. Chattering cheerfully, they sometimes fell behind and at others suddenly flew ahead of the older folk.

"They seem to be good friends," Abai observed to Yerbol. "There's a time in every man's life when he can no more keep apart from his friends than a pup from the other pups of his kennel."

Yerbol laughed. Wasn't Abai talking of their own young years, the years they had spent together? But looking at Akilbai and Mamirkaz, he shook his head dubiously.

"It isn't friendship that holds them together so much, I think, as their common hankering for the girls; and I'll bet that they've travelled a long way on that path," he said.

The others laughed in agreement. But Abai looked at the youths thoughtfully.

"You may be right. Who can say what's on Akilbai's mind? He's been spoiled. I'm afraid he'll make a self-centred mirza some day, the sort of man who shuns the wise and welcomes the flatterers. That might come to pass, Allah knows."

"Why find fault with him so," Yerbol objected. "Why don't you say plainly that you're dissatisfied with him because he made you a father when you were just a boy yourself."

It was a bold sally which only Yerbol could have permitted himself. Asilbek and Shakke laughed.

"Akilbai is safely under Yerbol's wing now."

"The mischief-maker may do his worst now!"

By midday the party reached Balkibek. The gathering had been convened by four tribes: the Siban, Tobikty, Kerei and Uak. They had come to investigate all quarrels and debate all complaints. For it a plot of land had to be found which would not belong to either side; the chiefs of the tribes had always availed themselves of their proximity to bring pressure to bear upon the council. Balkibek, however, was situated on the border-land between the Tobikty, Siban and Kerei and though abounding in

water and fodder remained unoccupied year after year. Attempts by any of the tribes to take possession of it were promptly frustrated by the other three. This was the most convenient spot for the gathering.

The gathering represented the population of the nine volosts in the two districts of Semipalatinsk and Karkaralinsk. Four of the volosts belonged to the Tobikty, two to the Sibai, two to the Uai and one to the Kerei. Now the Irgizbai were more influential than ever. The news that two sons and a grandson of Kunanbai had been elected was being discussed everywhere. Those of the Tobikty who belonged to the rich and powerful auls and could therefore aspire to office were both offended and worried.

"Lucky devils, those Irgizbai!" they said enviously. "When Kunanbai was Aga-Sultan, they stood above all others and now that he has retired from the matters of this world and is resting like an old camel on the ashes of a hearth, the luck and the power have gone to his sons. His cubs rule over three volosts! And his son-in-law Dutbai rules in a fourth, in Mukir. The whole of the Tobikty is in their hands now. And not the Tobikty alone. Iskhak can reach out for the Sibai and Uai. They've got their heel on both, the Irtysh and the Chinghis. If ever there was luck. . . ."

On the way, Abai learned all this from Yerbol, who had visited the gathering a few days before, and could appraise the sentiments of the people. The gathering did not mean the people in general, but the atkaminers, the biis and the volost rulers, the people vested with power and authorized to make speeches, and their immediate associates.

"There's nothing they like more than a bribe," said Yerbol. "It used to be said that they could swallow a camel alive, but this pack can do far better now, mark my word! They swallow the sheep in flocks and the horses

in droves, and the town chiefs, may Allah punish them, are not backward either; Iskhak sent twenty pedigree horses to Kazantsev to secure the office for Takezhan. And now the new volost rulers are taking it out in the people's blood."

"And what about the biis. Are they corrupt too?" asked Abai.

"I wouldn't say that about all of them, but they do very well for themselves on the whole. Judge for yourself. Imagine a case being fought out between the Kerei and the Tobikty. Both sides apply to the volost rulers, who pass the matter on to the biis but let them understand that they'll be rewarded if the decision is favourable. And the biis are no holy men, poor fellows. They give the necessary decisions and take their share."

"Tell me frankly. Is it possible that Zhirenshe and Urazbai are corrupt too?"

"Of course, they are! What a question!"

"And I regarded them as friends." Abai shook his head. "And I was responsible for them becoming biis. Perhaps you are wrong. I hope you are. I want to believe they are honest men. Whom shall I believe if they are corrupt?"

Abai fell into a moody silence and Yerbol too cared to say no more. How could he say bad things of people the other had called friends? He remembered Abai's words: "Slander and malice are at the bottom of all quarrels between friends and kinsmen."

There were two endless lines of yurtas on each side of the river and Abai and his party lost much time finding their kinsmen in these long avenues. Septagonal and octagonal yurtas were rare. Most of the Kazakhs gathered here had set up white pentagonal and hexagonal tents brightened with embroidery and patches of coloured cloth. Clusters of drab and sooty little yurtas stood somewhat apart—the kitchens and the servants' quarters.

Many foals were tethered along the rows, the milch mares having been brought to the council together with riding and harness horses.

Abai and his friends soon came upon the triple octagonal yurtas set up for the chiefs, between smaller yurtas grouped in twos and threes. Volost rulers, biis, elders and shabarmans could be seen everywhere. Herdsmen too were running about and there were many curious onlookers. The chapans, jackets, saddles and bridles presented a riot of colour. The various hats and caps showed that all tribes and clans were represented here. There were the Tobikty's flat hats with four quarters, the high and narrow timaks of the Kerei, the padded six-gusset hats of the Siban and the eight-gusset hats of the Uak. The volost rulers, their candidates and bii-dolinzhis* and their interpreters formed a solemn line before the yurtas of the chiefs. Officials in white caps and gold-buttoned tunics emerged from the main yurta surrounded by police and guards.

"What are they standing there for?" Yerbol laughed, watching the ceremony. "They look as if they've come to hear a sermon."

Shakke too was surprised. They've separated themselves from the others like goats from the sheep, he thought.

"They're waiting for the chiefs," explained Asilbek, once a volost ruler himself. "The oyaz is coming. You can see his carriages now."

Six or seven carriages were approaching along the green valley with a tinkling of bells. A horde of shabarmans and guards were galloping ahead at a mad pace,

* The candidates were elected together with the volost rulers and their assistants. Bii-dolinzhis were the foremost biis in each volost. If the volost ruler was dismissed, he was replaced by the candidate and if the latter was dismissed, the office was taken over by the bii-dolinzhi.—*Ed.*

raising such a din with the clatter of their hoofs that they might have been taking part in a baiga.

"It's not the oyaz alone who's coming, but a host of chiefs," said Abai.

"They say that two oyazes of our region will be here—one from Semipalatinsk District and the other from Karakalinsk District," agreed Shakke, who had been here several days before and had heard all the news from his brother Shubar. "It is they who are coming now!"

Sure enough, two large carriages parted from the others and drew up at the official yurt. The two district chiefs got down and at once were the centres of two compact knots of volost rulers and interpreters as they moved towards the entrance. The shabarmans scattered before them in all directions, shouting and brandishing their whips to make way.

"Let's keep clear of those madmen," said Yerbol gathering his reins. "They've gone out of their wits at the sight of the chiefs."

They moved on to continue the search for the yurts of their kinsmen. Baimagambet, Mamirkaz and Kazakpai were darting here and there, asking everyone where the yurts of Kunanbai's sons had been set up.

"We've found Takezhan's yurt," Baimagambet was the first to announce.

"We won't stay there," Abai said briefly.

"Iskhak's aul is here too," reported Kazakpai. "Shall we go there, Abai?" he asked in broken Kazakh; he had still not learned the language, although he had been living among the Kazakhs for years. Abai rejected his proposal too.

"He's the ruler of Kzil-Moly Volost, and why should we be a burden on a strange tribe," Yerbol found it necessary to explain.

The brothers who were volost rulers had set up their yurts side by side, and next to these were the yurts of

Kunanbai's grandson Shubar, the new ruler of Chinghis Volost, who now came to meet Abai's party on his brown pacer. He was a tall, broad-shouldered djiguit with regular, faintly pock-marked features. He was two years too young to be a volost ruler, but the Irgizbai had set his age at twenty-six. In spite of his youth, he was better educated than the others; he had studied with Gabitkhan for ten years and could even have been a mullah himself. Not satisfied with this, however, he too had learned to speak Russian—from his interpreter. He was determined, active and bold, and therefore conspicuous among the men of his age. He had more than once influenced the discussions and decisions of the council and the elders had entrusted him with the responsibility of conducting negotiations with the Russians at the elections.

"Abai-aga, our yurtas are here. Where are you going?" he called after saleming his uncle. "Why don't you stay with us?"

Abai greeted him courteously, congratulated him upon having received so important an office at so young an age, but declined.

"You're an official figure now and are sufficiently burdened as it is. You'll have your hands full with the chiefs and the plaintiffs and petitioners and your friends. But we, you see, are used to a more carefree life. We go to bed early and get up late. We'll stay with Ospan, if you don't mind."

Shubar was somewhat affronted, but offered no objections.

"I would like to have a few words with you first, Abai-aga," he said, detaining his uncle while the others rode on. "When the oyaz came, we, the volost rulers, led him to the Guest Yurta and the first thing he asked was, 'Has Ibragim Kunanbayevich come to the gathering?' This heartened us considerably and I was the first to say, 'Yes, he is here and will surely come to convey his salem!'"

Shubar could not conceal his pleasure that it was thanks to Abai that he had been able to bring himself to the notice of the authorities.

"It would be good if you visited him," he went on. "There are many people here, as you know, and everyone is trying to put a spoke in everyone else's wheels. It would be very important for us if you could salem the oyaz before the others."

Abai realized that it was Losovsky who had asked for him and decided to call upon him, though not with the object that Shubar had in view. He would simply be glad to meet an old acquaintance.

"You needn't coax me. I'll visit him without fail," he answered and made for Ospan's yurt where his companions were waiting.

There were many guests. Though he was not a volost ruler, Ospan, the master of Kunanbai's Great Yurta, had set up five large yurtas. He had also ordered the slaughter of a grey mare with a silver-blazed forehead, the sign of truth and loyalty, as was customary on the eve of an important undertaking such as a campaign or litigation. The volost rulers of both districts had been invited to partake of the repast.

The volost ruler, Zhumakan, the son of one of the most influential elders of the Siban, sat at the place of honour in the octagonal yurt. The Kerei were represented by their shrewd volost ruler Toisary, and the Tobikty by the self-confident and bellicose volost ruler Moldabai, a stout, robust-looking djiguit. Takezhan and Iskhak and other volost rulers were also present.

No words were wasted. They sat silently eyeing each other, wondering which of them would find favour with the chiefs. Envy and hatred were thinly veiled by courtesy. They were chary of words, speaking in circumlocutions and hints. The case between the Siban and the Kzil-Adir was to be heard soon, perhaps even tomorrow. To put it

more accurately, it would be a contest between the two volost rulers, Takezhan and Zhumakan. The next case to be heard would be that of the Motish against the Kerei. This too was to be a duel between volost rulers, this time Moldabai and Toisary. No gathering had been held for several years and a host of complaints had accumulated. There had been reports of barimta, raids, abductions and other crimes. The biis would soon vie with one another in eloquence and each of the volost rulers was on his mettle.

Their anxieties and apprehensions represented something quite foreign to Abai, however, and he did not hesitate to question Zhumakan and Toisary about the case between the Kerei and Sibai, a matter which had long troubled the region and was still unsettled. In revenge, both sides had frequently raided each other and stolen each other's horses. The case went under the heading of "Litigation of the Girl Salikha." Abai's interest was aroused.

Toisary parried his questions, but Zhumakan spoke his mind, his eyes flashing angrily at his opponent.

"With good-will, it should not be difficult to make peace, my dear Abai; but how can you settle a matter in court if even some chit of a girl won't obey?"

It was clear that his reproach was directed at the Kerei in general and that the two tribes were bitterly at loggerheads. To avoid making matters worse, Abai ceased his questioning.

When the kumys was served, everyone livened up, and someone suggested that this was a fitting time to hear a good song. Abai took a dombra from Shakke, who had been sitting by him leisurely strumming the instrument, and passed it on to Baikokshe, an akyn who had come from Kzil-Adir with Takezhan. The akyn lived in Ospan's yurta, but was in the habit of walking about everywhere and from time to time shared his observations with his host.

"They've all been stuffed with bribes," he had said. "The volost rulers, the elders and our worthy biis. I'll say this, Ospan, be a volost ruler, if you are not satisfied with the property you have. You'll be able to skin everyone, whether innocent or guilty, and no one will dare to judge you."

Ospan had listened to the local news with great curiosity.

"How have you learned all that?" he asked the akyn. "Bribes are given and taken on the sly; agreements are made in whispers, by winks of the eye rather than by actual words, and still you seem to know all about it! Are you a jinni or what?"

Baikokshe explained his methods.

"Not a soul must know about this," he warned. "I merely keep on good terms with the shabarmans of all the volost rulers. All the bribes that are given and taken must pass through their hands. They hide nothing from me. Besides, they know the doings of their masters from the messengers of other rulers and tell me about this too."

Baikokshe accepted the dombra and sang an extemporaneous greeting to the company. Slightly hilarious with the kumys, the volost rulers punctuated the song with loud exclamations.

"Good for him! He's the best akyn we have nowadays."

"Sing on, nightingale! I can tell the old school at once!"

Baikokshe was indifferent, and sang without raising his eyes, a gaunt, gloomy figure. Having finished the song of greeting, he changed to another tune and other words. "You've achieved your ends and have become high and mighty, and if you are honest, do not trample on the poor, do not protect those who are evil or permit the villainous to torment the meek. Don't rob the people, don't ruin their happiness, don't be a burden to them." He men-

tioned no names, but it was clear that the words were aimed at most of the volost rulers present.

The song brought no approval. The arrogant Moldabai was even affronted.

"This Baikokshe is by no means kokshe,"* he said angrily. "He's a sly fellow and can get at you, before you know it, and heap filth upon everything you've done."

"The listeners are supposed to listen and nothing more," Asilbek retorted with a laugh. "An akyn's words show the truth of many things."

Displeased with the song, the volost rulers tried to change the subject and joked with one another with unnatural vivacity. But Abai once more brought them back to the subject.

"That's just why Baikokshe's song should be heard. It's not the flattery of a petitioner or the praise of a beggar, but the sharp voice of the people, expressing the people's thoughts before the people themselves speak."

"The people have nothing to do with it," Takezhan said with asperity. "None of the people have told him to use such words, as bitter as poison. It's simply that Allah has given him a spiteful nature."

Iskhak and Toisary, too, complained:

"Why confuse him with the people? He's liable to infect them with his spitefulness."

"The mangy horse rubs himself wherever he can."

"No one can hear the truth without murmuring," commented Abai, smiling. "Your words mean in fact, 'Keep the truth away because it may make us angry!' If one Baikokshe alone can make us so angry, then how can we bear to listen to the entire people?"

"Baikokshe is not the people," Takezhan insisted.

"Oh, no, my worthy volost ruler," the akyn interrupted,

* Kokshe—the name of a clan; the word means "obscure," "inconspicuous."—*Ed.*

lifting his hand from the dombra he had been strumming. "Baikokshe is at one with the people. It's hard for you to listen to me, of course; but Baikokshe only repeats what the people say."

"Now, what do the people say? Perhaps you could sing it in a few words?" scoffed Takezhan. His words were caught up by the others who joined in the jeering.

Abai looked at Baikokshe with a mischievous twinkle.

"Why not! I'll begin the song and you will finish it," said Abai.

*The lower the valley, the thicker the grass,
Some find that life's path is quite easy to pass.*

The akyn half arose, humorously raised his eyebrows and finished the stanza.

*For deftness promoted to prominent stations,
They live upon bribes while the people
have patience.*

"That is what the people say," he added and laughed, looking at Takezhan. In spite of themselves, the company could not help approving the apt words of the rhyme.

"Empty chatterer!" Takezhan grunted looking away. "May your tongue be scorched!"

Abai sat rocking with laughter.

"I'm sure Moldabai was wrong. He's not Baikokshe, but Zhaikokshe."* He rose and left the yurta, still laughing.

The volost rulers had been sadly ruffled, and looked like nothing so much as fat, terrified ducks or turkeys pressing to the ground under the shadow of a falcon.

"Enough of that! Hold your tongue!" Ospan said to

* Zhai—thunder.—Ed.

Baikokshe, when he saw that the akyn's jest had offended most of his guests. He began to refill the cups with kumys with his own hands.

Shubar, for his part, was ashamed of the affront to both his uncle and the atkaminers he had invited.

"May your tongue run dry, Baikokshe! Do you think that to be frank one must jeer at everyone? Since when have you forgotten all decency and learned to spit into the plate after finishing your repast?"

His words set Ospan off, his protruding eyes flashing angrily at the akyn.

