

The Mandate

The great Lord Jangar brought back to life
the knights who had been killed,
and together they built a high palace-tent
in which he lived ever after.

There was no lord over him, there were no enemies
who could attack his flanks.

I

Asaray could never forget the summer day when the Russians came to rip him from the heart of his people, force him to forsake his destiny and take him so far away from everything he loved. It was to be the turning point, the most crucial day of his existence, yet he had been given no inkling of its approach.

The day augured well and he was in high spirits. As a young Prince of the Torghut Mongols he had every reason for his cheerful mood; he was thoroughly enjoying his carefree life and he was utterly unprepared for the event which would stand every expectation on its head.

How could he have foreseen it? It was the Year of the Horse (1764) and his nomadic people, who had originally migrated from the border of China in Central Asia, had already lived in the Volga region for over one hundred and fifty years in almost complete freedom.¹ True, the adjacent Russian ogre had been casting ever darker shadows in their direction but his staunchly proud people still used the Russians to calm and subdue their fractious and unruly children:

“The Oross will get you!”

It rarely failed.

On that fateful day Asaray rode out before daybreak to inspect his plentiful herds of horses, camels, cattle and sheep. This early hour, as a new day was about to begin, always lifted his spirits and he rode around at a brisk canter. He exulted in the fragrance of the dew-fresh grass, of wild onion and thyme; he saluted the cows lowing their greetings as they awaited their morning milking; he laughed at the familiar joyous cackle of the geese and ducks from the western lake. At the far end of the steppe the mighty god of fire rose from his steaming bath. The light veil of haze was dissolving in the first rays of the sun, washing the land in that splendour which never failed to lighten Asaray’s heart.

He was wearing his most comfortable clothes: a light, russet-hued lambskin coat over blue linen trousers and wide, red, morocco boots. As he rode on, the sky turned a darker blue; on the vast canvas the divine calligrapher’s brush had jotted powerful strokes and emphatic dots in feathery white clouds, seeming to affirm Asaray’s birthright of all this wide expanse of fertile, generous earth.

Spread across the plain, he passed the thousands of gers — the characteristic round Mongol tents of felt — and his heart filled with pride in the innumerable livestock: his herds were the healthiest and glossiest of all the Torghuts’. In the distance boys and girls were already rounding up ponies and sheep, their clear young voices ringing out “Hai, hai!”. Everywhere Asaray paused one or more of his tough, efficient herdsmen reported to him, politely but neither subserviently nor submissively, free nomads whose lifelong experience he respected greatly.

“What do you think, Abak: is it time to move on?”

Abak’s black eyes sparkled and a huge smile filled his sunburnt face at the courtesy of being consulted:

“I think that would be timely, Prince Asaray. The tips of the grass are starting to turn brown.”

“Good. I don’t mind leaving in a few days. I was thinking of the region north of Ryn Peski.”

“That would be ideal, sir. There is more water there, and juicier grass.”

Asaray rode on, talking with those he met and issuing instructions when necessary. He loved his duty of managing their affairs and took pride in seeing that things were done well. Yet as the day advanced he felt himself growing tense and impatient, eager and excited at the prospect of holding Badma in his arms.

As soon as his tasks and duties were fulfilled he set off for their secret rendezvous with all the haste that decorum allowed. It was just his luck to run into his old friend Kirep, with whom he had shared so many laughs and played so many tricks at lama school. Although Asaray always enjoyed Kirep’s company and slowed his horse as a mark of courtesy, now he could spare little time and it showed.

“I’ve never seen you in such a hurry, Asaray,” Kirep teased him with a wink. “Are you meeting a very special girl today?”

“This time it’s serious: I’m on my way to meet Badma.”

“Serious? Do you mean you’re engaged?” Kirep portrayed mock horror.

“Yes, you fool. Hadn’t you heard?”

Without waiting for any more teasing Asaray spurred on his horse and vanished, laughing, in a cloud of dust. Now the long-awaited moment was drawing near and he put his horse into a full gallop. At the tamarisk grove selected for their tryst Asaray stopped and waited, trying not to betray his nervousness. The wind had dropped and the enveloping silence heightened his sense of expectation.

Now Asaray could see her in the distance, thundering toward him in her usual wild gallop, and his heart leapt. How small and slender she was, how delicate and fragile, yet he knew her inner strength. She rode marvellously, although he appreciated that he might be a shade biased.

She pulled up her mount beside him, her open round face radiantly happy, and they both dismounted. Badma’s every movement seemed fluid and graceful but today there was a special harmonious vibrancy about her which made him want to dance and perform the impossible for her. He felt dizzy with the lightness and gaiety of those wonderful moments.

After a long, tingling embrace he plucked her off her feet and danced around with her in his strong arms, feeling no weight to her, both of them laughing and crying in sheer exhilaration.

He laid her down in a secluded spot among the nearby sand dunes, a hollow protected from the wind which seemed to rise and fall with their hearts. Few words were spoken; all that had needed to be said had been of another time, in another world. Words were superfluous now.

Two months thence, when autumn came, it would be time for the annual migration south. Only then were they to be married and they would make the trek to the Kuma Valley and the foothills of the Caucasus together. Two months ... such a short time but such a terribly long wait.

At least he could accompany her back to her own camp, less than an hour's ride from his own. As they kissed goodbye he asked:

"Tomorrow? Same time?"

"Yes, same time, same place, if I can find the time," she laughed, teasing him.

His heart was so light as he went home he feared he would float off his horse. He contemplated his shadow and those of the people and gers he passed lengthening in the light of the late afternoon. Asaray had often felt at one with nature but now he felt he knew the purpose of everything and that it was all right and proper. Everything seemed in perfect order and proportion.

His parents' large tented khibitka, a symbol of their royal status, was open when Asaray returned to his own camp. He dismounted and greeted them, touching his father's right arm with his left hand and bowing to his mother.

Asaray was unwilling to share his overwhelming feelings with anyone else yet — they were far too rare and precious — and so, after they had briefly exchanged the news of the day, he bade his parents goodnight and immediately withdrew to his own tent. His whole being and consciousness were pervaded with the glow of Badma's love; he could think of nothing but her and their future together. She had never been in the south, where his and the Khan's herds usually wintered and he would show her all the things he had grown to love so much since he first went there as a small boy. They would take long rides into the foothills of the Caucasus, visit Chechen and Circassian villages and buy colourful leather goods from even more gaudily-dressed women. They would purchase the finest riding horses from swarthy mountain-dwellers with fierce moustaches and the ever-alert eyes of born hunters.

They would go hunting themselves, for red deer, bear, fox, black grouse and pheasant. Asaray's eyesight was remarkably keen, like that of most of his compatriots, and he was an especially fine shot but Badma was at least his equal. Wintering with her as his wife in the mild southern climate of the Kuma, with the rugged mountains and abundant game within easy reach would be sheer bliss. He knew he was very lucky.

