



AUTUMN HAD COME again to the mountains. After the bustling summer, everything prepared itself once more for autumn's silence. The dust of cattle drives had settled all around and the camp fires been extinguished. The herds had left for winter. People too had left. The mountains were emptied.

Now eagles were flying on high, keeping to their solitude and sparing of their cries. The rumble of the river's waters had become more hollow: in summer, the river had grown accustomed to its bed, wearing its way in and becoming more and more shallow. The grass had stopped growing and faded through to its roots. The leaves tired of clinging to their branches and steadily fell. And silvery young snow already covered the highest peak at night. Towards morning, the dark ridges of its crests turned grey, like the manes of silver fox.

The wind in the canyons grew sharper and colder. But so far, the days were still dry and bright.

The forests across the river, opposite the cordon, quickly succumbed to autumn. From the river upwards—up to the

border of Black Pine Forest—autumn's foliage raged like a smokeless fire through the steep thickets of smaller trees. The loudest colours of all were gingers and crimsons; the most tenacious in growing on the steep ascent were the aspen and birch groves, which reached up to the heights of the great forest itself—to the kingdom of gloomy firs and pines, lying just beneath the snows.

As always, it was chaste and severe in the forest, as in a temple. Nothing but hard, brown trunks, nothing but a dry resinous smell, nothing but umber needles packed densely about the forest's feet. Nothing but wind coursing inaudibly among the crowns of old pine trees.

But today, agitated jackdaws had been generating a steady din over the mountains since morning. Screaming furiously, a large flock circled incessantly over the pine forest. The jackdaws had taken alarm immediately upon hearing the thud of axes. Now, vying with each other in screeching as if being robbed in broad daylight, they pursued two men who were hauling a recently cut pine log down the mountain.

The log was being dragged on a chain hitched to a horse's harness. Orozkul trod in front, leading the horse by the bridle. Tensed like a bull, his raincoat catching on the bushes, he clumped down like an ox ploughing a furrow. In back of him, behind the log, grandfather Momun kept up with the pace. He too found the going hard at this height; the old man gasped for breath. He grasped a birch lever in his hand, using it to hook under the log as he climbed down. The log kept lodging on stumps and rocks, and in the steep places would try to swing around sideways to the slope and roll straight down. If this happened, disaster was inevitable: the men would be crushed to death.

The man who controlled the log with the lever was in the most dangerous position—but you could never tell: Orozkul had already leapt away from the harness several times. And each

time was seared with shame when he saw the old man risking his life to restrain the log on the slope and waiting until Orozkul would return to the horse and take its bridle. And it's not for nothing that people say: to hide your own disgrace, you must disgrace someone else.

"What are you trying to do—finish me off?" Orozkul screamed at his father-in-law.

No one was near them to overhear this and condemn Orozkul, for it was unheard of to treat an elderly man this way. Timidly, the father-in-law remarked that he too, after all, might have fallen under the log. Why shout at him that way, as if he'd arranged it all purposely?

But this nettled Orozkul still more.

"Phoo, what a character you are," he said with great indignation. "If you're mashed to pieces—okay, you've lived out your time. What does it matter to you? But if I'm smashed up, who'll take your daughter? Who needs her, that barren thing? Barren as a wizard's whip . . ."

"You're a hard man, my son," was Momun's answer. "You don't have any respect for people."

Orozkul stopped short and measured the old man with his gaze. "Old duffers like you should have been sitting around the fire long ago, warming their arses on the ashes. You get your wages, don't you?—such as they are. Where do they come from, those wages? Through me. What other kind of respect do you need?"

"All right, all right—I just said it by the by," said Momun with resignation.

They pushed on in this manner. After mastering another rise, they stopped for a rest on the slope. The horse was soaked in foam. But the jackdaws did not take this occasion to quiet themselves. They kept circling as before: thousands of them, all making a din as if they'd set themselves the goal to scream all day today, and do nothing else but scream.

"They scent an early winter," said Momun to change the subject and dampen Orozkul's anger. "They're bunching up for migration. They don't like it when they're disturbed," he added, as if apologising for the unreasonable birds.

"Who's disturbing them?" said Orozkul, turning around sharply. Suddenly he went crimson. "Watch what you say, old man," he warned in a low but threatening voice.

"Phoo," he thought, "what's the old one driving at? What are we supposed to do—not touch a tree because of his jackdaws, not break a branch? I'm not having any of that. So far at least, I'm in charge here." He clapped an angry eye on the screeching flock.

"If I only had a machine gun, damn it," he said. And turning away, he swore obscenely.

Momun said nothing. He needed no adjustment to his son-in-law's swearing. "He's out of his senses again," the old man said sadly to himself. "He turns into some kind of animal when he drinks. And when he's in one of his hangovers, you can't say anything to him either. What makes people like that?" Momun grieved. "You do him a good turn, and he answers with malice. And he's ashamed of nothing, he never thinks better of things. As if that's the way things should be. He thinks he's right. As long as he gets the best of everything. Everybody else must wait on him. If you don't want to—he'll make you. It's still bearable when his kind is off in the mountains or forests and has only a couple of people at his disposal. But what if he turns up in some higher post somewhere? God forbid! That kind of person is always around. Always grabbing for themselves. And you can never escape from his kind. They're waiting for you everywhere, hunting for you. They'll stop at nothing in the way they treat you so that they can live their soft lives. And make out that they're right, of course. Yes, that kind of person's always around . . ."

"All right, you've stood around long enough," Orozkul

interrupted the old man's reflections. "Let's get going," he ordered. And they moved on.

Orozkul had been in a bad mood since early morning. In the morning, when they'd had to cross over the the opposite bank and into the forest with the equipment, Momun hurried to take his grandson to school. He'd gone completely senile! Every morning he saddled the horse, took the boy to school—then galloped over again to bring him home from school. All that fuss over an abandoned kid, the side-effect of a night's pleasure. You'd think the kid couldn't be late for school. Here we are working on something that only God knows how will turn out—and we're supposed to just drop it and wait around? That's what he supposes? "I'll be back in a flash," he says. "If the boy's late for class it's embarrassing in front of the teacher." He found the right one to be embarrassed in front of, that fool!