"I've invited my kinsmen here for a ceremonial repast, to let them rest and make merry. If you were really wise, you would remember the proverb: 'One half of happiness consists of kind words!' I've expected kind words from you and what have you given us instead? I won't stand for quarrels and reproaches here."

This tirade from the host prompted Baikokshe, Shakke and Baimagambet to leave the yurta one by one.

That evening Abai called upon Losovsky. Tanned by the scorching sun of the steppes, the latter arose, advanced to meet him with a smile and shook his hand warmly. After the usual exchange of inquiries, Losovsky seated his guest and described one of the cases on hand. The table was piled with papers pertaining to an appeal drawn up by some tribes and termed a "Statement" in official jargon.

"All these seals and signatures," he said, "have turned out to be fraudulent.

"I'm glad you're here, Ibragim Kunanbayevich; you may be able to help me," he went on. "This paper is an appeal to the governor from a young Kirghiz of Mukur Volost. His name is Kokpai Zhanatayev. It pertains to Balkibek where we are now located. The decision on his case was taken by the rulers of six volosts interested in the land. Let me read it to you:

"We, the volost rulers, have agreed that the land in

question, known as Balkibek, of old belonged to Kokpai Zhanatayev, registered in Mukur Volost, and must be restored to the petitioner. We request, therefore, that Balkibek shall henceforth be regarded as the property of Kokpai Zhanatayev.' And it's covered with seals too. They look authentic, don't they? I thought so too. But when I looked into the matter more carefully, I found that the volost ruler of Mukur had never set his seal to it, let alone the other rulers. It's an ordinary forgery. Just look."

Losovsky began to leaf through the papers, pointing to the seals.

"The petitioner claims that these are the authentic seals of six volost rulers. Actually, they're one and the same seal of the aul elder set indistinctly on each of the papers. And to think that a young djiguit is involved in such a grave case of forgery. It is commonly said that our offices know nothing of the life in the steppes and make many mistakes, at times verging on absurdities, but who is to blame? It's just such cases as these that cause the mistakes. Now they perjure themselves or send us fabricated accusations or try to aid a robbery as in this instance. It is outrageous! I've sent someone to fetch that forger here. He'll be coming presently and, meanwhile, make yourself at home."

"Tell them to bring the tea," Losovsky said to the grey-moustached guard at the door.

The volost rulers who had sat feasting in Ospan's yurt such a short time ago were now crowding outside the triple yurt. Whenever the doors were flung open, those who stood outside could not help seeing Abai sitting at the table with the oyaz and looking through the papers. Some were jubilant at this, others envious. There were endless whispers and nudges. But when the guard emerged and shouted for tea, everyone was astounded.

"Is the tea for Abai?"

"The oyaz treats him as a guest."

"He must be his friend!"

There was a hubbub of conjecture; how would this affect one case or the other?

"Now it's clear that the Tobikty will have things their own way! Kunanbai's sons will never let anyone say anything if Abai is so friendly with the oyaz."

When Zhumakan, Toisary and Moldabai had returned from Ospan's yurta an hour before, they had still been heatedly discussing the impertinence of the akyn.

"Baikokshe would never have dared to say such things on his own. It's Abai who put him up to it."

"You're right. It's Abai's handiwork," Toisary agreed. "He set his akyn to bark at us and then went off. Now what was his idea?"

"Kunanbai's sons are certainly on top now," mused Moldabai. "Surely Abai must have some plan. Or is he just trying to frighten us? He has managed to make volost rulers out of three of Kunanbai's cubs by hob-nobbing with the authorities winter and summer. Pride has gone to his head."

But when they arrived at the entrance of the oyaz's yurta and learned that Abai was having tea with the great chief himself, they grew strangely still. While they were jealous of Abai, on the other hand, each of them secretly thought: "I should certainly do my best to be on good terms with Abai if with anyone. I've got to have him on my side."

At tea, Abai said nothing at all about the affairs of the steppes, the volost rulers or the impending meeting.

"I've just come to have a look at the gathering," Abai had said to Losovsky earlier in the evening. "I've only one small matter to attend to. I want to intercede for the poor zhataks who have been robbed by the rich auls. I am going to try to help them myself. Let's not talk about it just now. I've come to see you and to hear the news

from the town. I'd also like to know how Yevgeny Petrovich and Akbas Andreyevich are getting on."

"Splendid, Ibragim Kunanbayevich. I'm very glad you came. You're my only real companion in the steppes, you know."

He did not hesitate to tell Abai all he knew about the town, their mutual acquaintances, and the most interesting articles in the St. Petersburg newspapers and magazines. They were interrupted by a fat, purple-faced policeman who came and stood at attention.

"Zhanatayev is here, Your Excellency! Shall I bring him in?"

"Please do."

A tall, broad-shouldered young djiguit was led in from the outer yurta. Abai liked the bold forehead, the intent expression of his large grey eyes, and his slightly aquiline nose. He was especially impressed by the deep sonorous voice when the young man said in Russian:

"Good day, respected Oyaz!" Noticing Abai, his eyes shone with pleasure. "Assalau-magalaikum, Abai-aga!" he pronounced with his hand to his heart.

The next to enter was Kokpai's interpreter.

Losovsky began his questioning, and Abai learned that Kokpai was twenty years old, that he was a shakird who had been studying at the madrasah of the Khazret Kamaly for many years. He had come from the Kokshe and was related to Dutbai, the ruler of Mukur Volost.

"Zhanatayev," Losovsky addressed him, "all the six rulers, including your relative Dutbai, have today testified that the documents you have submitted are forgeries. Let's leave aside Russian laws for a while. You're studying at a Moslem madrasah, aren't you? What punishment should be imposed on a liar according to the Sharia? You're still young, but what will happen to you later if you take to such a path. Frankly, I'm worried about you. You're not illiterate and are very well aware

of what you've done. I could show some lenience if it were done in ignorance, but in the present case it should be punished twice as severely. What have you to say for yourself?"

No sooner had the interpreter finished with this, than Kokpai coughed, as if preparing to sing, a long guttural sound, which reminded Abai that the young man had been renowned as a good singer a few years before. Kokpai shifted his eyes now to Losovsky, now to Abai, and turned first red and then pale.

"My guilt is heavy, Taksir, I quite agree. But let me explain why I did it. I'll accept your decision as a just retribution."

"Tell us why," said Losovsky.

"Out of need. I'm a poor man of the weak tribe of Kokshe. On the one side our neighbours are the Mamai, a strong tribe with large lands. On the other lie the Tobikty, another rich tribe. The best of the land belongs to them and we are as crowded together as needles in a pin-cushion, all huddled up on the bank of the Bakanas River, a stream no longer than the tongue of a man. Balkibek is near at hand; in fact, nearer to us than to the Siban, the Kerei and the Tobikty. The valley lies deserted and the broad meadows too and the river is so large nearby. It's no farther than a flock's drive from us. And so I decided to help my kinsmen. The seals are false, of course. No volost rulers have set their seals on my appeal. And why should they? I have nothing to bribe them with; my kinsmen are not powerful, and the rulers have nothing to gain by it. They would never consent and so I drew up the statement on my own, not to enrich myself, but for the sake of my poor kinsmen. Now you know the truth and I am at your mercy. If you decide to punish me...well then, here's my head. But if you forgive me...here's my heart."

Abai listened carefully to see that the interpreter did

not distort the words. He was charmed by the young man's manner, his boldness and dignity and was determined to intercede for him if necessary.

This was not Losovsky's first dealing with a petitioner. His experienced eye could size them up at once. However, this young man appealed to him and he could sense Abai's feeling of sympathy.

"Zhanatayev is more than an unsuccessful forger. He's an excellent advocate," he said good-humouredly. "Do you think those were really the reasons which made him do it, Ibragim Kunanbayevich?"

Abai was glad that Losovsky had addressed him. It would have been awkward to interfere in an official investigation. He looked at him with a grateful smile.

"The seals are false, of course; but his explanation is genuine, I'm quite sure of it and am ready to bear him out."

"But why should he commit a crime instead of seeking justice by honest ways?"

"That was wrong, of course."

"If he begins to do such things at his age, what will he come to?"

"He'll come to a bad end. And with his intelligence, he'll be a more dangerous criminal than other men."

"Quite true. And the people must be protected from this djiguit. In other words, we've got to punish him."

"Yes. I suppose that is true. But I think he has been sufficiently punished already. Not by prison, but by his conscience. It is clear that he is suffering greatly. Just look at him now."

Losovsky laughed and looked at Kokpai, who had flushed to the roots of his hair.

"You're so sure of his conscience that you could vouch for him, couldn't you?"

Kokpai suddenly spoke to Abai in Kazakh.

"A real djiguit rarely gives his oath, Abai-aga. I'm

not the sort to waste many words. I understand Russian very badly, but I've grasped the meaning of your words. Yes, I'm really ashamed of myself. Please vouch for me and I swear that I'll be indebted to you until my dying day."

Abai was deeply moved.

"My respected chief," he said turning quickly to Losovsky. "This djiguit has given his oath and I am ready to vouch for him. Forgive Zhanatayev and hold me responsible for any future misdeeds."

"Then listen to me, Zhanatayev," Losovsky said solemnly to the young djiguit, trying to impress him with every word. "If you do not go astray, you will yet be a good and useful man. You were on the brink of a precipice, and do not forget this. Try to be a real djiguit and follow the advice of Ibragim Kunanbayevich, who has vouched for you. He is a man of honour. And if you are a man of honour too, then let this transgression be your first and last." Losovsky then tore the forged documents to pieces.

An even greater surprise awaited those who stood outside.

"Abai has saved me from the clutches of death. I'll never forget my dear Abai-aga, never, to my dying day!" cried the young man as he came out.

Abai sat talking to Losovsky until late at night.

On leaving, he found Kokpai waiting for him, and he took him along to Ospan's tent.

The volost rulers had gone, each marvelling over the influence Abai had miraculously gained over the oyaz.

"To snatch a man from the threshold of prison! There's nothing Abai cannot do," they said.

They sat up all night and, as the Kazakh saying goes: "Tried to cut a cloak to the pattern of a shadow." Conjectures rose from the yurtas like flocks of frightened birds.

The passions of tribal jealousies ran high when the at-kaminers, the biis, volost rulers, their messengers and servants were gathered next day.

"Who is to be the presiding bii?"

"There are two districts here and two oyazes. Whom will they choose?"

"It is said that the oyazes have entrusted the elders with the choice."

"It will be a fat morsel for the tribe from which the bii is chosen. Whose star is to be lucky this time, the star of the Tobikty, the Siban, the Kerei or the Uak?"

"The Tobikty are our elder brothers and I'm sure it is they who will be honoured!"

Abai and his companions got up late that morning. They were neither plaintiffs nor petitioners, but merely curious onlookers. They left the yurta by midday and were joined by Baikokshe and Kokpai on their way to the gathering.

Watching the volost rulers crowding about the yurtas of the chiefs, Abai recalled how they had been standing about and peeping in at him and Losovsky the night before. The mocking words that had lurked in his mind now clamoured to be set free. Pointing to the crowd of them with his whip, he began:

*The messenger, hot and excited to death,
Spares neither his oaths, nor his horse,
nor his breath,
Shouting, more dead with haste than alive:
"Get ready, for soon the oyaz will arrive,
Into his presence your cattle drive."*

Baikokshe, Yerbol and Kokpai laughed heartily and at once infected the others. Lashing his horse, Baikokshe came alongside Abai.

"Go on with the song! What does the volost ruler say?"
Abai responded with:

*I serve the people—I lie and flatter,
All day without hitch my tongue can chatter.
If God permits me, today again
My people will have none cause to complain.
My people are fools—any trash they'll believe,
My words at face value they all receive.
What will it cost me to cook up a case
With the cunning oyaz in some lonely place?
No one our mischief will ever perceive.*

He finished, laughing.

Kokpai was fond of good songs and adept at jokes and verses himself. He resumed Abai's song, adding his own improvisation:

*I horde my secrets like treasured gold,
Whatever I seize remains in my hold.
Who earns my hatred—let him beware,
There's no revenge that I will not dare.*

"Allah be praised, Kokpai. I didn't know that you were an akyn and not merely a singer," Abai said with surprise.

"Neither did I know that you were an akyn!" Kokpai laughed.

Abai's friends flocked round him, demanding to hear the rest of that song. But as they approached the yurtas of the chiefs, they heard someone calling them. Nearby a circle of elderly men sat on the grass, Takezhan standing in their midst and waving his hat. The riders presented their salems as they approached.

"Abai and Asilbek, give your horses to the djiguits and stay here with us," said Takezhan, still on his feet. "We're

having a council of the Tobikty elders and would like to have your opinion on a certain matter."

Abai dismounted and offered the reins to his friends who withdrew. Taking his place in the circle with Asilbek at his side he greeted each of the company in turn. They were all men of the Tobikty: the volost rulers Moldabai and Dutbai, Kunanbai's two sons and his grandson Shubar, the atkaminers headed by Baigulak, the eldest among them, the shrewd Abraly, a man of Abai's age, Zhirenshe of the Kotibak, Kuntu of the Bokenshi, the squint-eyed Urazbai of the Esbolat. A few sturdy red-haired djiguits of the Motish sat beside Moldabai. Others were kinsmen of the Mamai and the Mirza-Bedei.

Abai was surprised to see two atkaminers of the Zhigitek, Abdilda and Beisembi, who sat on the very edge of the circle, gloomy and apparently indifferent. The perfidious betrayal of Bazaraly by the Irgizbai seemed to have strained their relations with the Zhigitek.

Abai had meant to ask Losovsky about the fate of Bazaraly the previous evening, but then decided to do it later, when he could confront him with the petitioners of the Zhigitek. He had intended to take with him Beisembi, whom he regarded as a strong and persistent leader of the Zhigitek, and Abdilda, who was known for his resourcefulness. Now, however, he was unpleasantly struck by the expressions on their faces. "Why are they sitting there so sleepily among their worst enemies, the men who sent the mainstay of their tribe to exile?" he thought resentfully, and looked away.

"A good horse shows what he's worth not at the beginning of a race, but at the end," said Baigulak. "We've made a good beginning and the star of the Tobikty has ascended so high that we can reach out for the moon. But now we have the honour of choosing the presiding bii. The three other tribes have renounced this honour in our favour, since we are the descendants of the eldest

brother. We are worthy sons of our fathers. Let us give our thanks to Takezhan, Iskhak and Shubar, our volost rulers. It is they who wrested the high honour at the conference of chiefs. Now, we, the elders of the Tobikty, should put our heads together. The presiding bii will take office tomorrow. We must choose a man respected by all. The oyazes will have to approve our choice. We've got to uphold the good name of our tribe. Let us find the man among us who is worthy of the office. May Allah shower his bounties upon him, amen. We've been hoping that you, Abai, who are so respected by the authorities, would go to the oyaz and name the man we have chosen. Well, kinsmen and friends, who shall that man be?"

The silence was long. Abai knew that every one of them was watching the others, warily biding his time. He could hardly restrain his laughter. But there was no end to the silence and finally he spoke himself:

"Well, kinsmen, if Allah has blessed us with such an honour, why hang back in such a way? Speak your minds unless this talk about the star of the Tobikty and the good name of our tribe is just empty words. Why don't you name the great man hidden among you?"

He stood up, his arms akimbo and shoulders thrown back, and slowly eyed them one by one. Still there was not a sound. Each one of them knew that Abai had long outstripped them in eloquence, education and knowledge of law. They were envious of him, but afraid; the mocking quality of his voice had not gone over their heads and the atkaminers preferred to lie low and wait. "What's he driving at?" they thought. "What's his trick?"

Abai decided to make the best of their silence.

"Let bygones be bygones, my dear kinsmen," he said. "Let's tell the truth for once! The office of presiding bii is more than an honour. It's a test. You've said much about the honour of the Tobikty, but that's not the thing

that the people are concerned with. It's not your personal disagreements that the presiding bii will have to think of. He'll have to deal with major issues, to help those who are oppressed and injured, who seek a repeal of the decision. He'll have to think of the tears of the weak, the complaints of the widows and orphans and the petitions to restore to the people what they accumulated by the sweat of their brow. To say nothing of the feuds between the tribes, between the Sibani and the Tobikty, the Tobikty and the Kerei, the Uak and the Tobikty. Only he who can truly say that his law is the law of honesty and justice is fit to be the presiding bii. You haven't ventured to mention a single name and so I shall have to do so. I'll speak openly. You're probably thinking of choosing someone from the Irgizbai, or more accurately, one of Kunanbai's sons. I who am an Irgizbai and a son of Kunanbai would not put forward any one of them, but choose a man who would not make the name of the Tobikty accursed, but on the contrary would enhance our fame; and you may be sure that I will support him before the authorities."

Everyone listened intently.