* * * *

There was a melancholy early evening stillness, disturbed only by the faint drone of insects in the warm summer air. The side flaps of the royal khibitka were open for greater ventilation. A heavy scent of freshly mown grass wafted to them as Asaray's parents sat quietly, sipping their tea and resting in contemplation.

The peace was broken by a thunder of hooves which set the dogs barking furiously. Someone called out in broken Mongol to leash them. The officer of the

guard entered to announce that an Oross lieutenant had arrived to advise the Khan that Assessor Bakunin of the Astrakhan government would shortly arrive with an important message for the Khan. Soon afterwards, the Russian emissary appeared, flanked by two senior officers and accompanied by twenty dragoons. The officers and officials were resplendent in their richly coloured uniforms, the common soldiers less so; all of them seemed in need of cleaning. After the officials had been accommodated in a guest ger and provided with food and drink they were received by the Khan, Donduk-Dashi.

The spacious royal kibitka was dimly lit by oil lamps. The Khan of all the Volga Mongols (of whom the Torghuts were by far the largest tribe), was of medium height but his impressive demeanour was enhanced by his long gown of rich brocade. He stood, stern-faced and imposing, near the house altar as the visitors were presented by the guard, who had relieved them of their riding whips.

Bakunin, tall and gaunt with an austere face, bowed deeply to the Khan and his companions followed his example. The visitors were seated to the left of the altar as tea was served. After polite preliminaries had satisfied protocol the Khan asked his visitors the nature of their business.

“I have come, sir, on a matter of great consequence. I have the great honour to present to you a formal letter from Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Catherine II personally,” the Russian envoy solemnly declared, handing over the letter and a Torghut translation.

“As you will see from this document, sir, the Empress requests you now to hand over your second son, Prince Asaray, as hostage to the Imperial Government, in accordance with your freely made promise of many years ago. Her Imperial Majesty expects your immediate compliance with Her request, Khan, and to deliver the Prince to the bearer of Her letter. We have been instructed to escort your son to his residence in Astrakhan, where he will be in the care of Governor Zhilin.”

Bakunin looked embarrassed and ill at ease when he delivered his message in his dry voice. The Khan’s face remained impassive and a heavy silence hung in the air between the silk curtains decorating the ger. The visitors watched the oil lamps cast their erratic light on the Buddha Shakyamuni and on the Khan’s fine, silver-inlaid rifle, two symbols representing the pillars upon which what remained of Torghut independence rested. Outside, one of the Khan’s horses, permanently saddled in readiness for his whim or need, snorted and stamped its hooves indignantly.

Finally, after what had seemed an eternity, the Khan spoke, his voice disclosing no hint of emotion:

“I shall study the letter from your Empress and shall confer with my Council on this grave question. You will be informed of my decision.”

The Russian envoys took the cue of their dismissal and withdrew. “Your freely made promise of many years ago...” He had indeed made that terrible mistake which now meant the loss of his beloved, deeply admired son; the Khan knew there would

be little chance of ever seeing Asaray again. Although only eighteen years old Asaray was exceptionally mature for his age and had been touched by a wisdom his brother, for one, could neither aspire to nor recognize. On top of leading the hard life of the nomads Asaray, being a prince, had had more demanded of him than a common herdsman and hunter. He bore his rank with easy authority, far removed from the arrogance of his weak and indecisive half-brother Ubashi. Consequently Asaray was very popular with everyone, especially girls, who constituted his greatest weakness, the Khan considered. Badma would resolve that fault, seeming a perfect bride for him. She would ... would have brought stability to his life. Everything was changed now, even that. As Khan, Donduk-Dashi must remain a statesman and diplomat, but as a father his grief threatened to overwhelm him.

Taking Asaray hostage was another step in the Russian plans to dominate the noble Torghuts. Why had Empress Catherine chosen this moment, when the Khan's family happiness was so infuriatingly close to fulfilment? Was this part of her expansionist policy to gain a stronger grip on the peoples in the border areas? Was it to secure the Torghuts as allies or prevent them siding with the Ottoman Sultan or Chinese Emperor? Each had sent out feelers in the not so distant past.

Donduk-Dashi cursed his failure to take seriously the Russians or the consequences of their demands all those years before. It had all seemed so simple then. After the death of his cousin Donduk-Ombo Khan he had been the obvious choice for the succession over the other claimants, but even then, twenty years before, he had needed Russian backing to overcome dissension and factionalism amongst the leaders of the clans. In return for the official title of Vice-Khan (later changed to Khan) they had exacted his oath of allegiance — as another Khan had given before him — in faith whereof he would give his son as hostage. Having no sons then Donduk-Dashi had not foreseen the bitter consequences now visited upon him.

When he had fallen in love with Tseren-Jalla (Jall?) and married her, he had, in accordance with Torghut tradition, taken her widowed elder sister Najitana under his protection as well. Here fate had played another malicious trick on him: Najitana was a jealous, suspicious creature but she, not his beloved Tseren-Jalla, had first presented him with a son, Ubashi, which had greatly enhanced her status.

Barely a year later Tseren-Jalla bore him Asaray who, when only five years old, had already been claimed by the Oross. As this was the first the boy's mother had heard of the Khan's old promise her blind fury was as much of a shock to the Khan as that Tseren-Jalla herself had suffered. He saw his sweet-natured wife striking out as a tigress in defence of her cub and the Oross were equally intimidated. The Khan had managed to persuade them to allow him to give his son a Mongol and Buddhist education before handing him over.

When Asaray was ten and sent to the lama school to be subjected to their rigorous educational system, the Oross had renewed their demand but the Khan had again managed to fend them off. Fortunately he had been in a strong bargaining position

then as Kalmyk cavalry was aiding the Russians in their Seven Years' War. The Torghuts had most notably performed in the battle of Gross-Jägersdorf where the Russians and their allies had beaten the mighty Prussian armies of Frederick the Great; the Russian army and Torghut cavalry had briefly occupied Berlin.

Now the situation was different. As Russian power advanced slowly but inexorably towards their territories the Torghuts' position was being eroded. It was Russian policy not to take the eldest son and presumed heir of the ruling Khan as their hostage to fortune, but the second or third son. Now both Asaray and Ubashi had finished their schooling, the Khan was bereft of further delaying ploys or any room to manoeuvre. It was ironic that of his two sons Asaray was the far more mature and capable but the die had been cast, so lightly, so casually, so long ago.

Donduk-Dashi had given his two sons their shares of their future inheritance to rule over, and Asaray's ulus² were flourishing. Despite — or because of his youth he was rarely short of fresh ideas and plans. His enthusiasm was infectious and soon many old-fashioned, less efficient practices had been replaced by better ones. The young prince never introduced any innovation without first consulting the elders but his powers of persuasion often allowed him to convince them that the advice and proposals he was following had originated with them whilst, in truth, he had put the ideas and suggestions in their mouths. He was happy to let them take the credit.