Who the hell is she anyway, that teacher? She's been going around in the same overcoat for five years. Always loaded down with notebooks and shopping bags . . . And thumbing rides on the road to the district centre because she's always needing something there, something's always lacking. First coal for the school, then glass for the windows, next it's chalk or even dust rags. To think that any self-respecting teacher would work in a school like that! The name they thought up for it: Mini School. You bet it's runty all right. And good for what? All the teachers worth anything at all were in the city. With schools made of glass. Teachers in ties. But that's in the city . . . where the bosses sit around on the back seats and are driven through the streets. And what cars! They make you feel like stopping and standing up to attention until they glide past. Black, smooth, sparkling cars. And all the city folk act as if they don't even notice them; they've got no time because they're always dashing somewhere. That's real life for you—over there, in the city. That's where a man should shove on to

and get himself fixed with a good job. City people know how to respect a man according to his job. That's what's expected: people can't get away with not showing respect. The higher the job, the more respect. Civilised people. And just because you've sat at somebody's table or accepted some kind of gift, you don't have to drag logs about or anything like that. Not like here—somebody gives you fifty roubles or maybe a century with a real push—and for that he's got to cart away his timber. Who knows, he can even slap a complaint against you. 'Bribe-taker Orozkul,' he'll call you, he's this kind or that . . . Plain ignorance!

Yeah, to be in the city! To goddam hell with all these mountains and forests, these filthy logs. And that empty-wombed wife and this brainless old geezer with his bastard kid who he fusses over like some kind of wonder. Ekh, I'd love to cut loose, like a horse full up on oats. I'd make them respect me . . . "Orozkul Balazhanovich, may I please step into your office?"

And he'd marry a city girl there. Why not? Say some entertainer—a real beauty who sang and maybe danced a bit with a microphone in her hand. They say what that kind cares about is a man who holds down a big job. He'd take one of those beauties by the arm—and he himself would be dressed up fine. Then off to a film. She'd clack away on her high heels and smell of perfume. Passers-by would sniff at her. Before you knew it, there'd be children. He'd see to it that his son became a lawyer, and his little girl would play the piano. You can always spot city children at a glance—because they're smart. They speak only Russian at home, instead of stuffing their heads with village lingo. That's the way he'd bring up his own kids. "Daddy, Mummy, I'd like this, may I have that . . ." Can anyone really begrudge something to his own offspring? Oh, he'd get the better of lots of people, he'd show them who he was. He was as good as anybody else. The people at the top

— who were they, in what way better than him? They were just people, people like him. They happened to be lucky. But not him. Luck evaded him. But it was his own fault too. He should have gone to the city after his forestry course and applied for a technical school or even an institute. He'd been impatient; he yearned for an official position. Even a minor one, so long as it was an official position. So now he had to traipse around some mountains, dragging logs back and forth like a donkey . . . And jackdaws to top it all off. What the hell were they shouting for? Why were they circling around? Ekh, if he only had a machine gun . . .

Orozkul had cause to be upset. He'd had a fine time all summer. Autumn approached, and together with summer, the days of his eating and drinking as the shepherds' and herders' guest departed. As the song goes, "When the blossoms fade on the mountain meadows, it's time to be leaving for the lowlands . . ."

Autumn had arrived. Now Orozkul had to pay for the honour accorded him, for his food and drink, his promises and debts. As well as for his bragging. "What do you need? Only two pine logs for beams? It's not worth even mentioning. Come on over and you can cart them away."

He had talked a lot of hot air, accepted tributes, drank much vodka. And now—panting, drenched in sweat and cursing everything on earth—he was yanking these whopping logs around the mountains. The whole deal turned out to be a miserable mess for him. And his whole life in general was a mess. Suddenly a desperate thought flashed across his mind: "I'll spit on all this and get out. Just leave for wherever my fancy takes me." But he realised immediately that he would go nowhere. He was no use to anyone anywhere, and wouldn't find the life he wanted for himself anywhere either.

Just try to leave this place or renege on your promises! His own cronies would give him away. People weren't worth

a damn these days. The year before last, he'd promised a Buguan, his own kinsman, a pine log in return for the gift of a young lamb. But in the autumn, he didn't feel like crawling up the mountain to search for the tree. It's easy enough to say, but just try to climb up there—then saw through the thing and carry it down. And if, on top of this, the tree's lived on this earth more than a decade—try and mess around with it. All the gold in the world couldn't make you want to tackle it. At that very time, old Momun was sick in bed. You couldn't cope alone—nobody's ever coped alone with a full-grown pine log in the mountains. You could fell it all right—and he *would* fell the pine. But not get it down the slopes. If he'd known in advance what was going to happen, he'd have gone after the tree with Seidakhmat.

Too lazy to clamber up the mountain, Orozkul decided to get his kinsman off his back with the first piece of timber that turned up. But the man wouldn't give in: hand over his genuine pine log, and not a damn thing less. "You know how to grab a young lamb, all right—but can't keep your word?" Orozkul went into a rage and tossed him out of his house: you don't like what I offer—then scram. But this fellow knew his way around. He scribbled an official complaint against the inspector of the San-Tash forest preserve, Orozkul Balazhanovich. He painted such a picture, full of fact and fiction, that Orozkul might as well have been shot as a 'wrecker of socialist forests'. Orozkul was dragged through an endless series of investigating committees from the district centre and the Ministry of Forests. He pulled through only by the skin of his teeth . . . That's a relative for you! And on top of it, that particular one liked to say that "we're all the children of Horned Deer-Mother. All for one and one for all." All that's pure bullshit—and what the hell does some deer count for when everybody's poised to grab for your jugular for a kopeck, or clap you in jail? It was in prehistoric times when people believed

in some kind of deer. There was no end to the stupidity and ignorance in those days—it was plain ridiculous. Now, on the other hand, everybody was civilised and literate. Who needs those babyish fairy-tales?

After that episode, Orozkul swore solemnly that he would never again give a branch or a twig to anybody. Not to any acquaintances and not to a single fellow tribesman, even if they were the children of Horned Deer-Mother three times over.

But summer returned. White *yurts* appeared on the green mountain meadows. Herds began to bray and puffs of smoke to trail out from alongside brooks and rivers. The sun shone and it smelled of flowers and of intoxicating mare's milk. It was good to sit around in the open air, on the green grass near the *yurts* and in the company of old acquaintances. And to savour mare's milk and the meat of young lambs. And then to gulp a glass of vodka and feel giddy in the noggin—feel that you could tear a tree out by its roots or wring the head off that mountain over there . . . During those days, Orozkul forgot his vow. It was delicious to hear himself called a great lord of a great forest. And once again he made promises and accepted tributes. Once again one of the forest's rare old pines didn't suspect that from the first signs of autumn, its days were numbered.