"I propose the name of Asilbek. I advise you to choose him as the presiding bii. He has not aspired to become a volost ruler or bii, but the people will be well pleased with his justice and solicitude. If you want my opinion, you have it now."

He had no sooner finished speaking than the Bokenshi, the kinsmen of Asilbek—Zhirenshe, Urazbai, Abraly and the resourceful Kuntu—chorused enthusiastic approval.

"Well said! So be it! No need to say any more! We thank you for your justice, Abai."

Things ran smoothly after that. Everyone was in agreement with Abai with the exception of the Irgizbai; they could not agree, but were afraid to argue.

The council then and there requested Abai to inform

Losovsky that Asilbek had been proposed for the office of presiding bii.

Losovsky readily agreed, as usual, when he heard Abai's favourable opinion, and unhesitatingly gave his approval.

It was only then that Abai broached the subject of Bazaraly, presenting the case as a personal matter, but could not proceed far before he was interrupted.

"I've been expecting you to say something about Kaumenov. Andreyev spoke to me about him when we were still in town; he's made inquiries on your behalf. But unfortunately I am helpless here. The case has passed out of our jurisdiction. It has been filed with the case of that fugitive Oralbai, the bandit, and since his crimes were committed in both Semipalatinsk and Semirechinsk districts, the case was heard at the offices of the governor-general of the steppes in Omsk. Sentence was pronounced long ago, its execution was left in abeyance pending the capture of the Kaumenovs in hiding. When we were leaving for the steppes, Kaumenov was already being marched to Omsk by stages. His fate is sealed; fifteen years hard labour. That's all I can tell you."

Abai was so affected that he wandered from the yurta without remembering to take leave.

His heart turned to ice as he thought of Takezhan, Iskhak and the other kinsmen who had betrayed Bazaraly to the authorities and had given false testimony against him. He walked on, unaware of his surroundings, only Bazaraly's face before his eyes—an animated, energetic and frank face. It was hard to imagine him in chains at the mercy of men who could understand neither his language nor his splendid character. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he tried to get away from the noisy crowd. He felt as though he had been beaten black and blue.

He was brought back to reality by the drumming of

hoofs. Zhirenshe and Kuntu were approaching, having been sent to learn what had come of his talk with Losovsky. Abai pulled himself together with an effort.

"Asil-aga has been approved, may it be a happy omen! Tell the news to the others," he said.

"We thank you for your justice, may Allah brighten your days!" said Zhirenshe. "You are not the son of your father, but 'the son of the people,' as you've often said." Zhirenshe laughed, his eyes narrowing. "You'll be famous all over the steppes. You are not the presiding bii, but you have chosen the bii of the gathering. Let the Ir-gizbai be offended if they like. They don't seem to understand that they owe everything to you. Kuntu is happy for Asilbek's good luck and I am happy on your account!"

He grasped Abai by the hand, but the latter could scarcely force a smile.

"Ah, Zhirenshe! What's the good of all this? An arrow has pierced me to the heart in the oyaz's yurta. Where is my Bazaraly? I hoped to help him through Losovsky and now I've heard terrible news. Bazaraly has been marched to Omsk and then he will be sent to serve fifteen years of hard labour. All my hopes are gone!"

Zhirenshe was stunned, and Abai went on, feeling that there was nothing he could do if even Losovsky was helpless. But was he really? Abai suddenly remembered his dry tone when speaking of Bazaraly. It was obvious that he had wanted to wash his hands of the matter, and Mikhailov's words came to his mind: "Try to rely on him when something serious is at stake, and he will show himself for what he really is." How true this was! Losovsky could have done a great deal; he could have at least denied the false testimony and certified that Bazaraly had nothing to do with Oralbai. What he had been ready to do for the inoffensive Kokpai he was by no means ready to do for Bazaraly, whom he suspected of being a bitter enemy of the authorities and officialdom at large. Yes,

Yevgeny Petrovich had been right. He knew life and he knew people!

Joyful shouts broke in upon him.

"Isn't that Abai over there. It certainly is!"

"At last we've found you, O light of our eyes!"

Abai turned to find Darkembai and Dandibai hastening breathlessly towards him. The old men were speechless with joy.

Abai decided to take up their case at once and beckoned them to follow, asking them about their aul in Yerally as they went along.

The new chapan sat well on Darkembai's broad shoulders and he wore a new hat as well. Dandibai had come in a homespun beshmet of camel hair and an old lamb-skin cap. Older than Darkembai, he was already bent; his face was deeply lined and the high cheek-bones protruded above his thin beard. He suffered from pains in his side and it was difficult for him to keep in step with his companions. He walked with his riding-whip clasped in his hands behind his back and by the side of Darkembai looked very much like an old stable hand.

Abai led them to a group of Irgizbai who were sitting in a circle somewhat apart from the crowd. Beefy Maibasar sat in the middle, stroking his beard, with Takezhan, Iskhak, Shubar, Akberdy and other atkaminers on either side of him. They had just been railing at Abai. Why hadn't he chosen the presiding bii from among his kinsmen? What in Allah's name had made him choose Asilbek, a Bokenshi? Maibasar was especially incensed. He had been so certain that it was his kinsmen who would find favour with the authorities, and he had fondly, though secretly, hoped that the honourable office would be assigned to himself.

"Our young people are volost rulers and the presiding bii, too, is to come from the Tobikty. Who is worthiest for this office if not I, the eldest of the Irgizbai, the broth-

er of Kunanbai?" He had already been calculating the profits that would come his way—there were many involved and tricky cases to be heard at the gathering and everyone was sure to come running to the man in authority. The prospects were wonderful. "With Allah's help I'll drive home some big herds and droves before we're through," he had thought. And now in this circle, Takezhan and Iskhak had declared, "Luck was in our hands, but Abai snatched it away from us and gave it to an alien clan. He alone is to blame!"

Maibasar was so angry that even his nose seemed sharper, and his complexion took on a purplish hue.

"How dared he drive away good fortune that came to us of itself," he blustered. "If he is so fond of that Asilbek, then let him present him with his own herds. What madness, to give such an office to a stranger when three tribes offered it to us out of respect for the Hadji. And if he did decide to give it away, then why for nothing? He has thrust aside a great piece of good fortune and scattered the honour of our ancestors to the winds like a miserable dervish." The other Irgizbai shared his indignation.

"Why did he make those speeches about helping the poor, the wretched and their like?" said Takezhan to Shubar. "Is this a funeral feast, a place to make a collection for the poor? Whom are we mourning at this gathering? Maieken was right. He's a dervish and nothing more!"

Shubar had a better opinion of Abai, knowing full well that he stood head and shoulders above any of his kinsmen. But when Abai was not around and especially in the presence of Maibasar and Takezhan, he too was not averse to poking fun at his uncle.

"He is not a dervish, Takezhan-aga," he snorted, tweaking the end of his long nose with a habitual gesture. "He's nothing less than a mullah. Didn't he give us a long sermon, like the imams do every day? Why shouldn't

we improve our minds and learn something of God's ways from him?"

The rest joined in his laughter; they appreciated his caustic remark, knowing that Abai was no friend of the empty sermons of the clergy. But just then they noticed Abai approaching with the two old men and they grew respectfully silent as they usually did in his presence. Only Takezhan continued to speak. Recognizing Darkembai and Dandibai, he at once guessed why they had come.

"That's all that was missing," he said angrily. "Abai has deserted his high company for a couple of beggars. Great Allah! What a virtuous man he has become! Perhaps he has given himself up to repentance since the murder of the tsar! He'll be going to Mecca next and come back with a turban on his head and a prayer on his lips, a real effendi. There'll be no end to his sermons then!"

Shubar and Maibasars laughed.

As Abai and the old men approached, the two zhataks respectfully salemed the company and put the usual polite questions about the welfare of the auls. The Irgizbai responded very coolly, since they all realized that the zhataks had not been brought here for nothing.

Abai did not greet anyone, though there were some present whom he had not yet met. He stood facing them with his hands behind his back and a cigarette in his mouth; his gaze was cold and penetrating.

"Takezhan, Iskhak and Shubar," he pronounced the names as if he were reading them off a list, as he took the cigarette from his mouth. "Come with me, all three of you. We must have a talk." Gesturing to the old men to go on, he followed them without looking back.

Shubar was the first to spring up. Takezhan and Iskhak also hoisted themselves heavily to their feet.

"These old men, Darkembai and Dandibai, have come here on behalf of the fifty households of the zhataks," Abai began without preliminaries, when the company had

settled nearby. "I went to Kok-zhatak and told them to send these two to the gathering, promising my support. They have come and I want you, three volost rulers, to come to terms with them. Remember that you will be the defendants if the case is brought up at the gathering."

Abai's hard look disconcerted them. Takezhan began the attack, his eyes flashing.

"So we are the defendants, eh? You'll be saying that Takezhan and Iskhak have raided their auls, isn't that so? You would like to lay the blame at my door. You've brought them to scare me and well they might, this couple of scarecrows!"

Abai went white with anger.

"Don't pretend to be so high and mighty, Takezhan. It is true that the old men are not very well dressed, but they are strangers to evil ways, while you are just as much a stranger to the true duties of a volost ruler."

"So it is I who have made beggars of them!"

"Yes, it is."

"That's a fine thing to accuse me of!"

"But that's just what I do accuse you of! You and your grandfather Oskembai and his sons, Kunanbai and Maibasar. These old men came to your houses as kindling wood and left as ashes. You've squeezed them dry and have thrown them out, but they are your kinsmen nonetheless."

Abai was seething with rage. The words about the axes wielded by the people now came to his mind.

"Don't try to wriggle out of this," he shouted. "If you don't want to be disgraced before the four tribes, come to terms with them here and now. You'll have to return their property anyway at the gathering. I'll do what has to be done right now. Well, what have you to say?"

Abai's threats implied that he would go straight to the oyaz, Takezhan reflected, and this was no trifling matter. Iskhak was silent too, his eyes downcast. The sight of

Darkembai had reminded him of the seven horses he had never returned. He was troubled by the thought that Abai might mention this too. He was now inclined to regard Abai as a representative of authority, half respectfully and half fearfully. He looked to Shubar expectantly; he was the only man to whom Abai would listen.

"Well, kinsmen, what have you come to complain of?" said Shubar to the old men soothingly. "The ice has been broken and you can carry on now by yourselves."

"We're not fond of a quarrel, delight of my eyes," Darkembai began to put forward his arguments. "We haven't the strength for it either. We're not trying to wheedle something out of you through Abai. We only want to recover our own hard-earned property. We have come with two complaints. The first is that last autumn the herds of Takezhan and Maibasars and yours, too, my dear Shubar, trampled down five plots of wheat that was almost ripe. Your animals grazed there for four days and we did not reap so much as a grain. This year, too, your horses trampled down the early shoots until only black earth remained. We were ready to wail with despair, my dear kinsmen. Secondly, there is a nest of thieves called Akhimbet in your Kzil-Moly Volost, my dear Iskhak. They've stolen seven horses from us. We tracked down the thieves, as you know. But what was the result? Just an endless exchange of letters and some other underhand dealings, but let bygones be bygones. In short, we went to ask for our seven horses, but returned only with tears. That is all I have to say, my worthy volost rulers. To whom should we complain if not to Abai, and where should we go if not to this gathering?"

If not for Abai, Takezhan would have long since hurled himself upon the zhataks. In the circumstances he could only afford to glare at them.

Shubar was quick to understand that this matter would not enhance their position before the biis and the authori-

ties. Once Abai were to begin nothing would ever stop him.

"You've cornered us properly, haven't you, old men!" he said briskly, as though addressing old friends. "There's no one at this council who would dare to press a case so stubbornly against the sons of Kunanbai. I had a mind to defend your case myself, since you are from my volost, but I see that you do not need me. You have a powerful protector in Abai-aga. He is supported by the presiding bii on the one hand and by the oyaz on the other; your words will reach them quicker than ours and then there'll be the devil to pay. You're very lucky, old men. And so we have nothing that we can really argue about and shall have to come to terms. I heard of your complaint even last year and Allah should not be forgotten after all." Shubar now glanced at Takezhan and Iskhak significantly.

"Let us not deprive them of the fruits of their labour. Let Abai-aga tell us his decision and that will be the end of it," he said.

Abai appreciated Shubar's quick understanding of the situation. He had managed to give the conversation a fresh turn and there was no denying that he was a glib talker. "He's wiser than Takezhan and Iskhak, though younger than either," he thought. "He'll go far, but in which direction?"

Dandibai, who had said nothing, understood that Shubar was trying to persuade Takezhan to satisfy their claims, to conciliate Abai and preserve the prestige of Kunanbai's sons. He had been listening and nodding his approval.

"If the talk is over, the horses will go to our drovers," he improvised at last, after clearing his throat. "We are satisfied with your decision. Though you are young, let it be as you have said."

"Let Abai tell us his decision and we shall do as he bids," Iskhak declared.

Takezhan felt it was useless and even dangerous to argue when the two were agreed. "Abai stands so near the authorities that he can raise a menacing hand at any moment," he thought, waiting for Abai to speak.

And so the decision was announced; the zhataks were to receive two five-year-olds for each plot that had been twice trampled down, twenty head in all. The seven stolen horses were to be made good with due allowance being made for their issue, which meant that they would have to be replaced by ten "full-valued" animals.

The old men were dumbfounded, and secretly prayed that Abai would see the matter through to the end. The volost rulers were silent too, though within they were outraged. To object to the decision they had accepted beforehand would have been a violation of custom.

Abai pretended not to notice their chagrin.

"Now, we're done with the decision," he said firmly, "and we've got to see that the horses are actually given to the old men. You're pretending to agree with the decision now, but will sing another tune when the council is over. To prevent this, I want you to give them those thirty head of horse in three days. You have plenty of shabarmans to do your bidding and may send them to fetch the horses. I'll be present when they are being delivered and only then shall we regard the matter as settled. Have you understood me?"

"Yes," they sighed, as though barely able to pronounce the word.

Abai rose, lit his cigarette and went off with the old men.

The five-year-olds were duly brought within three days and handed over to the old men in the presence of Abai.

The old men were beside themselves with joy.

"That's more than is usually paid for such losses as ours, more than a bride price; it's like a kun that is paid for murder."

"Never have zhataks received so much. May Abai be happy for the rest of his days!"

But there were misgivings too. The first to express them was the cautious Dandibai.

"You've made them restore the horses, Abai-zhan," he said to Abai, blinking with embarrassment, "but what if the horses skip back to the volost rulers? That is what my frightened head is worrying about. We'll never get those horses home. It's a long journey through the empty steppes and it won't be hard to rob a pair of old men and lay the blame on other thieves."

Darkembai, who was the bolder, was ready to face up to the risk.

"Why talk that way, Dandibai? What have we to be afraid of? We'll find some companions and drive the horses safely home."

But Abai too had misgivings and at once summoned Baimagambet. "You will go with these old men," he said to him. "First drive the horses to our aul in Baikoshkara and rest there for a day or two. Give my salem to Aigerim; let her make these aksakals as comfortable as she can and let her also give you my revolver. I keep it in the big coffer. Then choose a good horse for yourself and help the old men to bring the animals to Yeraly. Allah will be with you on your way, my old friends. Present my regards to your aul."

Dandibai had correctly guessed what was in Takezhan's mind. The latter had summoned two thieves known throughout the Yeraly—Serikbai and Tursun. Both were tall muscular men, sturdy as a pair of logs. Both, too, were experienced and desperate thieves. Takezhan had not only abetted them in the past, but had often suggest-

ed to them whom they should rob. He had even set aside some winter land for the two near Yeraly, and both were as firmly tied to his hand as horses on a long rope.

"We shall get our own back on those cursed zhataks," he said to Tursun, pointing to the large herd driven by Darkembai and Dandibai. "But look here, dogs, if the job is not cleanly done I'll just have nothing more to do with you and you'll get caught on the very next job."

Tursun was willing to act at once.

"Just see if I don't drive those zhataks to their graves!"

Serikbai advised him not to hurry, having once narrowly missed being caught by these same old men. He reassured Takezhan. The job would be done in the winter and the horses would vanish as if carried away in a blizzard. Takezhan, too, thought this was a better plan.

Now that the case had been settled, Abai could have gone on his way, but he preferred to stay for a few days to watch the proceedings. Only a few days before, the gathering had begun the hearing of one of the most intricate cases, that known as the "Litigation of the Girl Salikha." It had been dragging on since the previous year and mutual recriminations had been growing like a snow-ball.

