

By the same author

FAREWELL, GUL'SARY!

The White Steamship

by

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Translated from the Russian

by

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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HE HAD TWO tales. One was his own, about which no one knew. The other was the one his grandfather used to tell. Then neither remained. Which is the heart of the matter.

That year he'd turned seven and was going on eight.

First a briefcase was bought. A black leatherette briefcase with shiny metal clips which slipped under catches. With a side pocket for odds and ends. In short, an extraordinary, wholly ordinary schoolboy's briefcase. You might say that everything began with this.

Grandfather bought it in a mobile shop. A kind of general store on wheels which made the rounds of the mountain cattle breeders with its goods, sometimes dropping in on them in the San-Tash canyon.

From there, beyond the cordon, the mountain forest preserve climbed along gorges and ravines to the upper reaches. In all, three families were settled in the cordon. Still, from time to time, the mobile shop called on the foresters too.

The only lad in all the three households, he was always first to spy the mobile shop.

"It's coming!" he'd cry, dashing to doors and windows. "The motor-market's coming!"

The twin ruts of road wound their way here from the banks of the Issik-Kul, keeping to gorges and the river bank in its route over rocks and pits. It wasn't particularly easy to drive on such a road. Having reached Guard Mountain, the road climbed from the bottom of the pass to the slope, and from there slowly descended along a steep, bald incline to the foresters' houses. Guard Mountain was very close: in summer, the lad sprinted there almost every day to survey the lake through binoculars. And from there, everything on the road was always as easy to see as if on your palm: people on foot and on horses—and, of course, the lorry.

This time—which took place during a hot summer—the lad was swimming in his little river pond, from where he saw the dust kicked up by the lorry coming down the slope. The pond was on the edge of a kind of shallow in the river, laid out along the pebbly bank. Grandfather had constructed it with rocks. If it weren't for the little pool, who knows: perhaps the lad would have lost his life long ago. And as old grandma used to say, the river would have washed him clean to the bones and flushed him straight into the Issik-Kul, where fish and all kinds of underwater creatures would have probed his remains. And no one would take the trouble to search or grieve for him—because there's no sense in poking into the water, and because he'd be nobody's great loss. So far this hadn't happened. And if it did, who knows—maybe old grandma really wouldn't rush to save him. Had he been her own blood, perhaps; but as she said, he was somebody else's. And somebody else's means always somebody else's, however much you feed him and however long you pick up after him. Somebody else's... but what if he didn't want to be somebody else's? And why was he the one who had to be considered somebody else's? Maybe not he but old grandma herself was somebody else's?

But this comes later—and the story of grandfather's pond belongs later too...

And so he spied the mobile shop that day; it was descending from the mountain, followed by a trail of dust along the road. He felt a wave of happiness, as if he knew that the briefcase would be bought for him. He leapt out of the water instantly, quickly pulled his trousers over his skinny hips and, still wet and blue—for the river was cold—dashed down the trail to the house to be the first to herald the mobile shop's arrival.

The lad ran quickly, hopping over bushes and around the boulders he wasn't able to jump. He didn't dally anywhere, even for a second—not near the high grass, not near the rocks, although he knew that they were far from ordinary. They could feel insulted and even trip people. "The motor-market's arrived. I'll come back later," he tossed off while rushing past 'lying camel', as he called a ginger, hunch-backed piece of granite sunk into the earth up to its chest.

Ordinarily, the lad wouldn't pass without patting his 'camel' on its hump. He patted him in the manner of an animal's master, like grandfather his short-tailed gelding—just a casual, off-handed tap as if to say, "You wait around, I'm off to take care of something near by." He had a boulder called 'saddle'—half white and half black, a skewbald rock with a saddle-like hollow on which you could mount, as on a horse. There was also a 'wolf' rock which looked very much like a real wolf—tawnyish and flecked with grey, with powerful withers and weighty brows. He would steal up to him on all fours and take aim. But his favourite rock was the 'tank', an indestructible boulder on the very bank of the river, which was hollowed away by the current. Any second now the 'tank' would charge from the bank and plunge on, and the river would seethe, boiling with whitecaps. That's the way tanks move in the cinema, after all: down the bank and into the water—forward! The lad rarely saw films and therefore

stoutly remembered what he saw. Grandfather sometimes drove his grandson to the cinema at the state bloodstock farm in the neighbouring glen, on the other side of the mountain. Which is why the 'tank' appeared on the bank, always on the ready to dart across the river. There were other rocks too, 'good' and 'bad' rocks, even 'cunning' and 'stupid'.