The few who disliked or envied Asaray considered him selfish and insufferably self-assured, someone who always knew better; though devoted to his people as an abstract notion, he didn't value the ideas or needs of individuals. This criticism from those impervious to the young prince's considerable charm was unfair but, as even the Khan admitted, there was a at least grain of truth in it. Asaray always seemed to have one eye on the grander, longer term goals but, unlike Ubashi, he was rarely tactless with his peers or subordinates.

Now he must leave and the Khan couldn't delay the dreaded event again. What would become of Asaray's ulus, his people and herds? Donduk-Dashi's age was beginning to weigh heavily upon him; fortunately Tseren-Jalla was much younger and she would be most likely to take up those burdens about to be wrenched from her son.

His wife's reaction was more subdued than thirteen years before. As further procrastination would be useless she tried a different tack:

"Why don't you offer Ubashi to the Russians? Why must it be Asaray? We both know Ubashi is less competent and inspires no love from his people."

"If only it was that simple. I have suggested that before but, whatever we may think of them, the Oross are not such fools. Ubashi is the eldest son, he is their choice for Khan and they can see he will be easier to manipulate than Asaray. They would not hear of such an exchange before and they would not do so now." He sighed resignedly. "The members of the Council will be here shortly: I have summoned a meeting to discuss the Empress' letter."

“If the Council should vote to resist her demand, can the Oross take Asaray?”

“They can and they will. The Council will probably accede to the Russian demand, with whatever show of reluctance, even defiance, but they will accede. We cannot risk any conflict now.”

“It looks hopeless then. Fortunately he is not a child any more, and Astrakhan is not too far away. Perhaps we might get him back after ... who knows how long? Please break it gently to Asaray: it will be a terrible shock for him. Perhaps we should have told him before. Now he is unprepared. How will he react?”

“Yes,” the Khan sighed. “It will be a cruel blow. The boy will be terribly hurt. His whole life will be shattered in an instant. I always hoped that, somehow, it would never happen. So much for my foolish optimism. I see that the first members of the zargo — the Council — are arriving: I must go to receive them.”

Tseren-Jalla felt a strong urge to find Asaray and break the news to him herself but she knew this was man’s business. However devastated her son might feel it could only be tolerable coming from the Khan. So Tseren-Jalla sat in her corner feeling empty, useless and heartsore. She was exhausted from the pain of losing her son and the effort to seem courageous. How would he cope? Such a bright and happy child, it had been sheer delight to give him his first lessons. She could only hope his philosophical outlook and sense of humour would help to preserve him in such a foreign land. If only she had been able to bear him brothers and sisters.

She recalled an incident when Asaray was only three and they had been eating by a river. There had been a sudden rush of wings and the succulent piece of roast lamb had vanished from the child’s hand. An huge eagle had swooped and escaped with its prize before anyone could react. Although the startled little boy had been teased mercilessly his had been the first face to break into a grin over the incident. Would he be able to stretch that ability to laugh at himself through the times which lay ahead?

Now he was fully grown, tall for a Torghut, straight and broad-shouldered, a source of maternal pride. His regular, manly features and twinkling, dark-brown eyes set at a characteristically mischievous slant in his oval face at once conveyed both amiability and authority. Would that be enough?

Oh, compassionate Green Zara! What awaits him in Astrakhan, that depraved city thronging with its strange, barbarian masses? He might not be a child any more but he was still young and vulnerable. War would be better than this meek surrender, better than not knowing, imagining. But it was Asaray’s fate to become a captive without having had the chance to fight. Oh, Dashi: why did you make that promise?

* * * *

After several speeches had been made to deplore and protest the Russian encroachment upon their freedom and sovereignty, the members of the Council — the zargo — voted as the Khan had expected. Having to choose between an armed conflict and sacrificing Asaray, they reluctantly voted for the latter course.

Donduk-Dashi summoned his son and told him all that had happened. Asaray listened respectfully, standing absolutely still and composed. The Khan could only wonder at his son, who betrayed no emotion in the face of such a profound shock.

Asaray had undergone a strange transformation to a state of unreality and otherness, as though this could not be happening, not to him, as though he was watching the scene from elsewhere. Then he saw tears glistening in his father's eyes, something he had never seen or imagined before and the full weight and horror of the situation struck him with blinding force.

"I shall..." he began, his voice wavering before he recovered his firm composure and spoke clearly.

"I shall, of course, obey the Khan's command. How much time before I must leave?"

The Khan laid a hand on his son's shoulder and spoke in hoarse tones:

"You will go tomorrow, Asaray."

Asaray nodded numbly, his face white as the moon, and sank to his knees before his father. Donduk-Dashi raised him and they knelt together before the altar, offering prayers to the Buddha Shakyamuni. But Asaray could not concentrate, his thoughts in turmoil, his heart beating wildly: Go away with the Oross? Tomorrow? Abandon everything and everyone here? For how long? Would he ever return? It was too much to comprehend. And Badma?

When they sat down and tea was brought in, it required a tremendous effort of will for Asaray to contain himself and hide his feelings in accordance with his filial obedience and intensive lamaist training.

"Will you give me your instructions, sir?" he asked.

"Your duty, my son, is to remain always faithful to your nation and your religion whatever happens in that foreign country. Whilst there you must learn as much as you can from the Oross who are advanced in many material, if not spiritual ways, as in the arts of war and, perhaps, diplomacy."

Asaray's anger burnt fiercely within him now: We Torghuts should be ashamed of ourselves. How had this all come about? Why did his father have to subject himself to the Russians? Was he not a sovereign Prince? Was there no end to the arrogance of the Oross?

"I do not know how long the Russians will keep you," the Khan continued. "Possibly several years; perhaps ... even longer."

"Do you think Badma's parents will allow her to wait for me?" Asaray asked with trepidation, knowing the answer before he spoke.

"I have no idea. If you should be away for years..., well..."

"So we may never be married?"

"It is better for you to face up to that likelihood now, my son."

"What will happen to my ulus while I am gone, sir? Who will look after my people, my horses and cattle? Will all my work have been in vain?"

“Your mother and I will look after them until you return, Asaray.”

A sharp pain pierced Asaray’s heart. Suddenly everything in his life was evaporating, vanishing before his eyes: his girl, his horses, his parents and friends, his beloved tutor, his ulus, his freedom. What would become of them all, of the people and herds he oversaw? And deep down the worst fear of all nagged at him: what if, in time, Ubashi still had a chance to win Badma, whom Asaray had won from him. In his Russian exile Asaray would be impotent against his brother.

Nor could he do anything about the Mandate, the special task for which Lobsang-Norbu had prepared him and of which only the two of them knew. There would be no way even to discuss it with the wise old lama, his greatest friend who had meant more to him than his somewhat distant father. Was this his fate? Was everything he had done for his people to come to naught? Was everything for which this extraordinary teacher had trained him to be reduced at one blow to dust and bitter ashes?