A girl by the name of Salikha of the Kerei tribe had been betrothed to a man of the Sibani who had died the year before. The kalim had been paid in full and the bride's yurt and dowry had been ready. The Sibani, therefore, had decided that she should be married to the elder brother of the deceased, a man of sixty who had two wives. But this had been bravely and stubbornly opposed by Salikha, who wrote a letter to the elders of the Kerei and also sent a message to them through her kinsmen: "Don't let them deprive us of our honour! I have obeyed you always. Don't ruin the youth of your daughter, blessed Kerei. Don't give me away as a third wife to a man who is older than my father."

The girl's plea had become known far and wide and the young people decided to intervene. "We cannot endure such a humiliation," they said. An old akyn had composed a song called "The Plaint of Salikha to Her Kinsmen," which was sung by everybody, by the shepherds in the field, the herdsmen on their horses and the young people at their evening gatherings. A young man of the Kerei had fallen in love with the unhappy Salikha. His love was reciprocated. Finally, this general sympathy had its effect even upon the elders and it was decided to return the kalim to the Sibani and to break the wedding contract.

When word of this reached the Sibani, many malicious tongues were set wagging. "The Kerei want to show their strength and humble us. They've made a mockery of our ancestors; it's an insult to the Sibani." All negotiations failed and tribal strife soon followed.

Barimta broke out when the snow was gone and the first grass appeared. Both tribes began to steal each other's cattle and as many as five to ten djiguits were wounded in the frequent clashes. There was no peace between the two tribes, even during the gathering; the barimta was at its height and droves of choice horses were driven off every night by raiders armed with lances. It was clear that a great battle was imminent.

This was the most urgent complaint of all that had been submitted to the Karkaralinsk and Semipalatinsk chiefs, since the situation was growing graver every day. The number of people involved was enormous and there was no end to the petitions, false testimony and other documents—a real torrent of papers had poured in.

The Tobikty made the most of this dispute. It was this, in fact, which had originally given them the opportunity of choosing a presiding bii from their midst. Under different circumstances the Sibani and the Kerei would

never have renounced their claims so easily. Though Takezhan, Maibasar and their associates as always boasted that the sinecure had been received as a mark of honour to Kunanbai, the truth of the matter was that the case of Salikha could not be entrusted to a representative of one of the warring sides. But the choice of Asilbek did not suit the Kerei either.

"He stands near the Siban and his wife comes from the aul of the horse-thieves," they said. Asilbek, for his part, had refused to handle the matter, for fear of arousing discontent. His nearest kin were sorely disappointed. "You should have accepted this case," Kuntu, Dutbai and others said to him. "There was a fortune for the asking, and you have turned it down."

Both the district chiefs received numerous appeals urging them to take a decision themselves, but they refused. It was at that time, however, that fresh rumours of Abai's sense of justice were spreading throughout Balkibek. Everyone was especially impressed with the two things he had done.

"Try as they might to gain the office of presiding bii, the sons of Kunanbai could not persuade Abai to give it to them," it was said everywhere. "Instead, he gave the post to Asilbek, a man who is hardly related to him. He said that Asilbek was just, and would bring benefit to the people."

The second instance had come to be talked of by the people during the previous few days.

"He has taken the part of the zhataks and has made his own brothers, powerful volost rulers though they are, return thirty horses to those beggars. He is always just, no matter who appeals to him, kinsman or not. For the sake of the people he is ready to burden even his own kinsmen."

For the biis and the volost rulers of the Siban and the Kerei there were other considerations.

Abai was known to all the Semipalatinsk chiefs. Had they not summoned him and asked for his advice as soon as they had come to the steppes? Who therefore could be more powerful than Abai? Kunanbai was no longer the Kunanbai of old, but simply the surviving spirit of his ancestors, and his sons, volost rulers though they had managed to make themselves, were nothing much. What were Takezhan and Iskhak? Just ordinary djiguits in handsome cloaks, young men who lived solely on their fathers' fame. If there was a strong man among the Tobikty, it was Abai. Though holding no office himself, he was decidedly more intelligent and courageous than any of those who did.

Nothing else was spoken of in the yurtas of the Kerei and the Siban—until Zhumakan went to Losovsky, and Toisary to the other oyaz, the Karkaralinsk district chief.

Meanwhile, Abai had spent his days at the meetings, forming his own opinion of the biis. After listening to their contests of eloquence, he humorously concluded that Zhirenshe and Urazbai were the most voluble talkers of all.

Then came a day when Abai was summoned to the yurta of the oyaz. In Losovsky's tent he found the presiding bii Asilbek and the Karkaralinsk district chief. Their conversation was brief. Asilbek told Abai of the request made by the Kerei and Siban. They wanted him to act as mediator in the litigation of Salikha. When he was convinced that the request had come from the parties in question and had not been prompted by the chiefs, Abai agreed.

The district chiefs were pleased and at once approved his appointment. The Karkaralinsk chief Sinitsin then handed him two appeals written in Arabic by the girl. Abai read them carefully, but said nothing.

On the same day he summoned three representatives from each side. The Siban was presented by Zhumakan.

their volost ruler, Barak-Tyureh, one of their elders, and Tanirberdy. The Kerei sent Toisary, who was also a volost ruler, and two atkaminers. The company was received by Abai, Zhirenshe and Urazbai.

"As far as I have learned, kinsmen, your quarrel has developed into open strife," Abai remarked. "Things have come to such a pass that you are even raiding each other's auls and stealing each other's cattle. The disputed compensation was first a kalim for a bride, but has now grown to the dimensions of several kalims, to even more than a kun for murder. The man chosen to handle such a case as yours must know many details, many more than a single man can gather. 'One head is good, but two are even better,' as I have read somewhere. If you do not object, I shall appoint two biis to assist me. They are here: Zhirenshe and Urazbai. They're both from the Tobikty, whom you were willing to trust."

"So be it," Zhumakan and Toisary at once declared, without consulting their kinsmen.

"It is for you to choose your helpers."

"We, the people of the Sibian, have chosen you because we have confidence in your sense of justice," said Barak-Tyureh, a tall, healthy-looking djiguit, stroking his black, silver-flecked beard. "You may appoint two or five helpers for that matter. We have no objection. What matters is that the final decision should come from you. As the saying goes: 'Of biis there may be many, of decisions only one. Such is the will of Maiki-bii* and thus it shall be done.'"

Zhumakan nodded approval.

Toisary expressed the same thought, but in different words.

"It is not for us to say upon whose wings you should

* Maiki-bii, a legendary judge.—*Ed.*

fly. We have placed the case in your hands and it is your decision we await."

Abai bowed silently and the discussion was ended. An arbiter must be reticent, for thoughts are often betrayed by superfluous words. There were intriguers on both sides, people who were always trying to anticipate the swing of the pendulum and to take advantage. Abai therefore preferred to keep silent, fearing that his words might be wrongly interpreted by one side or the other.

"It's too early to say anything definite, but it seems to me that the Kerei are open-hearted in this, while Barak has something up his sleeve," remarked Zhirenshe with his usual shrewdness when they were alone.

Though of the same opinion, Abai again kept his thoughts to himself. He entrusted his assistants with making inquiries on the spot; Zhirenshe would go to the Kerei and Urazbai to the Siban.

"Much damage was done to property and many people have been injured during the barimta. You'll have to investigate many facts, but remember that truth and the semblance of truth are two different things. Enemies are inclined to mix truth with lies, or to exaggerate or conceal things. Keep your opinions to yourselves, and do not say: 'This is the truth and this is a lie!' And especially express no favour for the one side or the other and do not bind yourselves with promises. If you do, I shall be bound as well. And most important, strike no bargains. The kinsmen have chosen me because they rely on my honesty, and I beseech you to be the wings only of truth and justice."

The investigations took more than a week and were held in three places simultaneously—among the Siban, among the Kerei and at the meeting itself, to which many petitioners and witnesses came from both sides.

Abai himself only questioned the "masters of the word," that is, the principal plaintiff and the principal defendant:

the old, would-be bridegroom Sabatar of the Siban and the girl's father, Kaldibai of the Kerei. He was able to accurately assess the losses sustained through the breach of contract: the kalim, the gifts and the dowry.

The dead bridegroom had been the favourite son of the rich Baigebek, and the kalim had been one of the largest known in the region. When the young man had died, Kaldibai had declared that since his daughter was now destined to marry a man so much older than herself, Sabatar was to pay an additional half of the previous kalim. Abai carefully noted the amount.

Kaldibai, for his part, had also sustained considerable losses. He had raised the dowry to enhance his daughter's dignity. Besides the octagonal and well-furnished yurt with a silken carpet bought from a Kokand caravan for a hundred sheep, he had prepared an entire dowry in sets of twenty-five similar articles. There were twenty-five fur coats, twenty-five embroidered koshmas and twenty-five coffers; of dresses, linen, table-cloths, plates, pillows and blankets there were also twenty-five each. Even the silken covers for the ivory inlaid bed numbered twenty-five.

All this property had not yet been delivered, while the kalim had already been paid in full. For all that, the bride had refused.

The Siban tribesmen were especially grieved over the large number of cattle they had given up as a kalim, and it was this which had prompted them to steal the horses of the Kerei immediately after the breach of contract. The Kerei, for their part, had also resorted to barimta to get back these horses which they had come to regard as their own. Each side tried to capture as many horses as it had lost in the previous raid. Strong djiguits, experienced in barimta and raiding, fell upon their opponents again and again. Soon every man capable of wielding a soeel was involved in the struggle and the tangle over the ill-

starred marriage contract grew increasingly complicated.

Abai's next step was to summon everyone concerned in the quarrel, one by one. Finally, he was curious to know what Salikha, the cause of the conflict, had to say.

She had come to Balkibek to submit her complaint to the chief of the Karkaralinsk District in person and had not yet left the settlement. Abai sent Yerbol and Kokpai to fetch her and her kinsmen to Ospan's yurta, where he was living.

A tall olive-skinned girl in a sable hat and silk chapan entered the yurta accompanied by her father Kaldibai and other kinsmen. Large silver earrings trembled from the lobes of her ears as she walked in slowly but fearlessly. The yurta was filled to bursting, since everyone wanted to have a look at this girl whose name was on all lips. But after Ospan had offered kumys to everyone, Abai gestured to the Tobikty, and the people about him began to depart. Kaldibai also rose and led his kinsmen outside.

It was only now, when he was alone with her, that Abai examined her smooth, clear features, her dark wide-set eyes alight with a curious fire under luxuriant lashes which served to stress their depth. There was the suggestion of a curve in the delicate line of her nose. Her mouth drooped slightly at the corners and, though barely perceptible, premature lines on her face bespoke anxiety and grief.

Abai had long been accustomed to saying little and listening to others. Now, too, he watched the girl silently before speaking.

"My dear Salikha! This is our first meeting, but I believe I know as much about you as any of your kinsmen."

She blushed and smiled, her features changing instantly. Her white teeth flashed and her face seemed suddenly radiant, sincere and frank. She impressed him as hav-

ing a passionate spirit, a spirit that was ordinarily joyful and full of life.

"I've read your appeal," Abai went on. "Do you still abide by what you've written?"

Salikha frowned, her dark eyes expressing resentment.

"Abai-Mirza," she said with some surprise, "I didn't write it only to repudiate it afterwards. I haven't changed my mind." And she smiled again.

"Then let me ask another question: when you wrote that you would never marry, did this imply that it was only old Sabatar you would never marry? Or is there no one of the Sibani you would care to marry? Would you change your mind if a worthy man of the Sibani tried to woo you?"

"I would never have dared to refuse if it were a man closer to my age. Nor would my family and my aul have let me do such a thing."

"Have you passed word to the kinsmen of your betrothed to name another djiguit as your groom?"

"Yes, I have. But they replied, 'The kalim has been paid and Sabatar has his rights, which have been determined by Allah. Let her cease such nonsense!'"

"Tell me another thing, my dear Salikha," Abai continued more gently. "It is no longer any secret that the kinsmen of your betrothed often say, 'She would never have refused if she had not been urged to do so by a djiguit of the Kerei. It was only when she became entangled with him that she grew so stubborn—and so the Kerei are doubly guilty before our ancestors. They've taken our kalim and dishonoured the maiden.' That is what they say. And what have you to say about it? Did you form an attachment with this djiguit before or after you refused to marry Sabatar?"

Salikha answered without hesitation, though swept with shame.

"What I have to say is as truthful as our faith itself,

Abai-Mirza," she said, her earrings shaking with her emotion. "When the Sibani answered that they would not name anyone as a groom but the old man, I decided to run off with anyone; and it was only then that this djigit appeared. No living man could approach me before that. I regarded the Sibani as a desired home as long as my first betrothed was alive," she said, brushing the tears away with her embroidered handkerchief.

"That will be all," said Abai, still looking at her.

She seemed surprised that the conversation had ended so soon. It had been quite different when she had talked to her kinsmen. The compassion she felt in Abai's words strengthened her determination.

"No one incited me to do this, Abai-Mirza!" she assured him frowning, with sorrow and almost wrath in her tone. "The bitter thought came to me of itself. How could I be the third wife of that death's head Sabatar? I kept asking myself. Believe me, I feel more dead than alive. I look into the dark waters of the Balkibek every day, just as I used to look into the Bakanas near our aul. In this river, too, there will be room for me. I would rather the cold waters caress me than old Sabatar."

Abai looked up, deeply moved. Salikha got up and walked towards the door, but he sat still, and merely nodded a farewell. He could see the waters part before her body, her delicate eyebrows raised in terror beneath the still surface, her tiny hands reaching for death. The vision gave birth to new and rhythmic lines within him.

*"Let the waves kiss my lips—not that husband old,"
She uttered and sank in the waters cold.*

Yerbol, Kokpai and Shakke expressed surprise to see the girl leave so soon.

"Why did you let her go so quickly? It was just as if she were paying an official visit to the oyaz," Yerbol reproached him.

"She could have stayed for dinner, at least," Shakke observed.

"There was no need for that," said Abai. "Let her go." He reached for a sheet of paper and began to jot down the lines that had come to him.

He did not care to explain why he had not detained the girl. Had he kept her there, the Sibani, anxious to seize on any pretext, would have interpreted his action as an indulgence to the Kerei. They might also have said that Abai had prompted her what to say to the district chiefs.

The interrogation continued for three days more. Zhirenshe and Urazbai each had chosen five assistants and gone to the Sibani and Kerei. Soon they were back with detailed information.

At last came the day when Abai was to announce his decision. The losses of both parties and their mutual claims had now been fully recorded. The bizarre tangle of the whole case was completely in Abai's hands, but no one knew what decision he had arrived at.

He ordered the people of the Kerei and Sibani to gather before the yurtas of the district chiefs. The shabarmans accordingly rode through the settlement shouting, "The litigation of the girl Salikha! The dispute between the Kerei and the Sibani! Hearing of the case today! Decision to be announced!"

The people flocked to the base of a small hill. The chiefs in their brass-buttoned uniforms had also come out, surrounded by interpreters, guards and policemen, and formed a separate compact group of their own. There was something festive though solemn about the gathering.

As Abai approached the hill, he was intercepted by Zhirenshe and Urazbai.

"Now you have two reins in your hands, Abai. The final test has come for you and for our clans," said Zhirenshe.

"But you have not told your decision to even me and Urazbai. Couldn't we hear it now? Who is guilty and who is not?"

Laughing, Abai regarded his friends with narrowing eyes.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Which side should we uphold?"

Both were silent.

"Has something stuck in your throat, Zhirenshe?"

"The sight of gold will tempt even an angel," Zhirenshe began significantly. Watching Abai's expression closely, he tried to speak calmly and firmly. "The customs of the ancestors are law for the descendants. The Sibani have realized this well. Barak-Tyureh and other elders send this salem to you through us: 'Let him adjudge the daughter of the Kerei to Sabatar and he shall receive forty pedigree horses from the herds of the Sibani.' This is what we meant to tell you...."

To Abai it seemed that these were not words that were streaming from Zhirenshe's lips, but unspeakable filth. He waved his hand in despair, but took hold of himself and laughed. This quick play of expression did not escape Zhirenshe and at once kindled his hopes.

Abai was still laughing and looking at them.

"Well, Urazbai? How about you? Is that what you advise as well? 'Let us take the gift and sacrifice the Kerei to the Sibani.'"

Urazbai very well knew Abai's attitude to such matters, but was resolved to speak his mind nonetheless:

"Yes! That's my advice too. I agree with Zhirenshe. It's as clear as day. Is there a chief who would not take a bribe? Where's the bii who would not accept a gift? Or can you tell me of a bii who would not feather his nest? We shall be neither the first nor the last. It's not to Mecca we have come as pilgrims, but to the gathering of Bal-kibek."

"So that's your decision," said Abai, still concealing his thoughts.

Zhirenshe and Urazbai grew bolder.

"Yes! That is our decision."

"Let it be as the Sibani wish."