Among the plants too, there were 'favourites', 'brave ones' and others who were 'bashful' or 'wicked'. The stinging burdock, for example, was enemy number one. The lad crossed swords with it a dozen times a day. But the end of this war was not in sight: the burdock kept growing and multiplying. And there was the bindweed – which, although just a weed too, had the smartest and happiest flowers of all. They were better than all the others at greeting the sun in the morning. The other grasses understood nothing whatever: morning or evening, it was all the same to them. But all the bindweed needed was a bit of warming by the sun's rays and it opened its eyes and laughed. First one eye, then a second, and finally all the bindweed's blossoms uncurled. White, light blue, lilac, all kinds . . . and if you sat near them and stayed absolutely still, it seemed as if, just after awakening, they were whispering inaudibly about something. But the ants knew all about it. They ran all over the bindweed in the morning, screwing up their eyes in the sunshine and listening to what the flowers were saying to one another. Maybe they were telling their dreams?

Later, usually around noon, the lad liked to make his way into the thickets of stalky shiraljins. The shiraljins were very tall and had no flowers, but gave off a strong fragrance; they grew in bunches, tight little clusters that let no other plants near. Shiraljins were loyal friends. Especially when there was some kind of hurt and you felt like crying so that no one could see, the shiraljins were the best place to take cover. They smelled like the entrance to a pine forest. It was hot and peaceful in the

shiraljins, and the main thing was, they didn't block the sky. The best way was to lie on your back and look into the sky. At first you could hardly make out anything through the tears. Then some clouds would float by and they'd become anything you'd want them to be up there. The clouds knew that things weren't so good with you, that you wanted to run away somewhere, or fly away so that nobody would find you, and then everybody would sigh and pine after you: the boy's disappeared, they'd say, and where will we find him now? . . . And so that this wouldn't happen, so that you didn't disappear anywhere, so that you lay there quietly and gazed at the clouds, they'd turn into anything you wanted. From one and the same cloud you could get all kinds of different things. You just had to figure out what the clouds were depicting.

It was peaceful in the shiraljins, and they didn't block the sky. That's the kind they were, the shiraljins, with their smell of hot pine trees . . .

And he knew all matter of other things about the grasses. To the silvery feather-grass which grew in the marshy meadow, he was condescending. They were funny ones, those feather-grasses. Feather-brained. Their delicate, silky whisks couldn't live without wind. They just waited around for it, and whichever way it blew, that's the way they'd bow. They all bowed together, the whole meadow as if by command. And if it rained or a storm started up, the feather-grass didn't know where to seek shelter. If they'd had legs, they'd run away, probably just following their own noses . . . But they only pretended this. As soon as the storm calmed down, the empty-headed feather-grasses were again at the wind's command— wherever it blew, they bowed . . .

Alone, without friends, the little shaver lived in the world of these guileless things which surrounded him, and only the mobile shop could make him forget everything and run headlong for it. Nobody needed to tell him: the mobile shop

wasn't a collection of stones or some species of grass. It had just about everything under the sun, that mobile shop!

When the lad had run down to his house, the mobile shop was already approaching the yard behind the houses. The houses in the cordon faced the river; the front yards fused into an easy slope which descended straight to the bank, and on the other side of the river, directly from the bank hollowed away by the current, a steep forest rose directly into the mountains. Thus there was only one approach to the cordon, from behind the houses. Had the lad not dashed back in time, no one would have known that the mobile shop was already there.

At that hour, none of the men were about; they'd all gone off early in the morning. The women were at their household chores. But at this moment, he cried piercingly, running up to the open doors.

"It's arrived! The motor-market's arrived!"

The women were thrown into a flutter. They rushed to unearth the money they'd laid aside. And dashed out, one overtaking the other. Even old grandma praised him.

"That's our little sharp-eyes."

The lad felt flattered, as if he himself had driven up the mobile shop. He was happy because he'd brought them the news, because he dashed out into the yard together with them, because together with them he stood there at the van's open doors. But the women immediately forgot him. They had more important things to attend to. The assortment of wares lit up their eyes. There were three women in all: old grandma, Aunt Bekai—his mother's sister, the wife of the most important man in the cordon, warden Orozkul—and the wife of handyman Seidakhmat: young Guljamal, with her daughter always in her arms. Three women in all. But they made so much fuss, engaged in so much grabbing, rummaging and scrutinising that the mobile shop man had to ask them to form a queue and stop babbling all at once.