When talking with his father, Asaray had striven not to show his emotions; nor did he want to add to his mother’s burdens with them. But, back in the privacy of his own kikitka, he raged against the Oross and their devious machinations and he feared what might befall him.

II

Asaray felt an overwhelming need to do something, to be active, to talk to someone he trusted and loved. The betrayal he perceived from his parents had pierced his heart and he needed to soothe his pain. Although it was late in the evening he knew he must see Badma, take his sad goodbyes from her; if it was to be their last ever meeting he would at least have the memories to sustain him. Without a second thought he mounted his horse and was on his way. To his astonishment he was immediately followed by two Oross cavalymen, one of whom shouted after him:

“Stop, or we’ll shoot!”

In a lightning fast movement Asaray changed direction and gave his splendid mare, his fleetest mount, her head.

“Fast, fast, Gurbesu, my love, be as fast as you can.”

Her slender body quivered in response and she dashed off at a terrific speed, leaving the Russians so far behind that they didn’t bother to shoot. But they were Cossacks and excellent horsemen and somehow they managed to keep on his track.

When Asaray had come a long way into the steppe and found he could not shake them off completely he halted, bristling with anger. Impudent foreign brutes! How dare they give orders to a Torghut Prince? On his steppe! To hell and damnation with them! But even here his political wisdom leavened his rage.

Passively he let them approach until they slowed down to meet him, then, as they presented slightly easier targets, Asaray rapidly aimed twice and his arrows hit each of their mounts, one of which threw his rider and fled, and that was the end of their pursuit. Laughing despite himself Asaray galloped away, leaving the Cossacks to stumble back to camp on their own. How close had Asaray come to firing his arrows at the men rather than at their poor steeds? In truth he valued the innocent horses more highly and only the likely repercussions had guided his bow. He had never so freely wished death on any other man.

When he reached the Dürbet camp where Badma lived, although he was almost speechless with anger, Asaray told her and her parents the bad news and gave vent to his wrath against the Oross. They were shocked and shared his anger. Badma attempted to hide her distress but Asaray wasn’t fooled for a moment. He asked her parents whether he might speak to her alone and they readily consented, still stunned by how easily their own family future had been turned upside down.

With one of her typically slow, graceful and soothing movements Badma took Asaray’s hand and led him to a nearby ger, asking him to wait a moment while she went to get him a farewell present. When she returned he held her tight and kissed her until she pressed her face to his chest, shaking and throwing her arms about him. They remained in this posture for a long while until she lifted her tear-stained face and collected herself.

“Forgive me, dearest Asaray, for being so weak and feeble-minded when you need your own strength and mine.”

The way she spoke moved him profoundly. She looked so beautiful and strong.

“When do we leave for Astrakhan?” she asked simply.

“I must go alone, my love. Also, your parents would not let you go.”

“But we are practically married already. They will agree.”

“There is no knowing what awaits me or how long I shall be at the mercy of the Oross, but know it will be no life for you.”

“But...”

“Please, Badma, my love, do not ask me again.”

He was overwhelmed by her feelings for him and her simple courage and trust. His arms still around her and her body pressed close to his, Asaray had a strong desire to make love with her. She knew his burning need and wanted him too. It might be years before he could return. Yet it could not happen here in her home and, to ease the tension, she asked in a small, husky voice:

“Did you have any trouble coming here tonight?”

His face hardened at that memory and he remarked caustically:

“The Russians seem to think they are already the masters here and can order me about.”

He related how he had shot their horses. She clapped her hands in admiration, then showed her concern:

“But will they not punish you for that?”

“I do not care if they do. I could not have missed this chance to see you for anything. I just had to show them that they are not in charge here and I am not their hostage yet!”

“You are absolutely right, my love. But, please, be careful from now on. I do not want those brutes to do you any harm. You must stay alive if you are to marry me! You may be sure I shall wait for you, however long it might take.” The look in her eyes lent so much tender poetry to her words that he was deeply touched.

“And I shall return to you, whatever happens.”

All too soon it was time for him to leave. She gave him a small, bronze statuette of the Buddha Shakyamuni, beautifully proportioned:

“Take this with you to that foreign, heathen country. It will protect you and remind you that I shall be waiting for you. I have an identical one, so we shall be offering our prayers to the same deity. May Shakyamuni grant that we are reunited soon!”

Asaray fought back his tears, embraced her, and left quickly. During the ride back he was still seething with anger at the Oross. He knew he would be powerless in their hands, a prisoner. Above all, he hated to part from Badma and to think that he might lose her. Should he have let her come with him? The Oross would surely have refused or made things difficult for her. Before he had met her Ubashi had been courting

Badma and she had not been indifferent to his advances. It would be typical of Ubashi to use every means possible to win her heart while he was away. Would she refuse him forever? Should she do so? He shuddered at the thought of Ubashi's persuasion and coercion and of Badma lying in his arms. He struggled to shut out the image. Why could not the Torghuts fight the Russians? Was it not said in their great epic poem that the Lord Jangar fought and won a dreadful battle so there would be no lord over him? As he grew calmer Asaray also realized he would perhaps never see his tutor Lobsang-Norbu again. What would he have had to say about all this, he who had entrusted him with a special task?

It had been one of the most solemn moments in his young life when his beloved spiritual tutor had invited him to come, not — as usual — to his own modest tent but to the grand, ceremonial temple orgê where he sat, clad in his magnificent yellow robes of Deputy Supreme Lama, under the great statue of Shakyamuni.

When Asaray had entered Lobsang-Norbu had greeted him briefly with a warm smile but remained silent and inscrutable for a very long time. The elderly tutor had looked thin and fragile, transparent and weightless as if floating on air, yet he seemed to radiate an extraordinary power. Never had the young Torghut prince felt weaker and more insignificant.

Then came the lama's voice, as if from a great distance, but in crystal-clear tones:

"I have something of great importance to tell you, Prince Asaray. You must listen carefully.

"Since you are the Khan's second son, I have asked myself what your future role should be. Alas, it is not to don the yellow cloth as some equally gifted princes have done in the past. You are not mystically inclined. But you do have faith and a practical mind. You like to do things well. And what is most important: you are devoted to your people and you remain true to your name: Asaray — He Who Cares, the Compassionate One.

"And so I have spent many long hours in meditation and consulted the oracle.

"This is what I have to tell you on behalf of the gods:

"You will obey a special command, a mandate which the gods have given you. It is to be yours, and yours alone. It is that you will preserve the soul and identity of your people.

"At the same time, I must warn you not to seek worldly power, only to accept it when it is given. It is your fate to go far away from us and to be tempted in many ways, but you will return to the Torghuts and will be given a chance to fulfil the command."

When the priest solemnly announced that he was speaking on behalf of the gods, Asaray had fallen to his knees. Then, when he looked up, the lama's face was as stern as that of the bronze Buddha which loomed high above him.

Lobsang-Norbu proceeded to intone the familiar prayer in which Asaray was invited to join, Om-mani-padme-hum.