"Enough of your yapping, you curs," Abai shouted hoarsely, unable to control himself any longer, and he let out a string of oaths.

Both of them were older than him and never before had he dared to speak to them thus except in jest. His first fit of rage was soon spent, but he was still filled with anger.

"You two were to have been my helpmates. My wings indeed! I might just as well have chosen Takezhan. Justice and injustice are the same to you! What do you care either for the Sibani or the Kerei! But both of them are my people! You wanted to sacrifice me to your money-bags, to disgrace me before the gathering and all the Kazakhs. You would have done better to kill me. How could you have sunk so low? The people have trusted to the honour of your tribes and the spirits of your ancestors and what have you done? You've reached out for a bribe from under their very shrouds. Get out of my sight!"

He strode quickly away from them.

Takezhan and Iskhak came running to meet him breathlessly.

"The chiefs are waiting for you! Where have you been, Abai?" they shouted.

Abai walked through the crowd and took his place on the green top of the hill. He courteously greeted the two oyazes and then presented his salams to Barak-Tyureh and Toisary, the chiefs of the opposing parties.

Barak was confident. He had made his plans long before, when Abai had appointed Zhirenshe and Urazbai as his assistants. It was for that reason that he had told Abai that the decision was to rest ultimately with him

alone. He had been sure that Abai would never accept a bribe from the Kerei. "As for myself, I shall not try to bribe him either. It will be sufficient to bribe his assistants. If I pay them, they'll influence him as I choose," the shrewd atkaminer had thought. He had known the true worth of Zhirenshe very well. Hadn't the man once accepted a bribe from him willingly enough? Certain that Zhirenshe and Urazbai had done their work well, he now looked at Toisary with glee.

Abai opened the hearing by calling upon the two biis to speak. Barak-Tyureh and Toisary repeated their contradictory charges, which were known to all. Both finished with the following words: "We entrust our case first to Allah and next to you. Decide the matter in all justice! Let the spirit of our ancestors have the final word."

It was only then that Abai began to speak. Pale and under great stress of emotion, he sat with his legs folded under him, his hand pressing his hat against his side. Beads of perspiration stood out on his broad brow and his large straight nose, but his voice was clear and firm, his speech calm and fluent.

"My people, all who are gathered here! My kinsmen of the Kerei and the Siban! You have set me up between yourselves that I might seek the origins of your discord and restore peace among you. Entrusting this task to me, you said, 'May you serve as a seam to unite that which was torn asunder.' I wish to warn you that in settling this case I have been thinking of the people in general and not of individuals. But in thinking of the people in general, I was compelled to think first and foremost of the younger generation. Our accursed quarrels over brides have been a source of enmity between Kazakhs for many ages. As the times change, the laws must grow obsolete and new ways must be evolved for settling such disputes which disturb our peace, rend our unity and bring us dishonour. Such are the thoughts with which I have

approached this case, and such, too, are the thoughts which have prompted my decision. My first decision concerns the girl Salikha. I do not know what yardstick was used by our ancestors, but I do know that the young have a new approach; they do not wish to live in sorrow from the days of their youth. The new times have brought new customs and those of our fathers who refuse to heed the demands of the young will not heal the wounds but only reopen them. Salikha has once shown her obedience to her parents and became the betrothed of the man they had chosen for her. But fate bereaved her of her betrothed, the man who was her proper match. There cannot be two deaths in one life; such is the law of Allah. Is not Sabatar's demand the equivalent of a second death? It is a second death indeed, because the girl is ready to die if only to deliver herself from such a fate. All of you have sisters and daughters, my people. Is it just to sell a girl twice? She surrendered her freedom once in favour of her tribe. Let her freedom now be returned to her. Salikha is free of both the marriage and wedding contract. Such is my first decision."

The last words rang over the crowd with especial firmness.

"But the Sibani are not to blame for the fact that the girl's betrothed died," Abai went on without pausing. "The Sibani meant well and honestly paid the kalim. You, Kerei, have received it in full and not once, but twice. The first kalim was large enough and was at least equal to fifty camels. Not satisfied with this, you took advantage of the fact that Salikha was now to be the third wife of an old man and demanded an additional kalim, which was generously granted. Thus, you sold your own daughter a second time, and the Sibani are not to blame for this. On the contrary, you, Kerei, are to be blamed for your avarice. And so the Kerei are to return the kalim they received, but not only the kalim. They must also pay com-

pensation. They received property valued at fifty camels in the first kalim and at twenty-five camels in the second kalim. I have determined that the compensation for the guilt of the Kerei to the Siban and their own daughter shall be twenty-five camels. In all, the Kerei must give the Siban 100 camels. The clan of the bride and the clan of the djiguit she has chosen as her husband must contribute equally to this payment. Such is my second decision.

"During the past three days I have collected all necessary information about the losses sustained by both sides in their conflict. The Siban have driven away 200 horses, while the Kerei possessed themselves of 170. Let both sides return the horses or substitute five-year-olds for those that are gone. This is my final decision, kinsmen, and it has been prompted only by my desire to restore peace and unity among the tribes. I have nothing more to say."

The crowd was very still. Only the two oyazes, who had been listening to their interpreters, now exchanged a few remarks of approval. They nodded to Abai, smiling, and at once approached him. The crowd interpreted this as a sign that the litigation was over.

But neither among the Kerei nor among the Siban was there the hubbub that usually marked the announcement of a decision: "I agree." "I don't agree." "It can't be!" "That's a good decision." Nor was there a sound from even the Tobikty, who were disinterested observers.

Zhirenshe, who was sitting among the Siban, whispered something to his neighbour, a tall, venerable aksakal, who suddenly sprang up and shouted wildly at Abai:

"Oh, Kengerbai, Kengerbai! Your spirit is no longer among us! Whoever heard of such a judgement being passed on the wayward daughter of a tribe. I appeal to your spirit, O holy ancestor!"

And the old man stalked from the crowd, still calling on the spirit of Kengerbai. There were only a few, however, who understood his meaning. Long, long ago, Abai's ancestor Kengerbai pronounced the death sentence upon Yenlik and Kebek, a bride and djiguit who had broken a marriage contract. The old man's outburst passed almost unnoticed, and the crowd dispersed.

Abai, however, had heard and understood the old man's words. Thinking over them for a few minutes, he suddenly broke into laughter. Zhirenshe and Urazbai, who had come over to him, were much surprised.

"It would not have been so bad if it had not been for that aksakal," said Zhirenshe with affected anxiety. "Whatever made him think of Kengerbai at such a moment! I was simply shaken by his words. Aren't you sorry for the decision you have passed, Abai? You don't seem to understand that you have strayed from the path of our ancestors and are leading others astray as well. I'm sure you'll admit you're sorry." He peered into Abai's face questioningly. The other had stopped laughing.

"The people called Kengerbai a wild boar because he was ready to drink human blood in bribes. Did you know that? I am not the descendant of Kengerbai, but the son of a man," he said coldly, and strolled away.

Zhirenshe and Urazbai stood watching him go, angry but stupefied, as though something had hit them over the head. The first to recover was Zhirenshe:

"He's riding his high horse now. But we'll see!..."

"Kunanbai too rode a high horse once, but finally he stumbled," Urazbai added, spitefully. "His precious son will come to grief too."

The gathering drew quickly to a close. The chiefs were gone and the people were leaving for their various auls. Abai and his companions went to Baikoshkar. Zhirenshe

and Urazbai were travelling the same way, but kept themselves an arrow's flight ahead.

Abai had had no opportunity to have a further talk with them, and he lashed his bay to overtake them. But when the two saw him, they exchanged glances and spurred on their own horses.

"So that's how it is, I see!" exclaimed Abai.

The two reined their horses for an instant.

"Yes, that is how it is," Zhirenshe shouted angrily.

"And it's all the better that you should know it," added Urazbai.

The two galloped furiously off. Abai checked the pace of his horse and sadly looked after the men he had once called his friends. Both were now his enemies.

Takezhan and Maibasars, who were returning from Balkibek, surrounded by their usual crowd, were also railing at Abai, Zhirenshe having told them about the forty pedigree horses promised by Barak.

"He could have returned with many honours and a drove of horses too. And what has he come away with? Empty hands!" fumed Takezhan. "He's broken our customs like a Russian chief. Even a Russian chief would not have desecrated our ancestors' soil!"

But this was only the opinion of the Tobikty atkaminers. Neither the Kerei nor the Sibian had anything to say against Abai. Accepting his decision, they told both oyazes, "We agree with his decision, shall abide by it and make peace." A peace contract was drawn up and sealed by Barak and Zhumakan on behalf of the Sibian, and by Toisary and Bogesh on behalf of the Kerei. Both sides thought mighty of Abai, realizing that he was a new man, one who was breaking with the obsolete traditions of the Kazakhs.

"His words were good and will heal the people. Such a man will be respected everywhere," they said one to another.

An open carriage drawn by three horses sped along the road from Akshoky to Semipalatinsk. Baimagambet, who sat on the driver's box, now and then lashed the bay to make the most of the coolness of that autumn morning. Abai and his three children, Abish, Magash and Gulbadan, sat in the carriage which was lined with red morocco. The usually pale, thin face of Abish was now rosy with animation.

"Where shall we live when we get to town, Father?" he asked again and again. "At a Kazakh or a Russian house? Shall we be together, the three of us? I think I could do better if I lived and studied alone."

"What next? It's I who am going to live alone with a Russian family. They have a girl the same age as me and I'll learn to speak Russian sooner than you," exclaimed Gulbadan, who had always been more precocious than her brothers. Pushing Magash out of her way, she had snuggled on to her father's knees. Abai was pleased with the boldness of his little girl and her cheerfulness, which had not been diminished by her first parting with home.

"My happy golden bird," he said, tickling her chin, "you're bolder than your brothers and you'll live with the family of an educated Russian woman who will be like a mother to you. You'll be comfortable, all of you. I'll come to see you in town very often, because there's nothing more important to me than your studies."

He pressed the children to him. Noticing that Magash had said nothing and had apparently been saddened by his separation from home more than the others, Abai tried to distract him.

"Why don't you sing a song, Magash?"

Secretly pleased that his father had taken notice of him, the little boy's thin lips parted in a smile, revealing his tiny teeth.

"What song shall I sing, Father?" he asked, visibly brightening. "But I'm afraid to begin because I'll mix it all up. You'd better begin it yourself."

Gulbadan, who sensed her father's intention, joined in the game.

"Magash never likes to begin. Whenever someone asks him to sing, he gets so frightened that he backs away like a foal."

Everybody laughed, including Baimagambet. Even Magash laughed, though he buried his face in the cushion.

"Just because a foal backs away doesn't mean that he can't go forward sometimes," Abai interceded for his son. "But how can you know such a thing when you never ride a horse."

Magash raised his head.

"She can't ride a sheep, let alone a foal; and my tai,* which always backs away, took first place at the baiga five times," he said to Abai, now quite jolly. "You begin the song, Father."

Abai sang the "Kozy-kosh" and the children joined in.

Throughout the two days of their journey Abai sang songs to the children, told them stories or made Abish and Gulbadan tell him what they knew. When they were sleepy, they all sang in chorus, including Baimagambet. At last they reached the town.

On Mikhailov's advice Magash and Gulbadan were sent to school. They had to attend separate schools, boys' and girls' schools, but boarded together with a Russian family Andreyev had recommended. Mikhailov's advice with regard to Abish was somewhat different. This boy had already learned to read and write Arabic and was especially alert and quick-witted. He had picked up a little Russian from his studies with the interpreter, but was too

* Tai—one-year-old colt.—*Ed.*

big to be put into the first class of the elementary school. For this reason he was being put in the charge of an educated Russian family where he could improve his language and his general education could be looked after. Abai found a good private tutor for him.

Mikhailov took an interest in the boy from the start and gave Abai another bit of advice about him.

"Your eldest son, Ibragim Kunanbayevich, is capable of serious study, in my opinion. It doesn't matter if he has outgrown the first form at the elementary school. It is even better that he has come here after having received at least a smattering of knowledge in his native tongue. That will make it easier for him to study another language. Take my advice: let your little Abdrakhman get some grounding with his tutor and next year send him to school, but not in Semipalatinsk. Let him go to Tumen, where the schools are better. I have a good acquaintance there and he'll be taken good care of. Let him spend the summer in the steppes and the winter in town, where he will get a Russian education. If he keeps in good health, we may some day send him to the University in St. Petersburg!"

Abai was grateful to Mikhailov. Here was a friend who had given more thought to his children than all the kinsmen in the aul, and Abai unhesitatingly agreed with him.

They sat talking in Mikhailov's spacious study until dark, when a young woman brought in an oil-lamp from another room. She had a sweet, round face, luxuriant fair hair and large blue eyes, and Abai had never seen her before. The only woman he had seen about the place was Domna, who did the house work.

The young woman greeted the guest modestly. Mikhailov took the lamp from her hand and thanked her.

"This, dear Liza, is my friend Ibragim Kunanbayevich." He laughed awkwardly at Abai's puzzled expression. "And

this, Ibragim Kunanbayevich, is my wife Yelizaveta Alekseyevna."

Abai was at a loss, as he did not know just what Russians said to each other on such occasions.

"I didn't know you had married. I wish you happiness," he muttered finally.

The young woman was not at all like those St. Petersburg and Moscow ladies whom Abai had sometimes met in the houses of the chiefs or in the home of Akbas. She seemed more like the local womenfolk, of whom Abai had seen many on the streets of Semipalatinsk. It was clear from her gestures and the way she spoke to her husband that she was very shy. She was in the room only for a few minutes and then left unobtrusively.

"We were married quite recently," Mikhailov told Abai, "and quite unexpectedly too. I did it without much philosophizing. She springs from a local family of moderate means and has had little education. While Abish is getting his education, I shall try to give her what education I can. It is my duty to make her an equal and a friend."

Abai was struck by his casual tone and somewhat embarrassed air as he spoke of this event which should have been the most important in his life. He asked no more and Mikhailov went on to tell him that he had returned to his post at the district office.

On this occasion, Abai stayed in town for a long time. One day he visited Tinibai's house, for the first time since his arrival, and was put up for the night by his sister. Makish chided her brother for his long absence. He hadn't neglected them thus when Saltanat had been here, she said. The name evoked a string of memories.

"Saltanat... Lovely Saltanat..." he said slowly. "She was indeed a jewel. What has become of her, I wonder? Where does she live? Do you ever see her?"

Abai drank in every word of his sister's story.

Saltanat had long been married to the man to whom she had been betrothed. She had given up her freedom and since then had managed to visit them only once. She had brought her little son and had spent days on end with Makish, who had once taken her guest to Colonel's Island. They had brought with them some kumys and food and they had spent the entire day talking.

Abai was surprised to learn that Makish knew all the verses he had composed, and had sung all of them to her friend on the island. As she listened, Saltanat had silently embraced her little son without saying a word.

"Life has led me away from my dreams," she had said finally. "Those days seem like just another such island as this, just as cool and fragrant as this spring. What blessed days they were. I am resigned to my fate and I have nothing to pray for any longer; but our talk today has brought old memories back and I'm as lonely as ever. Still, this loneliness is not sterile, but will give birth to my pledge. Not only I, but my children too will revere the name of Abai. I'll bring them up as true followers of Abai. That will be the last fruit of our friendship."

Abai was moved almost to the point of tears. He was grateful to his sister for her story and felt that he could fully reveal his thoughts to her.

"Only Saltanat could have said such things. She told you of her duty and has reminded me of mine. She wants me to compose verses and songs which will be remembered by her children. Through you, she seems to say to me, 'What if our paths are separated by the mountain passes. I desire only that your voice shall reach me.'"

He fell silent, his heart flooded with the rhythmic beat of words.

Abai spent the autumn and first half of winter in town. The children were now going to school, but he could not

bring himself to leave them. He spent all the time, except on Sundays, in the Gogol Library, where his studies acquired an increasingly serious nature. In the evenings he would retell the contents of some of the books he had read to Baimagambet and the latter's stock of stories grew constantly.

On Saturdays Baimagambet hitched the horses to the sledge, and went off to fetch Magash and Gulbadan from the one place and Abish from the other. This gave Abai two nights and a day with his children. He made no other engagements on such evenings and refused to receive visitors from the aul. He devoted every available minute to his children, talking to them, helping them with their lessons or just playing with them or getting Baimagambet to tell them stories. Sometimes they sang songs together and the time sped by unnoticed.

Once a week Abai would visit Abish and have a talk with the mistress of the house, Anna Nikolayevna, an educated and intelligent elderly woman. He also visited Yekaterina Petrovna, the mother of four children, two boys and two girls of about the ages of Magash and Gulbadan. She was the widow of an officer and lived by giving lessons, and Abai had more than once sent her quantities of mutton and flour through Baimagambet in addition to the regular fees.