From the reaped fields, autumn stole unnoticed into the mountains and began to poke about in all directions. The grass turned auburn in the places where she broke through, together with the leaves in the forest.

The berries ripened and lambs matured. They were divided into flocks, young ewes and young rams separately. The women stored away dried cheese in bags for keeping through the winter. The men assembled to decide who would be first to start the return trip to the valleys. But before leaving, those who had come to an agreement with Orozkul during the summer warned him that on a certain day at a certain hour,

they would arrive at the cordon in lorries to collect the timber that had been promised them.

This very evening a lorry with a trailer would come to haul away two pine logs. One was already down below, already floated across the river and delivered to the place where the lorry would drive up. As for the second—well, here it was, the one they were now dragging below. If Orozkul could now go back and, speaking plainly, upchuck all he'd eaten and drunk for these logs, he'd go it in a flash; anything to shake off the work and agony he was now forced to endure.

Alas, there was no way to change his damned life in the mountains: the lorry with the trailer would arrive this evening, to haul away the logs at night.

It was still bearable if everything would work out safely; but the road ran through the state farm, right near the check-point. There was no other route, and sometimes the police dropped in on the state farm unexpectedly. Or motor vehicle inspectors or other officials from the administrative centre could turn up there at any time. They'd clap eyes on the logs under transport, then start questioning. "Where's that lumber from, where are you hauling it?"

Orozkul's spine tingled at this thought. And he boiled up with spite towards everyone and everything: towards the cawing jackdaws overhead, towards miserable old Momun, towards Seidakhmat, the lazy slob who'd got wise enough three days ago to push off to the city to sell the potatoes. Because he knew that they had to pull some logs down from the mountains. He'd sneaked out of it, as it turned out, and now he'd return only after finishing with every last bit of business in the market. If it weren't for this, Orozkul would have ordered him to drag the logs down together with the old man; he wouldn't have had to go through all this damn trouble himself.

But Seidakhmat was far away, and there was also nothing

to reach the jackdaws with. For lack of anything else, he could always bash his wife around—but it was still a long way home. That left old Momun. Breathing hard, growing more and more furious because of the thinness of the mountain air, cursing at every step, Orozkul tramped straight through the bushes, caring nothing either for the horse or the old man following behind him. Let the horse drop dead, let the old man drop dead—let he himself drop dead of a heart attack. Let the whole world sink under, the world where nothing's as it should be, the way it ought to be for Orozkul according to his virtues and his position.

Giving in wholly to his anger, Orozkul led the horse through the bushes straight to a sharp drop. Let Efficacious Momun jig around the log if he could. And let him try not to keep control of the log. "I'll crack the old fool in half and that's that," Orozkul decided.

At any other time, he would never have dared to take a chance with a log in tow on such a dangerous incline. But he'd gone berserk. And Momun had no time to stop him, but only to utter a cry—"Where are you headed? *Where?* Stop!"—when the log spun in its chain and charged downwards, trampling down the bushes. It was a damp and heavy log. Momun tried to get his lever beneath it to arrest its downward motion, but the blow was so powerful that it knocked the lever clean from the old man's hands.

All this happened in an instant. The horse fell and was dragged down the slope on its side. In falling, the animal struck down Orozkul. He clutched convulsively at the bushes as he rolled. Just at that moment, some kind of horned animals started in fear within the thick foliage. Leaping high and powerfully, they took shelter in a grove of birch trees.

"Marals, marals!" cried grandfather Momun, beside himself with fear and joy. And then fell silent, as if not believing his own eyes.

Suddenly, everything grew hushed in the mountains. The jackdaws dispersed all at once. Having crushed strong young birch trees in its path, the log was caught by something on the slope. Entangled in its harness, the horse struggled to its feet by itself.

In tatters, Orozkul crawled to one side. Momun hurried to help his son-in-law.

"Oh sacred Mother Horned-Deer. She's the one who saved us! Did you see them? They're the children of Horned Deer-Mother. Our mother's returned. You saw yourself!"

Still not quite believing that the danger had passed, Orozkul brushed himself off, grim and flushed with shame.

"Stop babbling, you old fogey. That's enough. Get the horse there out of its traces."

Momun climbed down dutifully to disentangle the horse.

"Oh, wondrous Mother Horned-Deer!" Momun continued mumbling in joy. "The marals have returned to our forests. Our Horned Mother hasn't forgotten us! She's forgiven us our transgressions . . ."

"You're still twaddling?" snapped Orozkul. He had recovered from his fright, and as before, spite gnawed at his heart. "Blathering your fairy-tales? You're off your own head so you think other people will believe your goofy fables."

"I saw them with my own eyes. They were marals," said grandfather Momun, not giving in. "Didn't you see them, my son? You saw them yourself."

"So I saw something, so what? Kind of flashing by, three of them . . ."

"That's it—three. I thought so too."

"Well, what of it? What's so great about marals? A man's almost had his neck broken right here. What's there to be jolly about? And if they were marals, it only means they came through the pass. On the other side of the mountain—back

over there, in Kazakhstan—they say some marals are still around. There's a big preserve there too. Maybe they're marals from that preserve. So they wandered over here—so what? What's it to us? Kazakhstan's none of our business."

"Maybe they'll like it here," mused grandfather Momun. "If they'd only stay . . ."

"C'mon, enough of that," Orozkul cut him short. "Let's get going! . . ."

They still had a long descent in front of them with the log, and then had to get it across the river, also by towing it in harness. That too was a hard job. And if they succeeded in ferrying the log safely across the river, they still had to drag it up the little hillock where it would be loaded onto the lorry.

Damn, all this work!

Orozkul felt utterly unlucky and unhappy. All around him, everything seemed unfair. The mountains felt nothing, cared for nothing and complained about nothing: they just stood there for the sake of standing. The forests were succumbing to autumn, after which they'd succumb to winter, which was never a hardship for them. Even the jackdaws flew around free and screeched themselves sick if they wanted to. Marals—if they really were marals—came through the pass and would roam the forest, how and where they wanted. In cities, people strolled happy-go-lucky along asphalt streets, rode in taxis, treated themselves to restaurants and had all the fun they wanted. And fate had pitched him into these mountains, he was ill-starred . . . Even this Efficacious Momun, his good-for-nothing father-in-law—even he was luckier because he believed in fairy-tales. A stupid man. Stupid people were always satisfied with life.