Asaray timidly asked at last:

“Am I not unworthy of such a task?”

The answer came forthwith:

“You must follow the gods without questioning.”

“You said, reverend sir, that I shall go far away from here. May I ask where?”

“All that will be made clear to you in due time. It is not for me to say.”

The lama blessed him, and quoted these lines from Tsong-khapa:

“You must find shelter from the evil forces. There is no other refuge which can protect you than the Three Infallible Jewels³. Therefore, take refuge in them from the depth of your heart...”

Then, with a few kind words he had been dismissed.

Asaray had felt both honoured and frightened by this awesome chill of Fate.

What could the mysterious assignment mean? How was he to preserve the soul and identity of his people? It was a prince’s duty to act justly, to lead his people in war and make them follow Buddha’s way. Could that be all that was meant?

Instinctively he felt that it was some greater task of vital importance but he knew not what. For some time afterwards he meditated every day on the significance of the secret mandate. Every night he prayed to Shakyamuni for guidance. But he was young and loved fun, and so he often rebelled and wanted to shake off this heavy responsibility. Why had he been chosen, why not someone else, someone older?

It was only later, when he had come to realize that all his efforts to promote the welfare of his ulus would be meaningless if their nation as a whole could not protect itself and survive among hostile neighbours, that he had fully and consciously accepted the task with which the gods had charged him. Their soul and identity were indeed at stake.

Now those of Lobsang-Norbu’s words which he had tended to overlook rang out in Asaray’s ears: it is your fate to go far away from us. He realized with a start that this part of the prophecy was now soon to be fulfilled and he trembled as he recalled the rest of it.

* * * *

The moon had risen. Asaray’s camp was coming into sight. If the Oross were lying in wait for him to take revenge he was prepared. But when entering the camp he was, surprisingly, left unhindered; a few Russian soldiers only looked on from a respectful distance. Obviously their time had not come yet.

He slept little that night. The oil lamps in front of the house altar glimmered, dimly illuminating Shakyamuni’s face and the hunting scenes on the lacquer cabinet; the flickering lights threw grotesque shadows across the felt interior of the ger, resembling a Mongol warrior on horseback, his bow and arrow drawn. When he was half-dreaming the ‘white old man’ appeared — the popular Mongol god with his

white beard and silvery hair, clad in white clothes and leaning on a staff tipped with a dragon, who looked at him and gave him an encouraging nod.

While Asaray lay awake, dozing off now and then, a jumble of scenes, recent ones and from his early youth, passed across his mind in quick succession. Lying in the tall grass of the steppe and looking up at the endless parade of clouds of all shapes and sizes sailing by in the sky, Asaray could distinctly make out the great Mongol warriors his father had told him about, marching westward, their invincible cavalry thundering over the plains. Magnificent cities were burnt and hundreds of thousands of tents were pitched in distant countries where foreign princes came to pay tribute to the great Khan.

Nearer by, the young lambs had turned overnight into pretty dancing girls who pirouetted and smiled at him when he paid them a compliment. There was sudden consternation when a couple of wolves approached menacingly but when Asaray spoke to them they slunk away. One day his mother had seen him do this but had not seemed surprised:

“Your grandfather also had this gift of speaking to animals and making them obey him.”

It was she who had first taught him to read and write on a slate, and he saw himself huddled over it while his mother with infinite patience guided his small fingers until they could correctly produce the intricate lines of the Oirat-Mongolian script.

Asaray was half asleep now but suddenly remembered the day he was sent to the lamas' camp for his education. How homesick he had been... The shadows cast by the small oil lamps came and went, and made him feel drowsy again. Why did the kindly 'white old man' look so grumpy now? Grumpy..., yes, there was that grumpy old monk in the lamasery in charge of housekeeping, who was their greatest tormentor. He made the ten-year-old boys toil like slaves, carry heavy loads, shovel shit, gather cow and sheep dung, and perform a hundred other chores when they already had an interminable programme of studies. He caused the nobles — the so-called 'white bone', to work and suffer more than the common boys — the 'black bone', who were to become monks, and would punish them with fifty or more strokes of the cane for the least offence. At times they rebelled, only to be punished even more severely.

Yet they learned that 'Old Grouser' was not as bad a man as he had seemed in the beginning. When they had been among the lamas for more than a year the boys even came to like the gruff old monk. Sometimes after a particularly trying day he would unbend and propose to his novices some of the Mongol riddles from his tremendous store or teach them some of those popular 'triads':

The 'three cold things in the world':

Cold — the camp of he who has a bad master;

Cold — the meal of he whose mother is bad;

Cold — the thoughts of he who is evilly disposed.

Or the ‘three things that are doomed’:

Doomed — the foal when the mare’s teats are dry;

Doomed — the priest who has lost his faith.

Doomed — the people whose Prince is vain.

A Prince’s vanity...the nation doomed. Ubashi the future Khan?

In his sleep Asaray saw Badma but she did not notice him. Ubashi was talking to her. He could be so charming when he wanted to but now he looked silly, displaying the insignia which the Oross had given him when he was invested as Vice-Khan. Conceited as a peacock he strutted around Badma. And then, oh horror, he took her in his arms and pressed her against him while she tried in vain to resist him. They were struggling. Asaray wanted to come to her rescue but he could not get to them, as if an invisible wall held him back. Nor did they appear to see or hear him. He shouted, but had he lost his voice and was it only an inaudible whisper?,

“Ubashi, take your hands off her, damn you!”

They did not hear him and he felt absolutely and painfully powerless. Their image faded away. He heard a deep voice:

“All that we see in this world is an illusion.”

Asaray turned around but there was no one to be seen.

* * * *

He was awakened by a knock on the wooden door of his felt tent from his long-nosed servant Gambil:

“Am I to go with you to the Oross country, Your Highness?” he asked in maudlin tones.

“Yes, that is the general idea. Don’t you want to come with me and see the world?”

Gambil coughed nervously:

“I do not know, sir. There are so many dangers there. Don’t you need someone stronger to assist you?”

He held out his meagre arms and pointed to his pathetically narrow chest.

“Oh no, you will do, Gambil. Now get all the luggage ready, and do not loiter around here chatting.”

Gambil could be tiresome. A pity he could not take some of his friends along instead of these depressing servants. He had spoken flippantly to that rogue Gambil but in reality felt miserable. However, he had learned that one must accept one’s fate when it is clearly inevitable, a fate Lobsang-Norbu had predicted for him. The lama had also said that Asaray would come back and fulfil the prophecy.

So be it then. He would go and follow his karma although the thought of what awaited him was suffocating and constricted his heart. What did the pagan Oross have in store for him?

III

There was shouting outside and Asaray's mother hurried in:

"The Oross have come!" She seemed utterly calm but when she stretched out both her arms and held him, speaking words of endearment and calling him 'Asa' as when he was little, Asaray felt she was trembling all over. It was he who had to comfort her:

"Never mind, mother. I shall come back one day!"