He had also made some arrangements for several Kazakh orphans—the result of a conversation with Mikhailov, who told him that in accordance with an order received from the Corps in Omsk, every volost was to pick a boy to be sent to the city school. No parents could be found willing to part with a son, however, although there were some who would have agreed to send their children if they were richly compensated. The feeble ray of knowledge that had penetrated the auls was quickly extinguished by the age-old prejudices. Mikhailov commented bitterly that no one throughout the Semipalatinsk

District could be found who was willing to send his son to study.

Abai had accordingly decided to write to some of the Tobikty under his influence, and a young zhatak Aniyar of the Chinghis Volost finally arrived and was duly put into a boarding-school. The Shagan Volost was represented by the Kirghiz orphan Omarbek, who had lived in Moldabai's aul. Takezhan responded by sending another orphan, Kurmanbai by name, of the Kzil-Adir Volost. Abai had also had two orphans sent from the tribe of Mamai in Yeraly and arranged for their tuition at the madrasah.

"Let at least the younger generation of the zhataks have this ray of light," he thought, worrying over the future of these poor people. Perhaps it was they who were destined to bring the light of knowledge to their people.

Recently he had learned that not all the horses he had adjudged to the poor at the council at Balkibek were in their possession. The animals had been taken to Yeraly without trouble, but by the autumn no less than ten horses of the thirty were gone; they had been whisked away singly or in twos by unknown thieves. "Let at least some of the zhataks receive something which cannot be stolen—knowledge," he thought when he made arrangements at the schools for the children of the poor.

More than half of the winter was gone and it was time for Abai to return to his aul. It was on a Saturday that he made Baimagambet spend half the day gathering together the little Kazakhs who were at school in the town. Abai's house that evening rang with the songs of the children, who played many games. Abai gave them riddles to solve, while Baimagambet treated them from his stock of tales and funny sayings. Before the evening meal, when they were tired and had quietened down, Abai collected his little guests and his own children about him.

He produced a sheet of paper he had covered with writing that morning and the children stood around expectantly. It was a new poem that he read to them:


*The days of my boyhood in darkness I spent,
And never suspected what learning meant.
Children, the hope and joy of old men,
Be bold—take the treasures denied us then.
Study, my son; not to gain high ranks,
But to do noble deeds and win people's thanks.*

He repeated the poem several times and then said a few words to them in farewell:

“My dear children! We, your fathers and elder brothers, are like the grass that has wilted before it could really grow. We have learned nothing and are now very sorry. We used to dream of learning, but it never came to us. How I wish that you will do as my poem says. This is not only my wish, but also that of your friends in the steppes, those who expect you to help them some day. You must study with only one thought in mind: to be useful and honest men, protectors of your people.”

Pausing for a moment, he concluded: “That is all I wanted to tell you before I go away. This poem was written specially for you by an akyn whose name is Kokpai.”

Abai had often committed to paper the words which had burdened his soul that winter. But he still did not feel that he was a real akyn and his exacting pen, for that reason, concealed his identity under the unknown name of Kokpai.



At the Summit

I



SEVERAL YEARS had elapsed, years of arduous labour and searchings. But the hours he had spent with a book or pen in hand seemed the happiest to Abai. To meditate and set his experiences down on paper had become the essence of his life. The sparks of truth he had found in books or learned from life found their way into his poems and songs which were now unequalled in his native tongue.

His name was widely known and he knew at last that his poetic work was a duty to the people. A book of his verses entitled *Of People* scourged the ignorant parasites, the callous rich of the steppes and the corrupt officials. His lines spoke of the hard life of the people. Often he sang of beauty to the young, encouraging them to think and feel more deeply.

Born in Akshoky, the songs were soon carried over the boundless steppes. He set them on paper and his young, enthusiastic followers quickly learned them by heart, found suitable melodies for them and spread them far and wide.

Abai, however, was unable to devote himself entirely to his favourite occupation. Though he had refused again and again, he could not help being drawn into the work of settling scores or disputes, for he was truly an impartial judge in the eyes of the people.

One sunny winter morning, Abai was sitting at his usual place, near his tall carved-bone bed, his favourite cushion at his side, his hand resting now on his knee, now on the edge of the small round table. He was lost in thought, gazing through the window at the snow-covered surface of the Akshoky hills, lit up in the sun. How mysterious the power emanating from those snow-covered mountains!

He had somehow been called upon less as a mediator that year and had spent most of his time in his favourite winter house. It had been a fertile year. While reading his books, writing his poems or drifting through the hours in inspired meditation, he had come to look upon those hills as old friends. Did they not respond to his melancholy in the mornings and in the gloaming of the evenings? Always austere, they seemed to conceal a deep longing—they longed for the sun on the grey days and for the spring in the winter. Today their grey brows were smoother: dappled cattle could be seen on the steep slopes. Let those solitary hills ring with the herdsman's song.

Baimagambet who had long noticed Abai's air of concentration had kept himself respectfully in the background. To pass the time, he had taken up Abai's whip and proceeded to replace the old thong, occasionally glancing at Abai, who was now beating the air with his hand and muttering something, a curious habit he had contracted only that winter. Baimagambet was sure that he would presently call for pencil and paper. This time, however, Abai said nothing, merely stretching out his left hand absently. Baimagambet guessed his wish and placed two thick and worn volumes on the table.

Abai opened one of them, found a page, scanned it briefly and leaned back, thinking again.

There was no one for miles about who could have read these books written by distant poets of a distant world.

Pushkin and Lermontov, both of them had lived so far from the steppes and were unknown and alien to the Kazakhs. They had expressed themselves in an alien tongue, but to him they seemed like kinsmen. In their sadness they seemed to say to him, "You are like us."

Since Abai had made friends with these, Mashrab, Suffi Allahyar and even the magnificent Fizuli had receded into the background. The pious old men and mullahs who came to the aul often saw Abai poring over these volumes and wagged their beards in approval. "He's come to his senses at last. He is reading the Sharia. It must be the remembrance poems from the Koran that he is reading. He reads them by himself, as a pious man should, instead of having them read by the mullah," they would say.

But suddenly they would notice that this was a book that opened to the left, that its pages were sullied with pictures and that its lines were even and monotonous, not at all like the fanciful Arabic. They were aghast. "Why should he be sitting there spell-bound by that left-sided writing?" said some of the local notables. "And he's proud of it too!" others would remark. "He wants to show that he stands nearer to the Russian authorities than we."

Abai well knew that his silent friends caused anxiety to many, but he did not care.

Those poets were not among the living, but their names would never be forgotten. What does a man usually leave behind him? Only a grave mound and that is gradually levelled by the winds. But those two would stand for ever, like the two peaks of the Akshoky.

"Blessed is a people enlightened by knowledge," Abai thought with a sigh. "How I wish that we, the Kazakhs,

had inherited this golden treasure of knowledge. The memory of those two poets will serve as beacons to the future generations."

Abai began to read Tatyana's letter, a fragment from *Yeogeny Onegin*. "How skilfully are those words woven together, and as alive as breath itself in their deep tenderness," he thought, and suddenly remembered a poem he had once composed.

*No words does the speech of lovers know;
The language of love is such:
A flash of the eye, and a stir of the brow—
No tongue can express as much.
One time I myself used to speak the same,
I, too, understood what was said,
But then, when a grey-haired man I became
That art from my memory fled.*

He read the lines of the letter again and again.

"I have lived through this myself, but where have I ever heard it set down so wonderfully!"

Two images suddenly flashed across his mind, like two shooting stars. The one was the Togzhan of his youth and the other Saltanat who had so troubled his heart. Like Tatyana, they too had had to give up their happiness, though they were filled with love. This was their song too, he thought.

And so he had decided to translate the letter of Tatyana and for two days had been compelling her to speak in an alien tongue, in the Kazakh language. Engrossed with this task, he found more and more new expressions, noble in their sadness. He compared his translation with the original and found that his own Tatyana had at times used words that were too ordinary. Still, that could not be helped, since they were written for new hearers. Even as the words stood, they would be difficult

for most people to understand. He thought of Kokpai and Mukhah; what if they failed to understand?

Among the pages of *Yevgeny Onegin* he came upon a letter he had received the day before. Baimagambet had brought it to him with a dozen new books from Semipalatinsk. "This novel in verse was recently set to music," Mikhailov wrote in reply to Abai's delighted response to the great poem. "I have heard that the music is well worthy of the poem and has greatly moved the public of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Unfortunately we are not destined to hear it."

Abai again thought of Kokpai and Mukhah as he read the letter.

"Those poor fellows adorn doggerels with their melodies," he said and took up his dombra. "They shall have valuable silks instead of calico, those poor little retailers of song."

He murmured quietly, his fingers caressing the dombra, and though his eyes were fixed on the two peaks of Akshoky his gaze was turned inwards. When he had gone to bed the previous night, he had the faint stirrings of a melody within him, but now it spoke more boldly. He tried to sing the air; the rhythm was much like that of the poem.

*You are my God-sent husband,
I longed for you to be mine...*

Tatyana's plaint as yet sounded uncertain in the Kazakh language; Abai urged his dombra on, the chords flowing one after another. The final two lines were especially elusive, but at last fell in with the melody.

Abai then sang three stanzas of Tatyana's letter and smiled contentedly. He took a fresh pinch of nasibai. He remembered the melody well.

Suddenly he turned to Baimagambet with twinkling eyes:

"What are you busy with? Have you understood anything?"

Startled by the question, the djiguit held up the whip:

"I'm mending your whip, Abai-aga."

"Do you know what I have been doing?"

"Trying to remember some Russian song, I suppose."

"Very good! I'm glad you've understood that much,"

Abai laughed. "Please call the Kishkeneh-Mullah."

To keep the melody in his memory, he played it again. Baimagambet opened the door, revealing Aigerim and some visitors, their faces ruddy with the cold. Still carrying their riding-whips, they were dressed in lambskin cloaks, chekmens and padded robes. Two of them wore the narrow six-gusset hats of the Uak.

"What a frost you've brought in," Abai exclaimed still strumming his instrument.

"But it's not cold at all," Aigerim answered with surprise. "It's so warm outside that the fat won't freeze!"

"Perhaps I've mistaken these men for the frost," Abai said as he greeted the guests. Aigerim accepted his reply as another of those obscure remarks he had been making so often of late and went to the next room without a word.

"Mullah-akeh! Have you copied Tatyana's letter?" Abai asked the Kishkineh-Mullah, who had entered the room. "She has decided to sing at last in our Kazakh tongue."

"Good for her. I have copied the letter."

"Will you write to Kokpai and Mukhah? Tell them that Tatyana sends her salem and would like to make their acquaintance. Mukhamedjan will take the letter to town."

The visitors stood bewildered. They were not curious, however, with the exception of Mukhamedjan, a rosy-faced, grey-eyed djiguit who had entered the room with the Kishkineh-Mullah. With Mukhah and Kokpai, he was one of the best singers in the neighbourhood and often wrote poems as well.

"Who is it you said will sing, Abai-aga?" he asked eagerly.

In reply, Abai took up his dombra and sang the three stanzas he had translated. When he had finished, he laid aside the instrument and addressed the newcomers.

Though he had failed to catch the tune, Mukhamedjan was struck by the words of the song. He had always been the first to learn Abai's new songs, but had never heard this one, and concluded that Kokpai and Mukhah had never heard it either. It must have been a new song just written by Abai, he decided, and probably Abai would ask him to teach it to the other two singers.

Though Mukhamedjan was a near kinsman of Abai, it was not seemly for him, the younger man, to demand that the song be sung again. He was afraid of annoying Abai by badgering him, and therefore decided to stay in Akshoky for dinner. Meanwhile, he called upon the Kishkinah-Mullah to copy the new song.

Abai was deep in conversation with his guests.

While putting the usual courteous questions about their health and their ails, Abai had the curious sensation of having spoken to these men under similar circumstances on an earlier occasion. Hadn't he seen them before: the same two Uaks, and the same Kokshe in the same clothes and wearing even the same expression? Wasn't this the same horse-thief Tursun of the Kokshe sitting there with the same diffident expression? And there was the plaintiff Sarsekeh of the Uak, just as short and stout as before. Hadn't he puffed heavily then, too, and insisted that the horses stolen by Tursun should be restored to him? Abai thought hard: hadn't he received compensation for the stolen horses?

Life changed so often and so quickly, and he wondered why these two must always remain drearily the same? One of the two visions must be false, a dream! Either this one or that other! Or had time stood still?

Sarsekeh was still speaking, his voice as monotonous as a wooden pestle in a wooden mortar. Abai forced himself to listen and at last found something new.

"I know what this thief thought, Abai-aga: 'You brought me to Abai last time and made me cough up those horses. See if I don't make things hot for you after that!' That's just what he's been thinking, Abai-aga. He's stolen those horses out of spite, I tell you, and thinks that nothing will happen to him for stealing from an Uak. He stole three horses last time and five this time. It's his handiwork, Abai-aga, I tell you!"

Abai would have liked to scan the face of the thief, but the other sat with his head bowed as if on the point of dozing off. Only the end of his fleshy nose and part of his sparse black beard were visible below the fuzzy fawn of his hat with the ear-flaps tied down under his chin. But for all his apparent impassivity he was watching Abai's every movement from the corner of his eye.

He did not try to interrupt Sarsekeh and behaved as if all this were no concern of his. His very attitude seemed to show that it was only Abai who could make him speak and not the other. Had this been calculated as a sign of respect or was he merely afraid to commit himself?

"What have you to say about it?" Abai shouted, to make him raise his eyes.

The fuzzy hat slowly turned up as his small grey eyes took a fleeting look at Abai and dropped again. The heavy eyelids, baggy cheeks and even his body reminded one of a knobbly tree-trunk.

"Some time ago, Abai-aga, this same Sarsekeh here, took everything from me by your orders," he began slowly, rocking in his place. "You told me to pay and so I did. But must I be blamed every time the Uak lose their cattle?"

"Another endless wrangle!" Abai thought resentfully. "Where's the truth and where's the lie?" He would have

to delve into the mire again to get at the truth. When would it ever end? His mood was definitely spoiled. The subtleties of the truth he had seen were gone. The plaintiff wanted his cattle, while the thief wanted to live on the property of others. There was no way out of this maze.

He reached for the *dombra* again, hoping to recall the melody. But the once obedient two-stringed instrument was now like a tethered horse. The sounds would only jar; the song was forgotten. He laid the *dombra* aside in despair and returned to Sarsekeh's droning.

"Now, don't lie, Tursun. It was you and no other who stole my cattle this time too! You did it out of spite, because you had to return the stolen horses last time."

"A blind man always clutches at the things he has already held in his hand," said Tursun coolly. "Am I the only man in the steppes? I haven't been in the saddle for a month, let alone on Thursday."

The wrangle grew louder, each interrupting the other, while Abai listened in silence, his face puckered up in a wry grimace.

"Why don't you ask someone else to settle this?" he said finally. "Why didn't you ask Akilbai, your neighbour? He must know the truth better."

But neither Tursun nor Sarsekeh would agree to this. "Tell us your opinion; just say 'yes' or 'no.' We'll be satisfied with your decision," they insisted.

"Tell me the truth," Abai shouted at Tursun in exasperation. "Even if you die for it, tell me! Did you take the cattle or not?"

The other boldly returned his angry gaze.

"Abai-aga! Didn't I swear to die, but to tell the truth. I am a thief, but a thief has his honour too. I am not guilty this time."

Abai studied his face thoughtfully. "He may be a thief, but this is the face of the truth." Tursun's words had shaken his certainty.

"He is telling the truth," he said at last. "He did not take your horses, Sarsekeh. Look for them elsewhere."

Tursun readjusted his hat. Neither he nor Sarsekeh said another word.

"Well, your dispute is settled," said Abai as Sarsekeh lowered his head. "There'll be food and drink for you in the guest-room."

He returned to his *dombra*.

Sarsekeh and Tursun rose together, but the latter permitted the former to precede him, as a man from a distant aul—exactly as he had done when they had entered the room. As they walked down the dark passage, however, Tursun was laughing silently, as only he knew how.

He was greatly pleased that his ruse had succeeded. In the autumn he had stolen three horses from the Uak, and being lazy, he had slaughtered them at his own *yurta* with the result that he had been brought before Abai by the man he had robbed. When the inquiry began, he had been struck by an excellent idea. Asked whether or not he had stolen the horses, he answered without hesitation, "Yes, I did! Decide as you see fit! I am guilty." Abai was astonished.

"Really and truly, he has bribed me," Abai had then declared. "He has bribed me with sincerity. Let him pay for the stolen horses and that will be the end of it."