But Orozkul hated his life. It didn't become him. It was a life for people like Efficacious Momun. What did he need for himself, that Momun? As long as he lived he'd break his back day after day without a breather. In his whole life, he never

had anyone under him, and he knuckled down to everybody, even his old lady—he didn't even cross her. A fairy-tale can make that kind of wretch happy. He sees some marals in the forest and it reduces him to tears, as if he'd met his blood brothers who he'd been searching for all over the world for a hundred years.

Ekh, what's the use of talking about it? . . .

Finally they came to the last ridge, from which the long, steep descent to the river began. They stopped for a rest.

Across the river, something was smoking in the yard of the cordon near Orozkul's house. You could guess by the smoke: it was the samovar. So his wife was already waiting for him. But Orozkul felt no better for this. He gulped his breath through his mouth, unable to get enough air. His chest ached and heartbeat drummed in his head like an echo. Sweat from his forehead stung his eyes. And his empty-bellied wife was waiting for him at home. Phoo, she was heating the samovar, hoping to play up to him . . . Suddenly he felt a sharp yearning to speed up and kick that pot-bellied samovar—kick it to hell. Then fall on his wife and beat her. Beat her to a pulp—to death. He savoured this in his mind's eye, hearing his wife screaming and cursing her miserable fate. "Let her scream," he thought. "Just let her. Everything's rotten for me—why should she have it good?"

Momun interrupted his thoughts.

"And I forgot, my son," he suddenly remembered, hurriedly approaching Orozkul, "I've got to go to school now, to fetch the little fellow. Classes are over already."

"What of it?" pronounced Orozkul with assertive calmness. "What are you suggesting?"

"Don't be angry, my son. Let's leave the log here. Get down off the mountain. You have dinner at home. Meanwhile, I'll gallop over to the school. Fetch the boy. We'll come back up and take care of the log."

"Did it take you a long time to think that up, you old fogey?" taunted Orozkul.

"But don't you see? The boy—he'll cry."

"So what?" raged Orozkul. At last he'd found something for which he could light into the old man well and truly. Orozkul had been searching all day for something to find fault with; now Momun himself had given him his chance. "He's going to cry, and that means we're going to drop our job? You pulled one over on me in the morning—you had to get him to school. All right, you delivered him. Now you're going to bring him back? And what am I supposed to do? You think we're playing games here?"

"Don't, my son," Momun appealed. "Not on a day like today. It doesn't matter about me, but the little fellow will be waiting. Will be crying—on a day like today."

"What? On what kind of day? What's so special about today?"

"The marals have returned. On a day like today, why start . . ."

Orozkul was not only taken aback but even fell silent with amazement. He'd already forgotten about those marals or whatever it was that had flashed by in the form of quick, leaping shadows while he was rolling around in the thorny bushes, his heart in his boots with fear. Any second he could have been ironed flat by the uncontrollable log. He couldn't care less about marals—or the old man's prattle.

"Who do you take me for?" he said in a low and furious voice, breathing into the old man's face. "Too bad you don't have a beard. Or I'd yank it, so you'd stop believing that other people are stupider than yourself. Who the hell cares about your goddam marals! That's all I need—to start worrying about them. Don't try to hoodwink me with your fables. Let's go, get back to that log. And don't you open your trap until we get across the river. I don't give a damn

who goes to school or who's crying over there. Enough of this, let's get going . . ."

As always, Momun submitted. Realising that he wouldn't shake off Orozkul until the log was delivered to its destination, he worked away in silence and desperation. He did not breathe another word, although he was deep in anguish. His grandson was waiting for him outside the school; all the other boys had scampered home and he alone, his bereaved grandson, was waiting there for his grandfather, his eyes fixed on the road.

The old man pictured the scene: the whole class of children clattering out of school together and starting their dash for home. Their appetites had been well sharpened. Once on the street, they would catch the smell of the food being prepared for them, and run to the windows of their houses with excitement and delight. Their mothers would be waiting. Each one with a smile that made her child giddy with happiness. Through thick and thin, a mother always managed enough strength to smile to her child. Even when she raised her voice—"And your hands? Who's going to wash your hands?"—even then, the same smile was hidden in her eyes.

Since he'd started school, the hands of Momun's grandson were always smeared with ink. But grandfather was even pleased by this: it meant that the little fellow was busy with something meaningful. And now his grandson was standing there on the road, his inky hands clutching the beloved briefcase bought that summer. He was surely tired of waiting. By now he was anxious. He'd be keeping his eyes and ears peeled for his grandfather to appear on his horse atop the hill. Hadn't he always come on time before? When the lad came out of school grandfather would be waiting for him near by, already dismounted. All the other pupils dispersed to make their way home, and his grandson would run to his grandfather. "There's grandad," the boy would say to the briefcase, "let's dash." Running up to his grandfather, he would then



hesitate in embarrassment. If no one was near by, he'd throw himself into grandfather's arms, hug him and thrust his face into his stomach, inhaling the familiar smell of old clothes and dry summer hay. At that time, grandfather was transporting cartloads of hay from the far bank; you couldn't reach it through the thick snow in winter, and it was better to bring the hay over during the autumn. Long after this, Momun went about permeated with the bitterish scent of hay pollen.

Grandfather would seat the lad behind him on the horse's rump and they'd ride home, sometimes at an easy trot, other times at a walk; sometimes silent, other times discussing one thing or another— and arrive home without noticing it.

Through a saddle-like hollow between two hills, they rode down to their homestead in the San-Tash canyon.

The lad's intense enthusiasm for school irritated old grandma. He'd barely wake up in the morning before he dressed with great speed and rearranged his books and notebooks in his briefcase. Old grandma was angered by his keeping the briefcase by his side through the night.

"What's this gluing yourself to that rotten briefcase? All it needs is to become your wife—it'd save us from bride-money . . ."

The lad took no notice of old grandma's comments; indeed, didn't quite understand what she was talking about. His principal concern was not to be late for school. He rushed out into the yard to hurry grandfather along. And calmed down only when the school was in sight.

Once they were late nevertheless. The week before, Momun crossed to the opposite bank on horseback at the crack of dawn. He'd decided to get in one load of hay in the morning. It would have worked, but the load came undone on the way and the hay spilled off. He had to pitchfork all of it in place again and harness the horse to the load. The hastily packed hay spilled off the load again at the water's edge.