She turned her face away, choking, then nodded:

"Yes, I know, dearest Asaray, you will come back."

More shouted orders and the clanging of arms penetrated from outside. Asaray looked out. There they were, in full force and heavily armed. The sight of his captors sent shivers up and down his spine. He realized it was not fear, but the knowledge that they would be in command and control of him.

The sun rose low over the plains as he said a dignified goodbye to his parents, Badma and the many friends who had come: Asarakhu, Kirep, Ukhur, Bambar ("I hate to say this, Asaray, but your own brother Ubashi kept his silence when the decision was taken in the Council. I don't see him here either, the bastard."), his elder cousin Tsebek-Dorji, even old Serbejab, and a host of others from his own and even from some distant ulus, who had heard of his departure and his exploit of the previous night. Few words were spoken. Everyone looked grim, some held up clenched fists to the Russians, others spat on the ground, and they all cheered Asaray.

Badma watched the man she loved more than anything else in the world being surrounded by the Russians and taken into their foreign-looking carriage. Would she be able to keep back her tears? Should she have stayed home? She wondered whether this was how one felt when dying. She could imagine nothing worse. There he sat, her brave and strong lover, his dark-tanned face now a sickly pallor, seemingly unfeeling and determined to get on with it, but she who knew him so well saw the forlorn, forsaken look in the eyes that used to smile and twinkle.

He sat closed in between two hefty soldiers. The scene would forever remain etched on her mind: against the fiery eastern sky stood the black kibitka and the dark horses, waiting stock-still for the signal for departure to be given, the passengers equally motionless and artificial-looking — a silhouette cut out of black paper. Time seemed to be standing still, unable to free itself from that strange tableau.

"Oh, why don't they start moving!" she nearly cried.

Suddenly, all too soon, a whip cracked, the horses pulled and they drove away. She quickly turned around, tears streaming down her face, and ran to hide herself from the crowd. With the camp left behind and the sound of barking dogs dying away in the distance, Asaray felt completely lost. When, if ever, would he see again those whom he loved? He was now all on his own; only two Torghut servants and his Mongol teacher of Russian, who had taught him a good deal of the language,

accompanying him. They were on their way to Astrakhan and the Oross looked grim. They obviously had not forgotten the incident of the night before but Asaray paid no attention to them and did not hear what they said. His mind was utterly empty, unable to form or grasp a single thought.

The road led across a vast, sandy plain. Above the horizon the sky was painted with thin yellow strips of light but soon large black clouds, pregnant with rain, were creeping up all over them like huge, dark dragons; they hung low over the steppe, ready to burst and flood the pitifully small group of men and horses in the wide open fields. When the rains did not come the sombre menace remained suspended in the hot, close air in which the young Torghut prince felt doubly imprisoned.

Unexpectedly the carriage and its escort came to a halt. Before he realized what was happening Asaray received a blinding blow on the head which rendered him semi-conscious. From behind, his arms and legs were tied so tightly that he nearly cried with pain, and then fastened to the carriage. One of the soldiers spat in his face:

“You wretched Kalmyk, here’s for killing our horses.”

He spat once more, a big slimy yellow gobbet which slithered down Asaray’s face towards his mouth.

“We are outside your territory now, dirty Kalmyk, and there will be no more tricks from you, Prince.” He spat yet again.

Asaray cursed him inwardly. Whichever way he turned his head, there was no escaping the filthy spittle; all he could do now was keep his lips shut tight and grit his teeth with anger. His head ached dreadfully. At every bump in the road the cords cut further into his flesh.

When the group approached the delta which flows around Astrakhan and into the Caspian Sea the Russian officers roused some half-drunken boatmen to take them across the wide expanse of water. The Torghut hostage suffered from heat and pain but above all from the unspeakable humiliation and his total impotence. It was suffocatingly hot and humid in the marshes and a light haze trembled over the deadly quiet waters and the tall reeds. The stillness was disturbed only once when hundreds of cormorants flew up. The crew were sweating profusely. They were a wild, unkempt bunch whose bushy whiskers, beards and moustaches almost concealed their faces, leaving only the eyes and knotty red noses visible. Their long hair was cut with precision in line with their chin and they were clad in long shirts and cotton trousers with the bottoms tightly bound by coarse bandages. Their feet were encased in shoes made of bark.

After hours of rowing the haze suddenly cleared. Now the gold-and-blue church cupolas and towers of Astrakhan could be seen in the distance. Once safely inside the city, the Russian escort became more relaxed. Bakunin came to look at Asaray’s condition and ordered his men to free the captive’s hands and loosen the shackles around his ankles, which they did with obvious reluctance. Asaray, still seething with anger, sharply protested against the disgraceful and outrageous treatment to which

he had been subjected. He was in a violent mood and would have killed the men if he had been armed and able to move freely. Bakunin only said:

“I regret this, but you have only yourself to blame for attacking my men and their horses.”

The Russian official even tried to make conversation but his Torghut hostage did not respond. Bakunin pointed to the city wall which, he said, had no less than ten gates. Astrakhan was a large and important city. Asaray saw many soldiers everywhere and realized it would be no easy task to escape from here. He knew that it was a great centre for trade with the rich Central-Asian oasis-cities Bokhara and Samarkand, with Persia, India and even far-away China, and that explained the colourful, cosmopolitan crowd thronging the narrow streets.

Asaray was dog-tired by now and suffering a fearful head-ache. He had trouble taking in all these scenes which swam dizzily before his eyes. But when they halted in front of a gate set in the centre of a long, high wall, he sat up, a tight feeling in his breast, his heart skipping a beat: was this where they would lock him up? Passes were checked by two tall, brisk and martial-looking guards at the entrance. The Torghut Prince had to submit to the further humiliation of being frisked for arms. His luggage was left at the gate to be opened and examined.

The walled-in enclosure was the garden of an old mosque with palms and flowering shrubs beyond which loomed a large mansion, dark and forbidding. There they took Asaray to a tiny, dismal room in the left wing and only then were the shackles around his ankles removed. The brick walls surrounding him looked grim and unassailable.

“Oh Shakyamuni, oh Eternal Blue Heaven! What have I done to deserve this? What is my crime?” he asked frequently without finding an answer.

The night was sticky and he slept fitfully. He dreamed that he had gone riding with Badma, when the earth suddenly split open and he fell down into a deep, deep ravine. Looking up, he could see some light far above him but when he called out Badma’s name, there was a rumble as of thunder, and the high wall of earth collapsed and buried him alive. He awoke in a sweat of terror, feeling utterly abandoned and forlorn.