However his words had no great effect on the women. First they grabbed everything in sight, then began to pick out things, and finally to return the rejected items. They put things aside, tried them on, argued, exchanged doubts, and asked the same questions a dozen times. They didn't like this, found that too dear, and the third item was the wrong colour . . . The lad stood to one side. He became bored. His expectation of something extraordinary evaporated; the joy he'd felt when he caught sight of the mobile shop on the mountain disappeared too. The mobile shop suddenly turned into an ordinary lorry, crammed with a pile of assorted rubbish.

The vendor frowned: now it was doubtful whether these old hens were going to buy anything at all. What had brought him here, all this long way, through the mountains?

That's the way it turned out. The women began to back away, their ardour cooled, and they even appeared somewhat tired. For some reason, they began to make excuses, either for each other's sake or for the mobile shop man's. Old grandma was the first to complain: she had no money. And no money meant no wares. Aunt Bekai couldn't undertake a large purchase without her husband. Aunt Bekai was the unhappiest woman on earth because she had no children, for which Orozkul beat her in his drunkenness, which brought suffering to grandfather too, for Bekai was his daughter. Aunt Bekai bought a few trifles and two bottles of vodka. Which was in vain: it would only make things worse for her. Old grandma gave in to her disfavour.

"What's the matter with you?" she hissed so that the mobile shop man wouldn't hear. "Begging for disasters to bring down on your own head?"

"I know," Aunt Bekai cut her short.

"You're a fool," said old grandma, whispering even lower, but with a kind of malicious joy. If it weren't for the mobile

shop man, she would have upbraided Aunt Bekai. Whew, how they went at each other . . .

Young Guljamal came to the rescue. She launched into an explanation to the vendor of how her Seidakhmat was planning to go to the city soon, and money was needed in the city—which is why she couldn't loosen her purse strings.

So they stood around the mobile shop this way, buying a few things 'for farthings', as the vendor said, and then broke up for home. Can anyone call this business! Spitting in the direction of the departed women, the vendor began to pick up the wares that had been turned inside out, so that he could get behind the wheel and get out. Then he noticed the little boy.

"What's on your mind, big ears?" he asked. The little tyke had protruding ears, a thin neck and a large round head. "You want to buy something? Hurry up, I'm closing. Got any money?"

The vendor asked in passing, just for something to say, but the little boy answered in earnest.

"No sir, I've got no money." He shook his head.

"I bet you do," drawled the vendor with affected mistrust. "You're all money bags around here, you only make out you're broke . . . What's that there in your pocket—money, isn't it?"

"No sir," answered the lad with the same seriousness and sincerity while turning out his threadbare pocket. (His other pocket was sewn tightly closed.)

"That means you've spilled out all your dough, I suppose. Take a look where you were running. You'll find it."

They fell silent.

"Who do you belong to?" the vendor resumed his questioning. "Old Momun, is it?"

The lad nodded in answer.

"You're his grandson, I suppose?"

"Yes," the boy nodded again.

"And where's your mother?"

The boy said nothing. He didn't want to talk about this.

"She doesn't send a word about herself to anybody, your mother? You don't know yourself—is that it?"

"I don't know."

"And your father? Don't know too?"

The boy was silent.

"What's all this, then, my friend? You don't know anything?" the vendor reproached him playfully. "Well, okay, if that's the way it is. Here." He pulled out a handful of candies. "And look after yourself."

The lad backed away in shyness.

"Go on, take them. Don't hold me up. I've got to get moving."

The lad put the candies in his pocket and made ready to run after the lorry—to accompany the mobile shop to the road. He hailed Baltek, a fearfully lazy, shaggy dog. Orozkul was always threatening to shoot him: why keep that kind of mut, he kept saying. But grandfather prevailed on him again and again to wait a bit: the thing to do, he'd propose, was to raise a sheep dog and then take Baltek somewhere and leave him. Baltek couldn't care less about all this: when he was full, he slept; when hungry, he'd keep licking up to the nearest person, strangers as soon as his own masters—quite indiscriminately, as long as someone threw him something. That's the kind of dog Baltek was. But sometimes he'd chase after cars, out of boredom. True, not very far. Only until he'd gained full speed, after which he'd turn around and trot home. An unreliable dog. Still, it was a hundred times better to run with a dog than without one. Whatever he lacked, he was still a dog.