His grandson was already waiting on the opposite bank. He stood on a pock-marked rock, swinging the briefcase and shouting something and calling. The old man tried to hurry and the ropes became impossibly tangled, tightening into knots. And the little fellow kept up his calling; the old man knew that he was already crying. Then he dropped everything—the ropes, the hay itself—mounted his horse and hurried across the ford to his grandson. More time passed before he got across: you can't gallop across the ford because of the volume of water and strength of the current. It wasn't fiercely dangerous in autumn, but in summer it could sweep a horse off its feet, spelling the end of the rider. When Momun made his way across the river at last and rode up to his grandson, the boy was already shaking with sobs. He wouldn't look at his grandfather, but only cry and repeat, "I'm late, late for school."

The old man leaned over from the saddle, picked up the boy, seated him, and galloped off. Had the school been near by, the little tyke would have run there himself. As it was, he didn't stop crying during the entire trip and the old man could find no way to soothe him. In this state, howling dismally, he delivered him to school. Class had already begun. He took him directly into the classroom.

Momun apologised to the teacher at great length, promising that it would never happen again. But more than anything, the old man was shaken by his grandson's crying and the suffering he felt in being late. "God grant that school always has that kind of pull for you," thought grandfather. "Still, why did the little fellow cry so? It can only mean that he bears some pain in his heart, some inner, unexpressed hurt . . ."

And now, scurrying alongside the log, running from one end to another, pushing and poking beneath it with the lever so that it wouldn't get stuck anywhere and slide more quickly down the mountain, Momun kept thinking: how was he making out there, his grandson?

Orozkul, by contrast, was in no hurry. He was leading the horse. Nor was it a place for any great hurrying: the descent was long and steep, forcing them to take the slope obliquely. But couldn't he really have complied with his request to leave the log here temporarily and return to fetch it later? Ekh, had he had the strength, he would have hoisted the log to his shoulders, marched across the river, and tossed it on the spot where the lorry would load it. Here, take your log and leave us alone. And he, Momun, would set out for his grandson.

But what chance was there for this? They still had to get down to the bank and across the little beach of riverstones, and from there drag the log to the opposite side with the horse's help. And the horse was already worn out—how he'd tramped through the mountains, first up and then down . . . It would be still tolerable if everything worked out—but what if the log became stuck on the rocks in the middle of the river? Or if the horse stumbled and fell?

When they started across the water, grandfather Momun began imploring. "Help us, Horned Deer-Mother. Don't let the log get stuck, don't let the horse fall." Removing his boots and slinging them over his shoulder, rolling up his trousers above the knees, gripping the lever in his hand, grandfather Momun hurried after the floating log. They dragged the log sideways against the current. The water was as clean and transparent as it was cold. Autumn water.

The old man bore up: I don't mind, my feet won't fall off. Anything to get the log across as quickly as possible. But the log became stuck nevertheless, as if bad luck had willed it. It came to rest on a rock where the rapids were strongest. In such cases, you had to give the horse a bit of a rest and then to urge him on properly; one good jerk could free the log from the rock. But seated in the saddle, Orozkul mercilessly lashed the already weakened, fatigued horse. The horse went down

low on its hind legs and kept slipping and stumbling, but the log didn't budge. The old man's legs were frozen and his eyes began to go cloudy. His head whirled. The precipice, forest atop the precipice, and clouds in the sky were tilting and falling into the river, where they floated down the swift current and returned again. Momun was on the verge of fainting. The damn log! Had it been dry, had it spent its time in the sun, it would have been a different story: dry timber floats by itself, the only problem is to keep it from drifting away. But this one had just been sawed down, and the portage across the river followed immediately. Who works that way? But that's how it had turned out. Shady business always comes to a bad end. Orozkul would never agree to leaving the log to dry out: the inspectors might drop in on a surprise visit and write up a report about the felling of valuable trees in a forest preserve. Since they'd cut it down, he had to get the log off the mountain and out of sight as quickly as possible.

Orozkul kicked the horse with the heels of his boots and lashed him about the head with his whip. He cursed and shouted at the old man as if he, Momun, were the cause of everything. But the log not only didn't respond, but stuck more and more fast to the rocks. The old man's patience gave out. For the first time in his entire life, he raised his voice in anger.

"Off that horse!" he commanded, approaching Orozkul with great resoluteness and pulling him out of the saddle. "Can't you see that the horse can't manage? Get off—and now!"

The astonished Orozkul obeyed in silence. With his boots still on, he jumped straight from the saddle into the water. From this moment, he seemed to go feeble-minded, losing control of himself and his senses.

"Now let's pull. Dig in and *pull*. Both together!" At Momun's command, they heaved on the lever, lifting the log from its place and freeing it from the trap of the rocks.

What intelligent animals horses are! Precisely at this moment, he gave a powerful jerk forward and, stumbling and slipping on the rocks, pulled his traces as taut as a string. But hardly had the log worked free and slid slightly forward when it became stuck again. The horse managed another forward jerk, lost its balance, fell into the water and floundered, entangling himself in his harness.

"The horse! Get the horse up!" ordered Momun, pushing Orozkul.

With great difficulty, they succeeded together in helping the horse find its feet. The horse trembled with cold and could hardly stand in the water.

"Unharness him!"

"What for?"

"Unharness him, I'm telling you. We're going to re-harness him. Take off his traces."

Again Orozkul silently obeyed. When the horse was unharnessed, Momun took it by the reins.

"Now let's get out of here," he said. "We'll return later. Let the horse get some rest."

"Hold on there!" snapped Orozkul, grabbing the reins from the old man's hands. It was as if he had awakened; suddenly he became himself again. "Who do you think you're fooling? You're not going anywhere. We're getting that log out of here right now. People are coming for it this evening. Get that harness on the horse and keep your mouth shut, understand?"

Momun turned away in silence and, hobbling on his frozen feet, waded across the ford to the bank.

"Where are you going, you codger? I said *where*?"

"You know where. To school. Grandson's been waiting since noon."

"Get yourself back here. I said get *back*!"

The old man paid no heed. Orozkul left the horse in the river and caught up with Momun in the pebbly shallow just

before the bank. He grabbed him by a shoulder and spun him around.

They were now face to face.