A week which seemed as long as a month went past. The only man he saw was his silent guard and there was nobody who could tell him what was going to happen to him. Eventually Bakunin came to see him, the gaunt emissary who had brought him here. The Governor wanted to have a word with him, the Russian official said. He was escorted to the large wooden mansion where, after a tense wait in an ante-room, he was ushered into Governor Zhilin’s study. Growling an almost inaudible word of greeting from behind his enormous moustache while tea was brought in and hot water poured from a steaming samovar, the Governor came immediately to the point, fixing his cold steely eyes on his visitor:

“I have good news for you! To-morrow you will be transferred to St. Petersburg for your further education. Counsellor Kuropatkin of the Collegium of Foreign Affairs will see to it that you are instructed by the world’s best teachers. If you study with application I am sure you will become a perfect Russian. No doubt you will be most grateful to Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Catherine II, for Her great generosity towards you, young Prince. The Empress is giving you a unique chance and you are very lucky indeed.”

It was shocking news and Asaray could hardly believe his ears. This was not at all what his father and he had originally been told. He had been betrayed. Why this change of plans? It dawned on him that in his heart he had never given up all hope of fleeing from Astrakhan, and now what little hope he had was to be dashed. To escape from the distant Russian capital would be impossible. How would he ever be able to do something for his people if he was banished for good? But he was determined to suppress his emotions and give a dignified answer:

“I am astonished and pained by this news, sir. If it were my wish to become a Russian, which it is not, I should of course be most grateful to Her Imperial Majesty for what you call Her generous offer. But I am a Torghut prince and will remain one. I have no need of a Russian education. Therefore it is useless to send me to St. Petersburg. I have been instructed by the Khan, my father and prince, to stay in Astrakhan for an unspecified period of time, and that is all I am prepared to do. He is the only person who can command me.”

As he said this he drew himself up to his full height and his eyes blazed with fury.

The reply was icy. The Governor was indignant at Asaray’s ingratitude and impudence. Her Imperial Majesty had issued an order which must be strictly obeyed, he said, and he would see to it that Asaray did as he was told. He was curtly dismissed and escorted back to his quarters.

The interview with Governor Zhilin left Asaray in a state of shock. He was to be educated in Russia? They wanted to make an Oross of him? He would show them! What was the name again of the man who would ‘take care of him’? Kuropatkin, the Gopvornor had said. Well, he would give him a piece of his mind. The Kalmyks were free nomads, theirs was not a slave mentality: they were not and would never become Oross. He had no idea what St.Petersburg was like, only that it was incredibly far away. It was said that the winters up north were so cold that many people lost an ear or a hand through the frost. And they knew no decency. The Russians would treat him with arrogance and hatred, as they had lied and deceived his father. He still felt the filthy spittle on his face.

Even before Asaray left Astrakhan a Russian government official was drawing up a plan to make a ‘perfect Russian’ of him, as Governor Zhilin had suggested.

IV

In the Russian capital, Counsellor Alexander Vasilievich Kuropatkin was, amongst his other duties, already making preparations for the arrival of the hostage Torghut prince.

He was in charge of Asian affairs and his vast knowledge of the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Mongolia and China was acknowledged and respected. However, Russian foreign policy concentrated almost entirely on Europe and its intricate political systems and alliances, and Kuropatkin was left out of most of the deliberations; at best he was allowed to attend as a silent observer.

But there was one area of competence which affected Russia directly and on which he was regularly consulted: the border peoples in the south and southeast, particularly the Tartars in the Crimea and the Kuban, and the Oirat-Kalmyks (mainly Torghuts) of the Volga region.

The Vice-Chancellor was holding one of those rare conferences which Kuropatkin was allowed to attend. When the latest developments abroad had been discussed and numerous diplomatic dispatches from the principal European capitals had been dealt with, Count Panin suddenly nodded in Kuropatkin's direction and asked:

"There's a subject you wanted to raise, isn't there? Something about the Kalmyk situation, I believe?"

The Counsellor cleared his throat and spoke in his tediously elaborate and unctuous way:

"As you are aware, Monsieur le Président, our policy in that region is aimed at Christianizing the lamaist Kalmyks and making them give up their nomadic way of life so that they may be settled as farmers on fixed tracts of land. So far we have not been conspicuously successful in this: few Kalmyks have embraced the true faith and even fewer have been persuaded to lead a sedentary existence.

"Now you will recall, sir, that another aim of our policy is to constrain the Oirat-Kalmyk leaders and prevent them from taking adventurous actions. They have in the past been wooed both by the Manchu-Chinese Court and by the Ottomans. I need hardly point out the threat that any such alliance would pose for the Empire."

Count Panin, with an impatient gesture, interrupted Kuropatkin:

"Really, Alexander Vasilievich, we must not overestimate the importance of these slit-eyed little devils: Kalmyks, Kazaks, Nogay-Tartars and what have you. The thing to do is to play them against each other: divide et impera!"

"Well, yes, Your Excellency, we have pursued that policy in the past and are indeed still doing so. But it was also decided to take one of the Kalmyk Khan's sons as a hostage, to obtain a stronger grip on the Khan and his people, and educate him in the capital. Her Imperial Majesty's orders to that effect have now been executed. The second son of Donduk-Dashi Khan, young Prince Asaray, is expected to arrive here soon. His half-brother Ubashi, the Vice-Khan, is a vain and pompous weakling and

will always be an obedient vassal, but he has no large following, while by all accounts Asaray is made of different material and is already a popular leader.

If we could win him over, he could later exercise great influence among his people on Russia's behalf.

"But it would seem essential, sir, if you allow me to say so, that he be educated at the best and most prestigious of our institutions, the School (Academy) of the Imperial Land Forces Cadet Corps. However, its new Director is reluctant to admit him. He fears that a foreign element will cause trouble, though we have a precedent — the Dondukovs — which should prove such fears groundless.

"If you agree, sir, that for reasons of state young Prince Asaray must be admitted to the Cadet Corps, then I humbly beg you to sign an Order to that effect which I have taken the liberty to prepare for your convenience."

Panin read the document, sighed, signed it with a flourish and gave it back, but added:

"Look here, Kuropatkin, you keep an eye on that boy. Do not let him become a nuisance... well, more of a nuisance than his classmates."

The Counsellor returned to his office with mixed feelings. He had triumphed in his battle with the school for they could not refuse an Order from the Vice-Chancellor. However, he had been saddled with responsibility for Asaray's behaviour. He remembered Governor Zhilin's report which showed that the young man might not be so easy to handle. Kuropatkin decided to instruct the Director to be strict with him. In addition, he would summon Asaray to his office before he entered the Cadet School and use all his powers of persuasion to make him more amenable. He flattered himself on his knowledge of the Oirat and their susceptibilities.

But first he called on Princess Vera Dondukova, the widow of the former Khan Donduk-Ombo, who, after the death of her husband, had been brought to the capital with her children and ultimately converted to the true faith. They were distant relatives of Asaray. Kuropatkin had a long talk with her and her eldest son, who had been educated at the Cadet Academy and held the rank of Colonel in the Imperial Russian Army. They agreed to take in Asaray until the Cadet School formally accepted him as a student.