On the sly, so that the vendor wouldn't see, the lad tossed Baltek a piece of candy. "Get set," he warned the dog. "We're going to run a long way." Baltek began to yelp gently and wiggle his tail in the hope of more. But the lad decided against

tossing another candy. The man might be insulted: after all, it wasn't for the dog that he'd given a whole handful.

At this very moment, grandfather appeared. The old man had been to the apiary. From the apiary, you couldn't see what was happening behind the houses. But it turned out that grandfather arrived just in time, before the mobile shop drove off. A coincidence. Otherwise, his grandson wouldn't have had a briefcase. The lad was in luck that day.

Old Momun, whom sages nicknamed Efficacious Momun, was known by everyone in the region, and he knew everyone. Momun merited this nickname on the strength of his un-failing amiability to everyone he knew even in the slightest degree and his constant readiness to do anything for anyone, to oblige everyone. However, his zeal was appreciated by no one, just as gold wouldn't be valued if it were suddenly distributed free. No one gave Momun the respect due people his age. He was treated unceremoniously. At great funeral banquets of some renowned elder of the Bugu clan—and Momun was born a Buguan, was very proud of this and would never miss a funeral banquet of one of his clansmen—Momun was often charged with the slaughtering of the cattle, the greeting of the honoured guests and helping with their dismounting. He also helped with the serving of the tea—as well, sometimes, as the splitting of the wood and carrying of the water. Could anyone claim that there was little to attend to at great funerals with all those guests from all parts? Momun did everything he was assigned quickly and easily—and, most important, did not lie down on the job like the others. The young village brides, whose duty it was to welcome and feed this great horde of guests, observed Momun coping with the work and commented about it.

“What would we have done if it weren't for Efficacious Momun?”

And it turned out that the old man, who'd come with his

grandson from far away, would assume the role of a kind of apprentice *dzhigit** samovarboy. Anyone else in his place would have exploded with insult, but Momun was unconcerned.

And no one was surprised that old Efficacious Momun waited on the guests—this is what had made him Efficacious Momun all his life. It was his own fault that he was Efficacious Momun. If one of the newcomers expressed surprise—what are you, an elderly man, doing running women's errands; have the young chaps in this village all gone extinct, for goodness sake?—Momun would answer calmly.

“The dead man was my brother.” (He considered all Buguans his brothers. But to no lesser degree, the other guests were also his 'brothers'.) “Who should see to his funeral feast if not I? That's why we Buguans are all in kinship, all descendants from our progenitress herself, Horned Deer-Mother. And she, wonderous Deer-Mother, bequeathed us friendship in life as well as in memory . . .”

That's the kind of man Efficacious Momun was!

Old and young were on 'tu' terms with him and felt free to joke with him—he was a harmless old fellow. No one had to reckon much with him either—he was a meek old fellow. It's not for nothing that they say: people never forgive someone who can't make himself be respected. And he didn't know how.

He could do lots of things in life. At various times, he worked at carpentry, saddle-making and rick-making. In his younger days on a collective farm, he made ricks so well that it was a shame to pull them down in winter. The rain streamed down them like water off a duck's back, and snow lay as smoothly on top of them as on a gabled roof. During the war, he was a labour-soldier building factory walls in Magnitogorsk, and was designated a Stakhanovite. He returned, built log houses in the cordon and became a forester. Although he was officially listed

* *Dzhigit*: a skilled young horseman.

as a handyman, it was he who looked after the forest in fact, and Orozkul, his son-in-law, spent most of his time on eating-and-drinking rounds of his acquaintances. Only when his superiors arrived on a surprise visit would Orozkul himself take them around to inspect the forest and fix up a hunt—in these cases, he played the man in charge . . . Momun looked after the cattle and worked in the apiary. All his life, he was busy with work and errands from morning to evening, but he never learned to make people respect him.

Momun's appearance too was far from a chieftain's. He lacked all earmarks of solemnity, importance and sternness. He was a simple good soul, and this unrewarded human virtue was apparent in him from the first glance. In all eras, this kind of person has been admonished: "Don't be good, be hard. That's what you need—to be tough." But to his own misfortune, he remained incorrigibly kindhearted. His face was all smiles and a thousand wrinkles, and his eyes perpetually asked: "What do you need? Do you want me to do something for you? This very minute, just tell me what you need . . ."