With a sharp movement of his hand, Orozkul tore from Momun's shoulders the old canvas boots that had been hanging there, feet-down. He struck his father-in-law with them twice in the head and face—lashing out with all his might.

"Get back here," wheezed Orozkul, hurling the boots aside.

The old man trod to his boots and raised them from the wet sand. When he straightened up, blood appeared on his lips.

"You bastard!" said Momun, spitting out the blood and throwing his boots over his shoulder again.

This was uttered by Efficacious Momun, who had never contradicted anyone in his life. It was said by a pitiable little old man, blue with cold, with his old boots hanging from a shoulder and blood bubbling on his lips.

"Get back here."

Orozkul pulled him towards the river. But Momun broke away in a spurt of strength and silently moved off, not glancing around.

"All right, you old dunce, now you watch out," Orozkul shouted after him, shaking his fist. "I'll remember this!"

The old man did not look back. Climbing up to the path near 'lying camel', he sat down, pulled on his boots and walked quickly home. Stopping nowhere, he made his way straight to the stable. From there, he led out the grey horse Alabash, Orozkul's untouchable Sunday horse, whom no one dared to mount or even bridle so as not to spoil his gallop. Momun rode out of the yard bareback as if racing to a fire. When he galloped past the windows and the still-smoking samovar, the women who had dashed outside—Momun's old wife, his daughter Bekai and young Guljamal—realised immediately that something had happened to the old man. He'd never

mounted Alabash or galloped like mad through the yard. They did not yet know that this was Efficacious Momun's rebellion. Nor what this rebellion would cost him in his old age.

Orozkul returned from the direction of the ford, leading the unharnessed horse by the reins. The horse was lame on a front leg. The women watched in silence as he approached the yard. They could not yet guess what was taking place inside Orozkul, or what he had in store for them on that day. What troubles, what terrors . . .

In soaked, squelching boots and wringing trousers, he approached them in a heavy, ponderous step, glancing sullenly at the women from under his brows. His wife Bekai got into a state.

"What is it, Orozkul? What happened? My goodness, you're wet through. Was the log washed away?"

"No," barked Orozkul, waving her off. "Here"—he gave the reins to Guljamal—"take the horse to the stable." He himself went to his front door. "Get into the house," he said to his wife. Old grandma wanted to go with them, but Orozkul would not let her set foot inside.

"Go on your way, you crone. You've got no business here. Go home and stay put."

"What's with you?" said old grandma resentfully. "What's going on? And the old man—what about him? What happened?"

"Ask him himself," Orozkul answered.

Inside, Bekai pulled the wet clothing from her husband, gave him a sheepskin coat, brought in the samovar and began to pour the tea into a drinking bowl.

"Don't bother," Orozkul refused with a gesture. "Give me something real to drink."

His wife fetched an unopened half-litre of vodka and poured some into a water glass.

"Fill it up," ordered Orozkul. Draining the glass in a single gulp, he wrapped himself in the coat, stretched himself out on a hunk of felt, and addressed his wife. "You're no wife to me and I'm not your husband. Get out now and don't set foot again in this house. Get moving before it's too late."

Bekai sighed, sat down on the bed and, swallowing her tears as she was accustomed, said softly:

"Again?"

"Again what?" Orozkul bellowed. "Get out of here!"

Bekai leapt from the house and, as always, began to wail through the entire yard, wringing her hands.

"Why, oh why was I born in this world, wretched as I am . . ."

Meanwhile, old Momun was galloping to his grandson on Alabash. Alabash was a fast horse, but Momun was more than two hours late nevertheless. He met his grandson on the way. The teacher herself was walking the lad home. The same teacher with the coarse chapped hands, in the same invariable coat which she was wearing for the fifth year running. The wearied woman looked gloomy. The lad himself, his tears long exhausted but with swollen eyes, walked beside her with his briefcase in his hands; he cut a miserable, humbled figure. The teacher scolded old Momun sternly. He stood before her, dismounted and with his head hanging.

"Don't bring the child to school," she said, "if you're not going to fetch him on time. Don't count on me—I've four of my own."

Once again Momun apologised; once again he promised that this would never happen again.

The teacher returned to Jecesai, and grandfather and his grandson set out for home.

Seated on the horse in front of his grandfather, the lad remained silent. And the old man didn't know what to say to him.

"Are you very hungry?" he asked.

"No, the teacher gave me some bread," the grandson answered.

"Why don't you say anything?"

The lad did not reply.

Momun smiled guiltily. "You're my touchy little one, aren't you?" He removed the old forester's cap from the lad, kissed him on the crown of the head, and replaced the cap.

The lad did not turn around.

They rode on this way, both depressed and taciturn. Momun did not give Alabash his head but held a tight rein: he did not want to jolt the boy on an unsaddled horse. Besides, there now seemed no point in hurrying.

The horse soon understood what was expected of him and ambled on in an easy trot. Snorts accompanied the clatter of his hoofs on the road. He was the kind of horse made to ride alone, singing quiet songs—just like that, for the joy of it. There's no end to things a man can sing about when he's alone with himself. About his unfulfilled dreams and long-past years, about how life was once, when he was in love . . . A man likes to sigh over the old times, where something forever unobtainable resides. Exactly what it is, the man himself doesn't quite understand. But sometimes he wants to think about it—to feel something in his depths.

A good horse with good gait made a fine travelling companion.

Glancing at his grandson's close-cropped head, at his thin neck and protruding ears, old Momun thought that of his whole unlucky life, of all his work and efforts, cares and sorrows—of all this, what was left to him now was only this child, this still helpless creature. If only he'd live long enough to get him standing on his own feet. But if he were to be left alone, it would be hard for him. He was no more than a little corn-cob, but already had his own personality. If he were only a bit more

easy-going, a bit less withdrawn . . . Because people such as Orozkul will always hate and torment him, like wolves with a deer at bay . . .

Now Momun remembered about the marals—those who had flashed by as swift, darting shadows just a while ago, and wrenched a cry of amazement and joy from his heart.

"Did you know, my son?" said grandfather Momun.

"Marals have come to visit us."

The lad glanced over his shoulder.

"Really?"

"Really. I saw them myself. Three head."

"Where did they come from?"

"From the other side of the pass, I imagine. There's a forest preserve there too. Autumn feels like summer just now—the pass is open. So they came over to pay us a visit."

"And will they stay with us?"