Two months later, Tursun had again stolen five horses from the selfsame Sarsekeh, and driven them off the same night in a blizzard which had obliterated all his tracks. On this occasion, Sarsekeh could only suspect the man, since there were no tracks or witnesses.

In accordance with his plan, Tursun this time denied everything and his gamble had been justified. He had worsted not only Sarsekeh, but even Abai, and he had good reason to laugh.

Alone again, Abai continued to search for the lost melody with his *dombra*. Not long afterwards his solitude

was once more broken, this time by the entry of Korpebai, the famous game-player, accompanied by the Kishkineh-Mullah and Mukhamedjan. In one hand Korpebai held a leather pouch filled with balls for togiz-kumalak, Abai's favourite game, and in the other the board.

During the long winter Abai had been in the habit of inviting such players at kumalak as Ismagul Makishev, Markabai, or Korpebai who often stayed at his house for weeks on end. Abai himself was one of the best players in the region, but during the past four days of his visit, Korpebai had not let his host win even once. Their games continued from morning tea until dinner. There had only been a break the previous evening when Abai had spent time over a book and some work.

When the three entered, therefore, Abai knew that this was the end of his reveries and closed the book.

"Well, put down the board. I'll try to avenge myself for yesterday," he said.

The shining balls of yellow ivory clattered into the holes of the board as Korpebai's fingers moved with amazing dexterity. The marbles were swiftly sorted out by nines and the game began. When the usual opening moves had been made, and the opponents had seized a few marbles from each other, Mukhamedjan, the Kishkineh-Mullah and Baimagambet came closer to see how the tuzduks* would be captured.

Mukhamedjan had already copied Tatyana's letter and with the Kishkineh-Mullah's aid had checked it against the original. He had folded the manuscript and put it in his pocket. Abai never asked for the return of his manuscripts once they had been copied and memorized, and Mukhamedjan retained them as keepsakes.

The young man had been hoping to hear the melody again, but Abai was preoccupied with the game, and all

* Tuzduk—the hole captured from the opponent, including the marbles in it.—*Ed.*

he could do, therefore, was to take the paper from his pocket and try to memorize the first lines. He was amazed by the unusual words and took up the dombra, humming whatever melody came to his mind. Neither "Ak-Kain" nor "Topai-kok" seemed to suit the words and he looked up to Baimagambet, sighing with disappointment. The latter responded by trying to draw Abai away from his game.

"Tatyana does not want to have anything to do with 'Ak-Kain,'" he said to the young singer, intending the remark for Abai.

"Not only with 'Ak-Kain,' but with all the-other melodies I know."

"Perhaps a baeet or zhir* would be more suitable," said Baimagambet, glancing at Abai out of the corner of his eye.

Abai's attention was diverted at last.

"Do you think so? But Tatyana will remain Tatyana. She is not Ak-Bala and will go neither to Cairo nor Baghdad for a melody."

Abai turned his attention once more to the board, shifting the marbles until the last of them found its place in the middle hole of his opponent. This made him laugh like a boy and Korpebai was quite crestfallen.

"A splendid tuzduk," the Kishkineh-Mullah exclaimed. Abai was in high spirits and in a mood to please everyone.

"So you say that Tatyana refuses to sing that song, Baimagambet?"

He took over the dombra while Mukhamedjan looked eagerly at the words, burning with impatience.

Abai began to play and the forgotten melody suddenly came all back.

"She seems to be willing to sing again," he said as he

* Baeet—book poetry in recitative; zhir—likewise a poetic story in recitative form.—*Ed.*

played the opening chords. Just then the door opened and Aigerim entered and sat down near him.

Mukhamedjan had just joined in as Abai reached the second stanza when Korpebai placed his last marble in the second front hole belonging to Abai, thus capturing the most important tuzduk, the "tuzduk of the yoked neck."

"Now see what he's done!" exclaimed Abai, interrupting his song. Quickly returning the dombra to Mukhamedjan, he bent over the board once more.

"He's spoiled everything, that wretched shrimp!" Mukhamedjan whispered angrily to Aigerim.

"What has he done?" she asked.

"I stayed only to learn the new song of Abai-aga and now, after losing such a tuzduk, he'll hardly notice us."

Baimagambet shook his head sympathetically.

"But try to sing it yourself," Aigerim urged Mukhamedjan. "We haven't heard you sing for a long time."

But the young man managed to sing the song correctly only after Abai had set him right.

"Now you have made her acquaintance, sing away," said Abai.

Greatly encouraged, Mukhamedjan sang the poem through in his rich, pure tenor, from time to time glancing at the words.

The game was forgotten. Abai's face was pale as he stood looking at the peaks of Akshoky. The sad words reminded him of the unhappy fate of Togzhan and Saltanat, and then his thoughts turned to Aigerim, his nearest and dearest, who now held herself so distant from him. The full force of the words of the song came fully home to him now that he heard it sung by this young, handsome akyn, and the others too were enraptured. This was no Kazakh song, but its sadness was universal, and enveloped them like soft, gentle waves.

To fix in his mind the melody he had learned with such difficulty, Mukhamedjan sang it again from beginning to

end. He too was carried away and could scarcely contain himself when he finished.

"What power of love! Who wrote these words?" he demanded.

The others too wanted to know and were waiting for Abai's answer when the Kishkineh-Mullah broke in.

"Foshkin!"

But Mukhamedjan cut him short.

"You'd better keep quiet, mullah. You've distorted even the name."

"How's that? What is his name then?"

"It seems to me that Abai called him Poshkin. Am I right, Abai-aga?"

Abai told them what he knew about the life of Pushkin.

"Yes, the poet found the right words for that fond heart. We Kazakhs have never known such an akyn; nor has the entire Moslem world."

Korpebai was again leaning invitingly over the board, but Mukhamedjan shifted it with his knee, as though unwittingly.

"But is it just, Abai-aga, to leave such an appeal unanswered?" he asked.

Baimagambet was quick to agree.

"You're right, I think," Abai answered thoughtfully. "We'll have to listen to the other side too." He reached for Pushkin's volume.

Mukhamedjan stayed for dinner, but left for Semipalatinsk later that day.

Abai read Pushkin all the evening. This was the first time that he approached the writer not merely as a reader but as fellow-poet.

"You've opened my eyes, Yevgeny Petrovich," he said out loud as he closed the book before the evening meal. "Now my Kaaba will wander elsewhere and West shall become East and East become West. So be it!"

Hopeful for a story as usual, his family did not disperse after supper. Abai, who of late had been so absorbed in his thoughts, was now glad to see Aigerim, his friends and especially his favourite story-teller Baimagambet.

Deep into the night he sat before them retelling the story he had read.

2

That evening the house of Tanzharik, a petty merchant in the western district of Semipalatinsk, was crowded with young people.

The young djiguit Kisatai, Abai's kinsman, who had rented a room from Tanzharik, had not abandoned the customs of the auls and was fond of guests, although he himself was rather shy and quiet. This evening his guests were near kinsmen and admirers of Abai. The heart and soul of the company was the hook-nosed Kokpai, who had become a well-known akyn and singer, famous for his stentorian voice. Whenever Abai was absent, he would enthusiastically praise what he liked and sternly disparage what he did not. He was a good story-teller too.

Another guest of honour was Abai's nephew Shubar. He had forfeited his office as volost ruler at the last elections and hoped to gain fame instead as an akyn and singer. Vain and ambitious, he was envious of Abai's renown and bore himself among the young akyns as if he were the foremost. He was always well groomed and dressed with especial care. The fashionable waistcoat he had recently bought was graced with a golden chain. He tried to speak with dignity and weight, pompously stroking his black beard, especially when Abai was not there. He was indeed convinced that he was by far superior to the other Kazakhs.

Magash, Abai's favourite son, who was now known by his full name Magavya, was also one of the guests. Not yet sixteen, he was a slender stripling with a delicate

if somewhat pale complexion, a broad forehead and a thin straight nose. He was conspicuous among the others not only for his appearance and manners, but also for his education. Young though he was, he had an independent air and boldly spoke his mind. He had come with the well-known akyn Mukhah, a tall handsome man with an excellent voice. Abai, who had recognized the quality of his voice and his skill on the dombra and violin, had originally employed him as a djiguit for Magash and had made a renowned singer of him. Iskhak, Irsai's son, sat nearby. Whereas Kokpai and Mukhah were masters of Kazakh popular tales and epics, Iskhak had, with Abai's help, studied the Arabian and Persian epics, *Jamshid*, *Bakhtazhar*, *Rustem*, and *The Arabian Nights*.

The young people intended to spend the night at Kisatai's house and had sent their carriages home. At the height of the conversation the door opened and a pot-bellied tea-urn was brought in by a djiguit, followed by the buxom wife of Tanzharik, who had a table-cloth in her hands. The guests, who were reclining on soft corpehs and cushions, drew back their legs to make way. While the low round table was being set, Kisatai produced a bottle of cognac and another of matured vodka. Large platters of kaza and titbits of horse meat were placed among the sweetmeats.

"That was wise of you, Kisatai," Iskhak exclaimed cheerfully. "Let's have something before the meat's ready."

The guests exchanged many stories, true and otherwise, and joked with one another good-humouredly. Shubar could not help recalling how fond Abai was of such lively gatherings of young people.

"It's a pity Abai-aga is not here," he said.

"Let him stay at home!" Kokpai retorted. "He seems to have taken to his books and poetry again."

Shubar looked up ironically.

"If that plane-tree continues to flower, my dear, then our flowers shall surely wilt away." He pretended to be hinting that many of the younger akyns were not sufficiently bold to vie with Abai, but in his heart of hearts he was simply envious of Abai.

"But perhaps we should wait until our own poetry comes to flower," laughed Magavya.

Shubar shook his head in mock chagrin.

"But how will you know when it has come to flower? I, for one, have written a segiz-ayak,* very good in my poor judgement. I've shown it to Abai, but he said that it was not written as a segiz-ayak should be."

Kokpai too had a complaint.

"He gave me some verses about a horse for my long poem. The verses were called 'Shokpardai Kekili Bar,'"** you remember? 'Let your Naurizbai have a good horse,' he said, but then he took his verses back. He must have thought that that horse was too fat for me."

The story evoked general laughter.

"It's time you got used to such things, Kokeh," Magavya said to Kokpai. "Hasn't he taken all his verses away from you?"

The jest was appreciated. Everybody knew that Abai had been concealing his identity under the pen-name of Kokpai, but a year before, when he had written "Burning Summer," he had decided that in future he would put his own name to all his verses. To compensate Kokpai for this imaginary loss, he had presented him with a mare. "Take this brown mare and give me back my poetry," he had said.

"I slaughtered that mare to feast all of you, remember?" said Kokpai. "There were two fingers of fat on her. I

* Segiz-ayak—a stanza of eight lines introduced by Abai.—*Ed.*

** "Shokpardai Kekili Bar"—Abai's famous poem about a pacer; Naurizbai is the hero of Kokpai's poem.—*Ed.*

didn't mind him recovering his poetry because we, at any rate, had a good feast."

"And do you know what Abai said when I reminded him of this?" he continued. "When a general captured Tashkent and entered the city with his troops with much beating of drums, one opium addict said, 'What if he has invaded Tashkent! Just hear the wonderful music we now have!' Aren't you a little like that opium-smoker, Kokeh?"

At the height of the evening another guest appeared, kamcha in hand, his moustache silvered with hoarfrost, his clothes stiff with cold. He had obviously come a long way.

"Assalyau-malikum!" he greeted the company loudly.

"Is that you, Mukhamedjan?" Iskhak exclaimed gladly when the new arrival was recognized at last. The others were also pleased to see him.

Mukhamedjan had come direct from his aul and, answering questions on all sides, he removed his top-boots, peeled off his coat and plucked the frost from his moustache. Eager hands showed him to the place of honour.

"You are right! Today I shall take my place between Mukhah and Kokpai," he said significantly, while Mukhah made room for him.

Kokpai examined the newcomer with something akin to suspicion. This Mukhamedjan thought himself better than other akyns! True, Kokpai was at times ready to admit that if only Mukhamedjan were not so poor, were a little more modest about his Irgizbai origin, and had had a bit of education, he could have created wonderful songs. But now, he seemed far too cocksure. Kokpai, therefore, was quick to scoff before the other could even sit down.

"We've just been wondering: Who is that coming with creaking boots? It appears that it is only the aul that has turned up."

"If the aul is so bad, then why did you return to it from the house of Allah?" Mukhamedjan retorted, a sly dig at the fact that Kokpai had once attended the madrasah, but had been compelled to return to his aul before becoming a mullah. The allusion was at once understood and the young people laughed. "So don't be too hard on the aul," Mukhamedjan went on. "There are treasures to be found in the aul as well."

"What treasures?" Kokpai asked with interest.

"You'll soon see. Let me have my tea first," Mukhamedjan answered condescendingly.

The general hubbub started up again and went on until Shubar proposed some songs.

"Let the eldest begin and the young ones will be less shy. Well, Kokeh, let's have your song about the contest between Naurizbai and the girl of the Tleukabakh!"

Kokpai coughed modestly and began a song he had composed that winter. When he had finished, Magavya tried to coax Shubar to sing his segiz-ayak. Shubar, however, thought this was unseemly and his song was sung by the bald djiguit Orumbek.

Mukhamedjan had arrived cold and hungry, and sat eating the kaza with zest and drinking his tea, oblivious to everything and answering Iskhak's questions in monosyllables.

When he had had his tea he moved from the table and listened while Mukhah sang his "Topai-kok." After this, Mukhamedjan reached for his dombra without waiting for an invitation.

"How many famous akyns we have here, and not one with a really good song," he said, deftly tuning the dombra.

The guests sat entranced at the magic melancholy of the words the young man began to sing with such extraordinary feeling. No one could be sure whether this was a Russian or Kazakh song, but one thing was certain—

no one had ever sung about love with such passion before. The poem captured every heart—the words were so charged with feeling and yet so full of dignity. They were like tears from the virgin depths of the heart.

"May Allah bless your throat," Iskhak exclaimed, overwhelmed. Such a remark would have provoked laughter under other circumstances but now it passed without comment.

The singer finished amid general silence and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Kokpai and Shubar seemed to be disconcerted—they could not even look at Mukhamedjan, fearful of reading confirmation of their conjecture in his eyes. Obviously, Kokpai thought, Mukhamedjan had had good reason to look so sure of himself. Now he had not even the heart to ask who had written the song. The others, too, sat without speaking.

Magavya was the first to break the silence.

"Please tell us where you got that song?" he asked quietly.

Shubar and Kokpai looked up with anxiety. Mukhamedjan then pulled out a letter from the Kishkineh-Mullah and unfolded Abai's manuscript.

"That was a poem by a great Russian *akyn* named Pushkin, and Tatyana, his heroine, wrote a love letter. Abai has only translated it and found a melody for it."

Shubar brightened considerably, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"I thought you were going to say that you had composed it yourself."

Kokpai was similarly relieved.

"If it were you who had written such lines and such music, I would never dare to vie with you," he said to Mukhamedjan. "What an unhappy man I would be then! Thank you, Mukhamedjan, thank you!"

There was general amusement.

Just then Mukhamedjan remembered that he had left his horse in the cold outside, and handing Abai's manuscript to Kokpai, he hurriedly left the room.

When the poor animal was safely stabled, he returned and stood on the threshold, smiling at what he saw.

The akyns sat huddled around the lamp, each with pencil and paper, busy copying the song he had brought.

The young man laughed heartily. "I see our akyns have become scribes."

The akyns laughed at this, but were too busy for repartee. After they had finished copying out the words they began to learn the melody from Mukhamedjan, and by the time they were ready to retire in the small hours of the morning, each of them knew the poem by heart.

Two days later, Mukhah was invited to attend a wedding among the Uak and this was the first time that so great an assembly—the groom, the matchmakers, the girls and the old men—heard this poem, so moving in its melancholy and deep sincerity.

"May Allah grant you long life, my singing swan," said an old man who had listened breathlessly from beginning to end. "You've melted my heart. Tell us, please, who gave birth to such a song?"

"Once upon a time there lived a Russian akyn called Pushkin and it is his song you have heard, as retold in Kazakh by Abai."

And Kokpai and Iskhak and Mukhamedjan and all the other akyns sang almost nothing but this song.

Visiting Mikhailov one day, Kokpai gave him a letter from Abai and told him the news that had so stirred the minds of his friends. Mikhailov was deeply interested to hear that Abai was translating Pushkin into Kazakh and already finished one chapter—Tatyana's letter.

"So it's in the Kazakh language now. I wonder how it sounds! Would you read it to me? But slowly please!"

He took Kokpai's timak and kamcha and laid them on the table.