His nose was soft and duck-like, as if lacking all cartilage. And was shortish as well: a quick-moving old fellow, like an adolescent.

He wore a beard, but even this hadn't worked out. It was nothing more than a source of amusement. Two or three reddish little hairs stuck out on his naked chin—that was the whole of the beard.

It's quite a different thing when you suddenly come upon a man full of weight and years riding along a road, a man with a beard like a sheaf of wheat, wearing an expensive hat and a bulky fur coat with a wide Persian collar; and mounted on a fine horse too, with a silver-trimmed saddle. Such a man lacks nothing to be a sage or prophet, and there's no need to feel small about bowing to his kind. They're esteemed everywhere. But Momun was stuck with having been born only Efficacious

Momun. Perhaps his only advantage lay in not being apprehensive about lowering himself in someone else's eyes. (If he didn't sit in the right place, say the right things, give the right answers, smile the right smiles; wrong, wrong and always out of place . . .) In this sense, Momun, although himself unaware of it, was a man of rare happiness. Many people die not so much from a disease as from an obsession which gnaws incessantly at them: to pass themselves off for more than they are. (Who doesn't want to be known as clever, worthy, handsome—and at the same time formidable, just and decisive? . . .)

But Momun wasn't any of these. He was an odd-ball and people treated him as an odd-ball.

Only one thing could give strong offence to Momun: to forget to invite him to a family council about the arrangements for someone's funeral feast . . . In this case, he was deeply insulted and suffered his slight keenly. Not because he had been ignored, however—he never decided anything at the councils, after all; he merely attended—but because the discharge of an ancient tradition had been violated.

Momun had his misfortunes and sorrows, which brought him suffering and nocturnal tears. Outsiders knew almost nothing about them. But his own people knew well.

When Momun saw his grandson next to the mobile shop, he immediately perceived that the boy had been disappointed by something. Since the vendor was a visitor, however, he first turned to him. He quickly dismounted and offered the vendor both hands.

"*Asalam aleikum*, great trader," he said, half in jest and half seriously. "Has your caravan arrived safely, is your commerce going well?" Ringed in radiance, Momun shook the vendor's hand. "Much water has flowed under the bridge since we've seen each other. Welcome!"

The vendor chuckled condescendingly at his speech and

homely looks—the same old, worn-out tarpaulin boots, sackcloth breeches made by his old woman, shabby little jacket browned with rain and sun and a rough felt hat. Then he answered Momun.

“The caravan’s in one piece. Only look what’s been going on: a merchant travels all the way to you, and you wander off from the merchant by hill and dale. And order your wives to hold on to their kopeks, like their souls before death. If you’d swamp this place with goods, nobody here would cut a purse string.”

“Don’t be harsh on us, old chap,” Momun apologised embarrassedly. “If we knew you were coming, we wouldn’t have gone off. And as for being low on money, what can’t be cured must be endured. When we sell our potatoes in the autumn . . .”

“Talk’s cheap,” the vendor interrupted. “I know all about you smelly *bais**. You sit pretty in your mountains with all the land and hay you want. Forest on all sides—it’d take you over three days to drive around it. You raise cattle, yes? Keep bees? And too stingy to part with a kopek. Why don’t you buy this here silk blanket. Or there’s one sewing machine left . . .”

“Honest to God, I don’t have that kind of money,” said Momun, justifying himself.

“You suppose I’ll believe that? You’re an old skin-flint, you bury your gold. For what?”

“Honest to God no—I swear by Horned Deer-Mother.”

“All right then, take some corduroy. You can make yourself a new pair of trousers.”

“I’d buy some, I swear by Horned Deer-Mother . . .”

“Aw, what’s the use of talking to you,” said the vendor,

* *Bai*: an exploiting Asian landlord, with the connotation of a petty rajah. They no longer exist under Soviet rule, and the word is sometimes used as a term of slight contempt.

flapping his hand in disgust. “I should never have come. And where’s Orozkul?”

“He pushed off in the morning—to Aksai, probably. He’s got some business with the shepherds . . .”

“Eating and drinking, I suppose,” specified the vendor with a knowing look.

An awkward pause descended.

“Please don’t take offence, my dear fellow,” Momun began again. “In the autumn, God willing, we’ll sell our potatoes . . .”