"If they like it they will. If they're not disturbed, they'll even settle. There's more than enough forage. You could raise a thousand marals here . . . In the old days, the time of Horned Deer-Mother, they lived here in multitudes . . ."

Sensing that the lad was thawing out upon hearing this news and that his resentment was being forgotten, the old man began talking about ancient times and Horned Deer-Mother. Intrigued by his own story, it occurred to grandfather how easy it was to suddenly become happy and to bring happiness to others. If only life were always like that! Yes, just like this, like now, like this very moment. But life wasn't made this way. Together with happiness, grief was always stalking you, always ready to pounce into your life and heart: relentless, age-old grief, always trailing just behind you. Even at that moment, when he and his grandson were happy together, anxiety lurked side-by-side with joy in the old man's heart: how were things now with Orozkul? What was he cooking up; what would his reprisal be? What punishment was he scheming

up for him, the old man, who had dared to disobey him? Because Orozkul would never simply let this pass. Otherwise he wouldn't be Orozkul.

And so as not to think of the misery awaiting his daughter and himself, Momun gave himself fully to describing the marals—their beauty, swiftness and nobility—for his grandson. As if he would be able to avert the inevitable.

Suspecting nothing of what awaited him at home, the lad was happy. His eyes flashed, his ears flushed. Could it actually be that the marals had returned? So it was all true! Grandfather said that Horned Deer-Mother had forgiven humans' transgressions against her and allowed her offspring to return to the Issik-Kul mountains. Grandfather said that three marals had come now to investigate things here. And if they liked what they saw, all marals would return again to their homeland.

"Ata," the boy interrupted his grandfather. "Maybe Horned Deer-Mother herself has come too? Maybe she wants to see how things are with us here, and then bring over her children, eh?"

"Maybe," uttered Momun uncertainly. He faltered. The old man felt uneasy: had he gone too far? Didn't the boy take his words too seriously? But grandfather Momun did not undertake to dissuade his grandson. Because it was already too late. "Who knows?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe. Maybe Horned Deer-Mother herself has really come. Who knows . . ."

"But we can find out. *Ata*, let's go back to the place where you saw the marals," said the boy. "I want to see them too."

"But they don't stand still in one place."

"Still, we can follow their trail. We'll follow their trail for a long, long way. And as soon as we catch just the tiniest sight of them, we can come home. Then they'll understand that people aren't going to hurt them."

"What a child you are," grinned grandfather. "Let's get home first, then we'll think about it."

By now, they were approaching the cordon by the path behind the houses. The rear of a house is like a man seen from behind his back. All three houses gave no sign of what was taking place inside them. The yard was also empty and tranquil. A strong foreboding pinched Momun's heart. What could have happened here? Had Orozkul battered his poor Bekai? Got himself dead drunk? What else could have happened? Why was it so hushed, why was no one in the yard at that hour? "If everything's all right, I'll have to drag that infernal log from the river," thought Momun. "The devil with that Orozkul, it's better to have nothing to do with him. It's easier to do what he says and to hell with all this. You can't convince an ass that he's an ass."

Momun rode up to the stable.

"Down you go, we've arrived," he said to his grandson as if they'd come from far away. He tried not to show his alarm. But when the boy was about to run home with his briefcase, grandfather Momun stopped him. "Wait a minute. We'll go together."

He led Alabash into the stable and, taking the lad by the hand, walked towards his house.

"Look here," said grandfather to his grandson. "If I'm called all kind of names, don't be afraid and don't listen to anything. It doesn't concern you. Your job is to go to school."

But nothing of the kind took place. When they entered the house, old grandma only peered at Momun with a long, accusing glance and, pursing her lips, returned to her sewing. Grandfather did not speak to her either. Gloomy and guarded, he stood for a moment in the centre of the room. Then he took a large bowl of noodle soup from the stove and, fetching two spoons and some bread, sat down with his grandson to a late dinner.

They ate in silence and old grandma did not so much as glance in their direction. Anger stiffened her flabby brown face. The lad realised that something very bad had happened. But the old man and woman still said nothing.

Dread and anxiety so welled up in the boy that his food wouldn't go down. There is nothing worse than people keeping silent during a meal, while they concentrated on their own evil thoughts and schemed something hurtful. "Maybe it's our fault?" said the boy—in his thoughts—to the briefcase. The briefcase lay on the window-sill. The boy's heart crept along the floor, clambered up to the window-sill and snuggled close to the briefcase, with whom it began talking in whispers.

"Do you know anything about it? About why granddaddy's so sad? What's he done wrong? And why was he late today—why did he come on Alabash, and bareback? Because nothing like that's ever happened before. Maybe he saw the marals in the forest and that's why he was held up? . . . But what if there aren't any marals at all—if it's all untrue? What then? Why did he talk about them? Because Horned Deer-Mother will be very insulted if he tricked us . . ."

Finishing his dinner, grandfather Momun spoke quietly to the lad.

"You go out into the yard, I've got something to take care of. You can give me a hand. I'll be right out."

The lad left obediently. No sooner had he closed the door behind him when old grandma's voice rang out.

"Where are you going?"

"Out to haul over the log," answered Momun. "It's got stuck in the river a while ago."

"So you remembered all of a sudden," old grandma cried out. "Came to your senses. Go have a look at your daughter. Guljamal took her back to her place. Who needs her now, your unfertile fool? Go ahead, let her tell you who she is now. Her

husband's tossed her out of the house like a mangy bitch."

"What can I say? If he's tossed her out, he's tossed her out," said Momun bitterly.

"Oh *you*. And who are you yourself? Your daughters don't know what to do with themselves and you think you're going to make a boss or something out of your grandson? Yeah, yeah, just wait. As if he's worth it; you're just begging for trouble. To top it off, you jump on Alabash and speed off. Take a look at you! If you only knew your place you'd understand who you're taking on. He'll wring your neck like a chicken. Since when did you start talking back to people? Since when did you become a hero? And don't have any ideas about taking your daughter in with us. I won't let her set foot in here . . ."

His head hanging, the lad made his way across the yard. Old grandma's cries were still resounding from inside the house when the door slammed and Momun hurried out. The old man started towards Seidakhmat's house, but Guljamal met him at the door.

"You'd better not just now," she said to Momun. "Later." Momun stopped, obviously perplexed. "She's crying, he gave her a terrible beating," she whispered. "He says that they're not going to live together now. And she curses you for it. She says her father's to blame for everything."