"Well, let me hear...."

"But how can I read it to you? It's a song. It is now called the 'Song of Tatyana' and we sing it very often at gatherings in Semipalatinsk."

"Who composed the music?"

"Abai-aga, of course."

"Sing it to me, then."

Kokpai sang the verses of Tatyana's letter, carefully watching Mikhailov to note his impression.

Mikhailov knew much of the Kazakh language already and was musical by nature.

"Please congratulate Ibragim Kunanbayevich for me," he exclaimed, grasping the singer by the shoulders. "It was good, wonderful! Your people must learn to know Pushkin and to love him too."

His excitement unabated, he began to discuss the translation.

"It seems to me that the translation is not accurate everywhere. The rhythm, too, does not always coincide with the original, as far as I could see. But does that really matter? And in any case I can't say that I have understood everything and it is not fair to speak of shortcomings without understanding the merits, is it? Just tell me this: is it a good song? Can you tell that Pushkin was a great poet by this piece?" The last question was particularly emphatic.

"Oh, Yevgeny Petrovich," came the enthusiastic reply, "if Pushkin is always like this, I may say that we the Kazakh akyns have never met anyone like him, though we have read so many of the Arabian and Persian poets."

This confirmed Mikhailov's opinion of Abai's translation; it was a real work of art. Once more he begged Kokpai to convey his congratulations to Abai.

There were so many guests in the winter house at Akshoky that the large room where Abai was wont to sit after his evening tea was too small to hold them all. People from the whole of the winter place were there. Aigerim, Yerbol, Baimagambet and Kakitai, Abai's young nephew, acted as hosts and showed the guests to their places. Old Baitory, Burkitbai and Baikadam had arrived with their wives and now sat near Abai. Kakitai's sonorous voice could be heard everywhere. Smiling and courteous, the young djiguit infected everyone with his cheerfulness and was ever ready with a jest or friendly word. That day he was especially attentive to the guests.

Kakitai was one of the sons of Iskhak, Abai's brother, and was the same age as Magavya. The two young men were close friends. For the past two years Kakitai had been living with Abai as his adopted son.

It was his broad frank face, large, somewhat protruding and shining eyes, his short, slightly upturned nose that lent him the happy expression so typical of youth. Any young woman could have envied his ripe red lips. Abai especially liked the boy's clear eyes and merry voice, which seemed to vibrate from his very heart. This nephew, indeed, was as dear to him as his own sons and Abai could not bear to let him return to his parents.

"What can you learn there?" he said one day to Kakitai. "Am I not as good to you as your mother and father? You would do better to live here with us."

Abai was glad to see that Kakitai was happy in his house.

There was another reason for Abai's fondness. Kakitai could not be sent to study in town, but while he had been living with Abai he had been studying Russian with extraordinary zeal and could sit over Russian books for hours. He had studied with Abish when that young man

had come home from the town on holidays, and Magavya, too, had shared his knowledge with him. In addition, Kakitai never missed an opportunity to ask his uncle about the Russian books he read. To all intents and purposes, he was now equal to any of the pupils in the town.

Noticing that nephew and uncle did not stand on ceremony with each other the other young people felt more at ease when addressing Abai.

The young akyns and singers had always been welcome here. A group of them had recently returned to the steppes on horseback and in carriages after a few months in Semipalatinsk. These were Kokpai, Mukhah, Magavya, Iskhak—the son of Irsai, Shubar and Mukhamedjan, who had not seen Abai all winter. In other years they had been accustomed to coming here often and staying long, spending their days and nights in a hilarious company of their own.

They had only just come, and did not even wait for tea before Kokpai addressed Abai and Aigerim on behalf of the others.

“Abai-aga, we’ve become real celebrities in Semipalatinsk. No family gathering, visit of a bridegroom or delivery of the bride or any festivities on either side of the river was held without us. They outdid themselves in kindness to us, and it was your songs that gave rise to all this, especially the ‘Song of Tatyana’ which Mukhamedjan brought to us. Since everyone there agrees that we are real masters of song, let us show you what we can do.”

“But if each of you alone could entertain an entire gathering, what is to become of me if all of you are to entertain me together,” said Abai smiling. “Aigerim, Kakitai, Yerbol and Baimagambet! Gather the whole aul, young and old! These singers are so swelled-headed now that they cannot sing to a mere four or five of us alone. Remember the saying: ‘When the fare is frugal, the guest bites his tongue!’ Now see that our guests don’t have to do the

same! See to the comfort of each of them and treat them well."

As twilight fell, Kakitai and Baimagambet made the rounds of the winter place.

While the guests were gathering, Kokpai told Abai the news from the town. He described how pleased Mikhailov had been with the translation of Tatyana's letter and conveyed his congratulations, without concealing the doubts expressed by the Russian.

Abai was pleased with his friend's insight.

"Mikhailov seems to be right, djiguits," he admitted. "My translation is not as accurate as it could be. I was influenced by my own emotions, you see."

Unwilling to say any more about the lines that had been inspired by his own memories, he spoke about his friend.

"What a fine sense of judgement he has! He does not know the Kazakh language well, yet he is able to detect the weaknesses in my translation. That is what learning does for a man."

It was an evening of songs and poetry, of poetic contests between akyns and singers, and it was well after midnight when the old men departed. Everyone took part in the singing, both the guests and the people of the aul; only Abai and Aigerim were silent. Now it was Mukhah, Mukhamedjan and Kokpai who in turns sang, then Magavya and Kakitai sang together, and then Iskhak, Yerbol and Baimagambet joined in a duet being sung by Shubar and Kokpai. At the request of Abai and Aigerim, the best singers sang their favourite songs, both old and new. Finally, Aigerim was asked to sing by Kokpai and Mukhamedjan.

"We haven't heard her sing for such a long time. Why does she never sing? Couldn't we hear her today, Abai-aga?" they pleaded.



Abai looked at Aigerim, whose beauty seemed to glow like molten gold.

"Aigerim sings no more. She doesn't want to." His voice was sad and tinged with bitterness.

Their relations in recent years had been limited only to mutual respect. The joy of being together had long departed and their hearts seemed chilled to one another for ever. Theirs was merely the affection of friendliness.

There was a tender reproach in Abai's voice, an echo of bygone days, and Aigerim was moved. She turned to Abai, her eyes deep with inquiry, her lips almost smiling. Her soft answer was like words of a song.

"Am I to blame, Abai? Was it not you who ceased to listen to me?"

"Then do sing for us, Aigerim! Sing some new songs to us!"

He did not want to hear anyone but Aigerim now.

Glancing at Yerbol, she made an almost imperceptible sign and he understood at once. Reaching for the dombra, he moved closer and began to play. The "Song of Tatyana" filled the house with silvery ripples and everyone was still.

Abai was astonished. To his knowledge Aigerim had never once sung the poem, but she seemed to know every word and every nuance of the melody. The truth was that she had learned it with Yerbol's help.

"It is Tatyana herself who is singing!" The thought flashed through every mind.

Abai had heard his own song for the first time when it was sung by Mukhamedjan on the day of its creation. Now he heard it for the second time and was swept with a fresh wave of delight. Aigerim gave new meaning to Tatyana's words and the song was reborn before its own creator.

To Abai too it seemed that he had been rejuvenated. Had he not once listened to his beloved with all his present ardour? As always, Aigerim seemed to be more than

singing—to be living the very words, the very melody! All those fervent hopes and whispers now burst into flame, a fire that burned only for him whom she loved.

*You are my God-sent husband,
I longed for you to be mine,
But you have denied me your friendship,
In loneliness I must pine.*

Was that not a melancholy reproach? She was very pale. The cherished mystery was unravelled in every trembling word: "Am I to blame? And if so, then can't you forgive me? Can't we recover our former days of happiness?" She seemed to be questioning Abai.

Aigerim was like one exhausted, the song having drained all strength from her. For a time no one dared to break the silence. Abai sat very still, unable to pull himself together. Then with sudden determination he put his arm about her.

"Aigerim, you have reached me with your song and your tears."

The guests were deeply moved.


"Tatyana could also be a simple daughter of the Kazakhs," said Kokpai. "More than one heart will speak with those words."

But Abai and Aigerim had nothing to say. Newly awakened love needs no words and tolerates no stranger's eye.

Mukhah, Kokpai and the other djiguits arose and left.

The song had loosened the knots that had kept their hearts apart.

It was thus that the great Russian poet Pushkin entered the steppes of the Kazakhs in the winter of 1887. To these spaces he brought the joy of his songs and it was his Tatyana who taught the Kazakhs to express their feelings in a frank and artless way they had not known before.



Epilogue

THE songs and poems born in Akshoky soon spread far and wide. Every new word sped over the steppes like the gentle but persistent wind of the Sary-Arka. Songs never heard before were carried by the winds over these expanses in reply to a desire that had lain dormant within them through the centuries. The voice of a tribe reborn, the harbingers of a new spring, the songs winged their way far and wide. They were songs for the summer that was to come, a summer that would see a fresh blossoming of life. They reached out to those who were seeking a new life and fresh horizons, to those restless spirits who looked to the future, prepared for battle.

The songs and poems born in Akshoky eventually reached Yeraly. Every evening they were read, copied and memorized by Hasen and Sadvokas, the orphans Abai had sent to school; they were sung by the children at the wells, outside the auls and round the camp-fires. Darkembai and other zhataks made the children recite Abai's poems again and again. Abai's old friend Darkembai would

move closer to the young scholar and listen eagerly as he took a snuff of tobacco from time to time.

*Oh, my poor Kazakhstan, my unhappy folk,
Deep in sore doubt your moustaches you stroke;
"What are evil and good?" in vain you ask—
To find the truth is a difficult task*

the poem began and Darkembai was infected with the poet's sadness.

Dandibai and Yerenai would then ask the children to recite another favourite poem:

*Though our hair is grey and our thoughts are sad,
we are full of greed.*

*If our children grow up like us,
every heart will bleed.*

*Not the joy of work, but envy and greed
in our souls weave their nest.*

*Neither noble deeds, nor the fruits of our toil,
but gain we love best.*

The old men would brighten up. They were especially fond of those songs which scourged the tyrants and enemies. What could Takezhan, Maibasar and Urazbai answer to these winged words. The old men were not satisfied with the recited words alone, but wanted them sung. Even more impressive in the chorus of young voices, the words delighted the grey-beards.

"What words they are! Words that make their way through all the sixty-two veins of a man!"

"No son of a Kazakh has ever been able to say what you have said, Abai! Only you could have said such things, my golden poplar so alone among these steppes of ours," said Darkembai voicing the general feeling.

The songs and poems born in Akshoky were sung far and wide by Mukhamedjan; on one occasion he sang them when he spent an evening in the yurta of Ospan. The young people of the aul and the servants clustered round the tent in a dense throng.

Ulzhan had not seen Abai for a long time and missed him greatly. Listening to the poem, she even failed to notice that guests had arrived. Perhaps these words were addressed to her?

*Once again we have met and I sing to you,
My spirit has changed and my songs are new.*

Her son scourged the old and ignorant akyns, the merchants in words, those who were eager for distinction.

*Not a clan in all the land is busier than Tobikty:
Hagglers and bargain-drivers—those the people's
fathers be.*

She was brought back to earth by the bark of Ospan's laughter. He had been listening in silence, but suddenly seized with mirth he pointed to Takezhan and his companions, who sat sedately drinking kumys.

"There they are," he said through his laughter. "It is they whom he meant."

When Ospan saw that Takezhan, Zhirenshe and Urazbai were offended, he laughed even more, and for an instant became the mischief-maker he had been as a child.

"What has happened to you, Ospan? Why are you guffawing like a stripling?" Zhirenshe grunted.

"There are no greater intriguers in the Tobikty than you three. That is why Abai has lashed out at you. Just dare deny it, Zhirenshe!"

Ulzhan smiled, but was soon lost in thought again.

"Abai was a world unto himself from the day he was

born," she said after Mukhamedjan had recited many poems. "He was the only hope of my heart. And I see that my hope has grown into a beautiful poplar and I can die in peace. I wish for nothing more, dear Allah, and am thankful."

Takezhan was displeased and could not repress his irritation.

"Oi, Apa," he said to Ulzan, "you say such things because you have given your heart to one son alone. Are there not noble and eloquent Kazakhs in our family besides him? And haven't they said so often, 'Praise be to Allah that we have brought forth not a single baksi or akyn!' Why be so pleased about Abai then? Isn't he a real baksi?"

Zhirenshe pinched Urazbai's leg, urging him to look at Ulzhan. Her face was distorted with anger.

"I am sure that you think you have sprung from the same litter as he, but there is a difference between kumai* and a mongrel. Say what you like, but you are not worth so much as one of Abai's finger-nails!"

Her broad, lined face was livid, her eyes bloodshot.

Takezhan reached for his kamcha and timak.

"Let us go," he said testily to Zhirenshe and Urazbai. "She's raving!" He strode to the door.

The songs and poems born in Akshoky sped over the steppes like the gentle but persistent wind of the Sary-Arka and made the rounds of all the Tobikty auls, reaching the Kerei in the upper reaches, the Uak in the lower reaches, the Karakesek and Kuandik tribes and even the Naiman in the valley of Ayaguz, the hills of Tarbagatai and the Altai.

A bridegroom and his companion one evening came to a poor yurt at the edge of an aul far from their native

* Kumai, a legendary hound.—Ed.

district. Both men were poorly dressed and the bride-to-be was also from a poor family. The bridegroom was Moldabek, the singer. The bride's family had invited the young hostess of the aul, respected and loved by all, to join the gathering. She was Togzhan.

Suddenly, without warning, Moldabek began to sing "Tatyana's Letter," "Onegin's Answer" and "Tatyana's Reply."

As she heard the very first words, Togzhan said to herself, "Only Abai could have said that." She was too overwhelmed by her feelings to ask who the author was and when Moldabek sang "Tatyana's Reply," she was astonished and moved. Were these not her own words? They had not been forgotten—the flame had flared up anew in this sad song. All the evening she sat listening, the tears streaming from her eyes.

On a quiet summer evening, Abai sat on the rocky hill of Kaska-Bulak, listening to the evening noises of the aul. His small aul had not wandered to zhailyau that summer, and instead, he was spending the season in the neighbourhood of the zhataks.

Many guests had come from the zhailyau that morning. They were young akyns who had brought him glad tidings of how popular his songs were throughout the steppes. Abai's name had been on the lips of everyone at the crowded fair at Koyandin.

"A good man has appeared in the steppes and his name is Abai. He has special words and behests for us. He is a wise man, a protector of the downtrodden and the enemy of the tyrants. He was born among the Tobikty, but is truly a son of all the people. We shall heed his words and behests."

It was Kokpai, Mukhah, Mukhamedjan, Magash and Kakitai who had brought the news. They had crowded round their aga-akyn, proud and elated.

Leaving his friends in the yurta, Abai had climbed this hill to be alone with his thoughts.

His eyes searched the vast expanses of Yeraly, Oikodik and Korik. How great was the face of this world plunged into evening stillness and bathed in slanting shafts of the sun.

Abai felt as though he were in a lonely ship on a boundless sea. With sails unfurled, he was roving towards strange shores, to a haven called the future. The name of his ship was "Hope and Struggle." It was forging steadily ahead.

Abai looked again towards the distant horizon, trying to visualize the course of his imaginary ship.

His momentary elation gave way to a fresh train of thought, as sullen clouds gathered over his vision of joy.

Life and struggle lay ahead and he was alone. True, he had strength and hope. His strength lay in poetry and his hope in the people, but his hope was still deep in slumber and, he wondered, would his strength alone be understood by the people? Had he the patience and will-power to go on alone?

He had reached the summit of his life. And behind him, in the past, which had prevailed—losses or gains? He was not sorry for much of what he had lost. His father had become a stranger to him and subsequently his brother Takezhan and many others like them, for instance Zhirenshe and Urazbai. Well, what did they matter? There would be many more like them. It was necessary above all to preserve the flame which lit the way for his own people. Yes, that would be his pledge.

But what had happened to that sea of his? He looked about startled.

It was no sea now, but the usual plains of Yeraly and a column of dust rising in the distance and there was another column and yet another. What could it be?

A rider approached from behind him, the horse was flaked with foam and the man out of breath. It was young Sadvokas whom Abai had once sent to school; Darkembai had told him not to spare his horse.

"Abai-aga! Did you see those clouds of dust?" he gasped on the verge of tears. "The robbers have fallen upon the poor herds of the zhataks. They are driving away our last horses. They are robbing us again."

Gone were the sea and the dream. And gone was his momentary vision of joy, of consolation. Life with its bitter reality, its grim struggles, was once more summoning Abai imperiously to battle.