“Autumn’s a long way off.”

“Well, if that’s the way it’s worked out, don’t judge us for it. For the love of God, come on in and have some tea.”

“That’s not what I came for,” the vendor refused.

He began to shut the van door, but at that moment glanced at the grandson, who was standing near the old man, already gripping the dog’s ear in readiness to chase after the lorry. “Well, at least buy this briefcase,” said the vendor. “It must be getting time for the kid here to go to school. How old is he?”

Momun immediately snatched at this idea: he’d have bought at least something from the dogged mobile shop man, and his grandson really did need a briefcase—he’d be starting school the coming autumn.

“You’re absolutely right,” bustled Momun, “I never thought of that. Of course: he’s seven, going on eight . . . Come over here,” he called to his grandson.

Grandfather rummaged in his pockets and fished out a hidden fiver. It had obviously been with him for a considerable time, for it was folded and pressed flat.

“Here you are, big ears.” The vendor winked slyly to the lad and presented him with the briefcase. “Now go study. And if you don’t get the hang of reading and writing, you’ll end up with your grandfather forever in the mountains.”

“He’ll cope, all right. He’s my bright little boy,” Momun

answered, counting his change. Then he glanced at his grandson, who was awkwardly holding the brand-new briefcase, and pressed him into his arms. "Good," he said quietly. "You'll go to school in the autumn." Grandfather's tough, weighty palm came down on the lad's head.

The boy felt a tight squeeze in his throat and was acutely aware of his grandfather's leanness and the familiar scent of his clothing. Momun smelled of dry hay and the sweat of a hardworking man. Sure, secure, and terribly dear—perhaps the only person on earth who doted on the boy turned out to be this simple, slightly outlandish old man whom clever types called Efficacious Momun . . . And what of it? Whatever he was, it was good to have him as a grandfather.

The lad himself hadn't suspected that his happiness would be so great. Until now, he hadn't thought of school. So far, he'd only seen children going to school—over there, on the other side of the mountains, in the villages along the Issik-Kul, where he and grandfather went to funeral feasts of renowned Buguan elders.

But from this moment, the lad never parted with his briefcase. Exulting and swaggering, he dashed off immediately to make the rounds of all the cordon's inhabitants. At first he showed his prize to old grandma—as if to say that his grandfather had bought him this—and then to Aunt Bekai. She too was impressed by the briefcase and praised the lad himself.

Aunt Bekai was rarely in a pleasant mood. Gloomy and irritated, she usually took no notice of her nephew. She was too preoccupied with other matters. Her own troubles weighed on her. Old grandma said that if she had children, she'd be a completely different woman. And Orozkul, her husband, would also be a different person. Then grandfather Momun would also be a different person, instead of the kind he was. Although he had two daughters—Aunt Bekai as well as the lad's mother, her younger sister—things were unhappy all the

same: it's bad when you're childless and still worse when your children are childless. That's what old grandma said. How to understand her? . . .

After Aunt Bekai, the lad ran off to show the purchase to young Guljamal and her little girl. From there he went down to Seidakhmat, who was mowing the hay. Again he ran past the ginger 'camel' rock and again had no time to pat him on the hump. He passed 'saddle', 'wolf' and 'tank', then ran farther, keeping to the river bank. The trail cut through thorny bushes; then he followed a long windrow of hay on the meadow and at last reached Seidakhmat.

Seidakhmat was alone there today. Grandfather had mowed his own plot long before, together with Orozkul's. They'd already carted away the hay. Old grandma and Aunt Bekai had raked it up, Momun pitchforked it together, and the lad helped grandfather lay the hay on the wagon. They built two ricks near the cowshed. Grandfather constructed them so carefully that no manner of rain would leak in. Ricks as smooth as if they'd been combed.

The same pattern was followed every year. Orozkul never mowed, but left everything to his father-in-law: Orozkul was the boss, after all. "If I have a mind to," he'd say, "I'll fire you all at one stroke." This was directed to grandfather and Seidakhmat. And pronounced when he was pickled. But he could never chase grandfather away: if he did, who'd do the work? Just try to make a go without grandfather. There was much to see to in the forest, especially in autumn. Grandfather always said: "The forest's not a flock of sheep, it won't scatter or stray. But it takes no less looking after. When there's a fire or a flash flood strikes from the mountain, a tree doesn't jump aside. It won't move from its place, but is destroyed right where it stands. That's what foresters are for: so that the trees won't be lost." And Orozkul wouldn't chase off Seidakhmat because Seidakhmat was gentle. He didn't

interfere in anyone else's business and didn't argue. But although gentle and sturdy, he was also lazy and liked to sleep. That's why he settled on forestry. Grandfather said that on the state farm, fellows like him raced lorries or took on the ploughing with their tractors. But in his private vegetable patch, Seidakhmat's potatoes were overgrown with weed. Guljamal finally had to take over the garden herself, working with her child in her arms.