Momun did not answer. What could he say? Now even his own daughter didn't want to see him.

"And Orozkul's still home, drinking by himself," Guljamal recounted in whispers. "He's like a wild beast."

They lost themselves in thought. Guljamal sighed in compassion.

"If only our Seidakhmat comes back quickly. He's supposed to be here today. You could bring over the log together and at least take care of that."

"As if it was the log that matters," said Momun shaking his

head. He fell into thought again and, catching sight of his grandson near by, sent him away. "Go on and play a bit."

The lad left them. He went to the shed, uncovered his hidden binoculars and wiped them clean of dust. "Things aren't so good," he said sadly to the binoculars. "It seems that it's our fault, briefcase's and mine. If there was only another school somewhere—briefcase and I would go there for our classes. So that nobody would know about it. Only I'd feel sorry for grandfather; he'd be looking for us everywhere. And you, binoculars—who would you look at the white steamship with? You think I can't make myself into a fish? You'll see. And I'll swim out to the white steamship . . ."

The lad hid himself behind a haystack and began to look around through the binoculars. He did not look long, nor with any joy. On an ordinary day, he could have looked for hours: the mountains stood there in their autumnal splendour, covered with autumn forests. White snow lay up above; below were crimson flames.

The lad returned the binoculars to their place and as he left the shed saw his grandfather leading a horse, collared and harnessed, across the yard. He was setting out for the ford. The lad wanted to run to his grandfather but was halted by a sharp cry from Orozkul. In his undershirt, with his sheepskin coat on his shoulders, Orozkul leapt out of his house. His face was purple, like a cow's swollen udders.

"I icy you," he cried threateningly to Momun. "Where are you taking that horse? Take her back, damn you. We'll get the thing over without you. And don't you dare touch it. You're nothing around here now. I'm going to kick you off this cordon. Now clear off—I don't give a hoot where."

Grandfather grinned bitterly and led the horse back into the stable. Suddenly Momun had become very small and old. He shuffled on his soles and looked neither to one direction nor another.

Choked with hurt for his grandfather, the lad ran along the bank of the river so that no one would see him crying. Ahead, the trail became misted over, disappeared, and found itself again under his feet. Tears fell from his face as he ran. There they were, his favourite boulders along the bank: 'tank', 'wolf', 'saddle' and 'lying camel'. The lad said nothing to them; they understood nothing, just stood there, doing nothing but standing. The lad merely put his arms around 'lying camel's' hump and, leaning up against the ginger granite, sobbed violently, bitterly and inconsolably. He cried for a long time before the sobs gradually subsided and he calmed down.

At last he raised his head, wiped his eyes and, casting a glance out in front of him, grew rigid from head to toe.

Directly in front of him, on the opposite bank, stood three marals at the water. Real marals. Alive. They were drinking from the river and, it seemed, had already drunk their fill. The one with the largest and heaviest horns lowered his head to the water again, and while sipping seemed to examine his horns in the shallow back-current, as in a mirror. He was of a brownish colour, with a broad, powerful chest. When he tossed up his head, drops from his fair, hairy muzzle fell into the water. Pricking up his ears, the stag gazed at the lad.

But most intently of all, the boy was examined by a white round-flanked doe with a crown of fine branchy horns on her head. Although slightly smaller, her horns were extremely beautiful. She was exactly like Horned Deer-Mother. Her eyes were huge, clear and full. And she herself was like a stately mare who gave forth a new foal every year. Horned Deer-Mother stared steadily and calmly at the lad, as if trying to remember where she had seen this big-headed, big-eared shaver. Her eyes sparkled moistly and shined from afar. A light exhalation rose from her nostrils. Next to her, with his rump turned in this direction, a young, hornless fawn gnawed at a rose willow branch, caring about nothing else. He was plump,



healthy and gay. Suddenly abandoning his gnawing at the branch, he gave a frisky jump, brushed against the doe with his shoulder and, jumping again several times, began to nuzzle himself against her. He rubbed his hornless head against Horned Deer-Mother's flank. But Horned Deer-Mother kept staring and staring at the lad.

Holding his breath, the lad emerged from behind the rock and, stretching out his hands before him as if in a dream, walked down to the bank and the water's edge. The marals betrayed no fear whatever, but observed him calmly from the opposite bank.

Between them flowed the swift, translucent and greenish river, foaming up and surging over the obstructions of underwater rocks. If it were not for the river separating them, it seemed he could go to the marals and stroke them. They stood on a flat, clean pebbled beach, and behind them, at the end of the little strip of beach, blazed the shrubbery of the forest. Above this was a clayey precipice, above the precipice stood gold and crimson birches and aspens; and still higher was the huge forest itself and white snow on the rocky mountain ridges.

The lad shut his eyes and opened them again. The same scene lay before him, but the red-leaved foliage was now slightly closer, together with the same fairy-tale marals.

But now they turned around and walked Indian file across the beach and into the forest. The largest maral went first, the hornless calf was in the centre, and Horned Deer-Mother took up the rear. Turning around, she looked once more at the lad. The marals entered the thick foliage and made their way through the small trees. Auburn branches swung over them and red leaves drifted down upon their smooth, resilient backs.

Then they went off towards the higher ground along the trail, climbing up to the precipice, where they stopped. And again the lad imagined that the marals gazed at him. The large

maral stretched his neck and, tossing his horns upward onto his back, thundered like a trumpet: "Ba-o, ba-o!" His cry rumbled over the precipice and the river in a protracted echo: "A-o, a-o!"

It was only at this point that the lad recovered all his senses. He whipped around to dash home along the familiar trail as fast as his legs could carry him, running to the very limit of his being. He flashed across the yard and, flinging open the door with a bang, shouted from the threshold between his pants for breath.

"*Ata*. The marals have come. Marals! They're here!"

Grandfather Momun looked at him from the corner where he was sitting, mournful and silent. He said nothing, as if he did not understand what the boy was talking about.

"That's enough of your noise!" hissed old grandma. "If they came, they came. Don't bother us now."

The lad left quietly. The yard was completely empty. The autumn sun had already tumbled down behind Guard Mountain and the neighbouring ridge of bare, dusky mountains, lighting the chilling mountain wildwoods with a thick but unwarming glow. From there, this cool glow diffused into unstable reflections over the crests of the autumn mountains. The forests were covered with an evening haze.

The wind blew down from the snow. The lad shivered. He was feverish.