Seidakhmat also put off starting the haying. Even grandfather had scolded him the day before yesterday. "Last winter," he said, "it wasn't you I felt sorry for, but the animals. That's why I gave you some of my hay. If you're counting on this old fogey's hay again, tell me straight out and I'll do the mowing for you." Seidakhmat took the hint and began swinging his scythe that morning.

Hearing quick steps behind his back, Seidakhmat spun around, wiping his face with his shirt-sleeve.

"What do you want? Did somebody call me or something?"

"No. I've got a briefcase. Here it is. Grandfather bought it. I'm going to school."

"You ran all the way down here for that?" Seidakhmat produced a boisterous laugh. "Grandfather Momun's like that"—he twisted his finger at his temple—"and you're heading the same way. All right, let's see your briefcase." He clicked the catch, twirled the briefcase in his hand and returned it, mockingly shaking his head. "Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "What school are you going to? Where is it, this school of yours?"

"What do you mean, what school? The farm school."

"You're going to walk to Jelesai?" marvelled Seidakhmat. "But that's across the mountains, not less than five kilometres."

"Grandfather said he's going to take me there on his horse."

"Back and forth every day? The old man's full of poppycock. It's about time for him to go to school himself. He can share

your desk with you, and when classes are over—back home together!" Seidakhmat split his sides with laughter. He thought it extremely funny to picture grandfather Momun sitting at the same school desk with his grandson.

The lad maintained a puzzled silence.

"Oh, I only said that for laughs," explained Seidakhmat.

He gave the lad a tweak on the nose and pulled the peak of his hat—grandfather's hat—over the boy's eyes. Momun never wore the Forestry Department's uniform cap; he was ashamed of it. ("What am I, some kind of boss? I wouldn't trade my own Kirghiz hat for any in the world.") In summer, therefore, an antediluvian hat of thick felt rode Momun's head, a 'former' *ak-kulpak**—a round white cap edged with worn black sateen around the brim; and in winter, an ancient sheepskin skullcap, also ragged. He had given his green uniform cap of the Forestry Service to his grandson to wear.

The lad was unhappy that Seidakhmat had received his news so scoffingly. He raised the peak of his cap to his forehead sullenly, and when Seidakhmat reached out to tweak his nose again, jerked his head back and snapped:

"Leave me alone!"

"My my—what an angry one you are," grinned Seidakhmat. "But don't take it to heart. Your briefcase fits the bill." He patted the boy on the shoulder. "Now shove off. I've still got to mow all day . . ."

Spitting on his palms, Seidakhmat retrieved the scythe.

The lad ran home, again along the same trail and once more at full speed past the same rocks. For the time being, he had no time to play around with rocks. A briefcase was a serious matter.

The lad liked to hold conversations with himself. But this time he spoke not to himself but the briefcase: "Don't you believe him, my grandfather's nothing like that. He's not a

* *Ak-kulpak*: a national Kirghizian cap of white felt in Central Asian style.

bit cunning, that's why people laugh at him. Because he's not the tiniest bit cunning. He's going to take you and me to school. You don't know where school is yet? It's not so far. I'll show you. We'll take a look at it through the binoculars from Guard Mountain. And I'll show you my white steamship too. Only first we'll duck into the shed. That's where my binoculars are hidden. I'm supposed to look after the calf, but I always go off to look at the white steamship. The calf's grown up already—he pulls you around so, you can't control him. Still and all, he's picked up the habit of sucking milk from a cow. But the cow's his mother and doesn't grudge the milk. Understand? Mothers never grudge anything. That's what Guljamal says, and she has her own little girl . . . Soon they'll start milking the cow and then we'll put the calf out to pasture. Then we'll climb up on Guard Mountain and look at the white steamship. You know, I talk with the binoculars like this too. Now there'll be three of us—me, you and the binoculars . . .”

In this fashion, he returned home. He very much enjoyed talking with the briefcase. He was about to continue the conversation, telling things about himself that the briefcase didn't yet know. But he was interrupted. From off to the side came the clatter of a horse's hoofs. Then, from behind the trees, a horseman appeared on a grey horse. It was Orozkul. He was also returning home. On the grey horse Alabash, whom he allowed no one but himself to ride, all saddled up in his parade gear, with brass stirrups, breast straps and tinkling silver pendants.

Orozkul's hat was cocked on the back of his head, revealing a narrow, reddish forehead. Drowsiness gripped him in the heat. He slept despite the horse's motion. A velveteen tunic, rather unskillfully sewn on the pattern of those worn by the regional authorities, was unbuttoned from top to bottom. His white shirt had pulled out of his belt in front. He was gorged

and drunk. A short time before, he had been a guest at someone's table, glutting himself on mare's milk and meat.

When they came to the mountains for summer pasturing, the neighbouring shepherds and horsherders often pressed Orozkul to let them play host to him. But their invitations had a purpose. They needed Orozkul, especially those who were building houses. They had to remain in the mountains, couldn't leave and abandon their herds—and where could they get their hands on building materials, especially timber? But if you got on the good side of Orozkul, it was as simple as that: you had your choice of two or three logs from the forest preserve, and you hauled them away. And if not, you'd wander around the mountains forever with your herd, and your house would take forever to build.

Dozing in the saddle, stuffed and important, Orozkul rode on, lackadaisically resting the toes of his box-calf boots in the stirrups. He nearly flew out of the saddle when the lad ran up to meet him, waving the briefcase.

“Uncle Orozkul, I've got a briefcase. I'm going to school. Look, I've got a briefcase.”

“Why don't you go to . . .” swore Orozkul, yanking on the reins in fright.

He peered at the lad with bloodshot, half-awake eyes, puffed up with drink.

“What are you doing here?”

“I'm going home. I've got a briefcase, I was just showing it to Seidakhmat,” said the lad in a sinking voice.

“Yeah yeah—go play,” barked Orozkul, and rode on, rolling unsteadily in the saddle. What did he care about a stupid briefcase, about his wife's nephew, a kid abandoned by his parents, when he himself had been so abused by fate? When God wouldn't give him his own son, a boy of his own blood, while others got all the children they wanted, without limit?

Orozkul began to sniffle, then uttered a sob. He was choked with self-pity and resentment. He felt terribly sorry for himself—sorry that his life would pass without leaving a trace on earth. A wave of anger towards his barren wife swept over him. It was all her fault, that damned woman who had gone empty all these years . . .

"I'll show you!" Orozkul threatened to himself, clenching his beefy fists and producing a suppressed groan to stop himself from crying aloud. He already knew that he would beat her when he came home. It happened every time Orozkul drank: sorrow and bitterness made this bull-like man take leave of his senses.

The lad followed behind him on the trail and was surprised when Orozkul suddenly disappeared. Turning towards the river, Orozkul dismounted, dropped the reins and pushed his way through the tall grass. Bent over and staggering, he pressed his hands full against his face and pulled his head into his shoulders. At the bank, Orozkul squatted and splashed his face with handfuls of water from the river.

"His head's probably hurting him because of the heat," the lad decided when he saw what Orozkul was up to. He didn't know that Orozkul was crying and, try as he did, couldn't control his sobs. He cried because it wasn't his son who had rushed out to meet him, and because he knew something in himself was lacking. Something that would have allowed him to say at least a few human words to that boy with the briefcase.



FROM THE SUMMIT of Guard Mountain, the view was open on all sides. Lying on his stomach, the lad fitted the binoculars to his eyes. They were powerful field binoculars which had been awarded to grandad long long ago in recognition of his lengthy service in the cordon. The old man disliked fussing with binoculars: "My own two eyes are no worse." On the other hand, his grandson had fallen in love with them.

This time he had climbed the mountain with the binoculars and the briefcase.

At first objects fluttered about, shifting in the round lenses; then, suddenly, clarity and immobility were established. That was the most fascinating moment of all. The lad held his breath so as not to disturb his focus and drank in the scene as if he himself had created it. Then he shifted his gaze to another point and again everything was dislocated and out of focus. The lad set to work adjusting the oculars.

From here, everything was visible in all directions. Including the very highest snow-covered summits, than which only the sky was higher. They rose up behind all the mountains;