* * * *

The news about his sudden departure for the Russian capital kept Asaray wide awake that night. Long before dawn a young, alert Russian lieutenant and two heavily armed soldiers came to fetch him. It was a dark night. He dressed by candle-light while the faithful Gambil carried his few possessions outside. He was now allowed to take only one servant with him and had chosen Gambil, bidding the others to return and inform the Khan. Two kibitka's or horse-drawn carriages, if one could call them that, stood ready — much simpler vehicles than that which had brought him to Astrakhan. The lieutenant sat in the first with Asaray, and Gambil followed with the

two soldiers. When they were on their way, he soon discovered what a rusty and nasty contraption it was, the framework being attached directly to the axle, without springs. They were badly shaken and jostled about as they passed over the rough roads, even at this moderate pace.

The horses were about as slow, he thought, as half-frozen turtles must be on a winter day. It would be a long, painful journey towards a dismal destination. When they passed the Volga-town of Sarepta the countryside was familiar to him. They were so near his people here and yet so far away. Asaray was tempted to try to escape but, when he considered the odds, he knew he would have to fight his escort unarmed and without a decent horse he did not stand a chance of making good any getaway. And where would he go?

Later, an order for post-horses enabled them to change horses at every station. The post-stations where they lodged were dirty wooden shacks full of lice and other vermin, some of them human. Asaray would have much preferred to sleep in the open but his escort would neither take the risk nor accede to any request from him. After three weeks of such travelling they reached St. Petersburg, capital of the cursed Russian empire. At least the bumps and jolts were over and the kibitka rolled over a fairly smooth pavement but he would gladly endure twice as many bumps, he thought, if he could turn around and drive home, even in this wreck of a carriage.

* * * *

Asaray was immediately taken to the large, two-storey mansion of the Dondukov family, his distant relatives who had long ago been fully assimilated. The house stood in a wide, shaded avenue. When his escort explained that he would be staying with them for the time being, Asaray loathed the prospect but recognized he had neither choice nor alternative. A Russian servant opened the door, and he took leave of the lieutenant and the soldiers who had, on the whole, been quite decent to him. The servant told Gambil to wait in the hall with their luggage and led Asaray to a large salon where he was greeted with a "Mende, Asaray!" in his own language by his cousin, Princess Vera Dondukova. She had an authoritative manner, and there was a somewhat condescending air about her rather too kind smile. He was struck by her elegance, the big coil of black hair and the steady, searching look from her clear, china-blue eyes.

"After this long journey you will want to tidy yourself up, I presume. Porphirii will take you to your room, run a bath and lay out some clean clothes for you. Then I hope you will have tea with me and my sons. Oh, I forgot, your servant Gambil can, of course, stay here as long as is necessary."

Asaray indeed felt dirty and smelly. Vera's sons apparently still owned some Mongol garments, for after a refreshing bath he found in his room cotton underclothing, linen trousers and a long, cool and comfortable silk coat with wide sleeves which fitted him well enough.

When he came down for tea, his hostess was flanked by her two sons, Alexei and Yuna, who gave him firm handshakes. Her sons were older than Asaray. Both were olive-skinned and their eyes were slightly slanted, yet there was an indefinable Russian air about them; perhaps it was their speech, their dress or their blue eyes, being half-Circassian. They went out of their way to be cordial to him but he felt far from comfortable. The room seemed oppressively over-full with heavy oak and mahogany furniture, paintings, frilly lamp-shades, and trinkets; in a corner he noticed an icon illuminated by a lampáda. Even the language was foreign, for these 'relatives' had forgotten most of their Mongol:

"We so much hope you will feel at home here," his hostess had said with a strong Russian accent, and: "You must be tired after this long journey. Was it very bad?"

"Thank you, Madam, it was not a bad trip, though at times a bit bumpy," he had answered politely.

They looked at him questioningly and he had to repeat the last word in Russian! They continued in that language.

"You must have heard in Astrakhan that you are to be sent to a school here, but as it has not been decided yet to which one, we were asked to take you in for the time being. It was Counsellor Kuropatkin of the Collegium of Foreign Affairs who suggested it, thinking that it would give you an easier start here. By the way, you can speak Mongol with him. He is fluent and has less of an accent than my sons and I," Princess Vera added with a smile.

Asaray thanked her for offering him her hospitality but caustically remarked that he had no wish to stay in Russia for long and bitterly resented having been taken hostage. He did not see why at his age he should go to another school. After all, he had graduated from the lama school .

"Well, I can imagine how you feel, but there's no other way," Alexei said. "You will probably be sent to the Academy of the Land Forces Cadet Corps. If so, you'll be lucky, for it really is a very special school, the best of all. It teaches subjects of higher education which undoubtedly you have not had at home. Yuna and I were educated there and we are now regular officers in the Imperial Army. You may officially be a hostage but you will be well treated, I'm sure, if you enter into the right spirit. To live in St. Petersburg is in itself a great privilege, you know. You'll find this a fascinating city. I can show you all the sights, Asaray, if you wish."

"Oh he," Yuna cut in mockingly. "He's a living encyclopedia and just as dry. He knows everything about the city except its real life for he's always in bed long before the excitement starts and he has no sense of humour either. But if you're the serious type, Asaray, you'll get on splendidly with Aliosha."

During the light evening meal Asaray handled a fork and knife for the first time in his life and felt very clumsy. Every so often some morsel would slip back onto his plate, to the delight of Yuna. There was little conversation, which suited him since these difficult table manners required his full concentration. He noticed with distaste

that his relatives crossed themselves in front of the icon when entering or leaving the room.

When Asaray had withdrawn from the strain of polite talk, he was relieved to have his own room and a clean bed after the dirty lodgings during the journey but he wondered about his hosts. How could they have changed so much, drifted so far from their origins? Princess Vera Dondukova was the once powerful widow of the formidable Khan Donduk-Ombo of the Volga Mongols — first cousin to Asaray's father. She had ruled for some time after her husband's death until she was subdued by the Oross, who had appointed another Khan. She had been taken to their capital where she and her children had been converted to the orthodox religion. The name Donduk had been Russified to Dondukov and she had received a Russian princely title.

The days that followed were boring for Asaray. Neither Princess Vera nor her sons had much time for him. As often as he could, he locked himself in his room. He sometimes dreamed that Badma came to him. They made love but it was a short-lived bliss from which he awoke with a pain harder to bear than before. The room was stuffy and hot, even with the window open day and night. There was not one single object in it which seemed familiar to him, save the Shakyamuni statuette which was his only comfort. Most of the time he just sat or lay there, feeling bewildered. He could not help comparing his present quarters with his comfortable kibitka back home.

How ideal for nomads were the Mongol tents, he reflected: light, roomy, airy and dry; cool in summer and warm in winter; strong enough to withstand storms. They could easily be assembled or struck in a short time. In his mind's eye he saw the innumerable kibitka's — gers — in the wide prairie: thousands of cylinder-shaped felt tents, lower than a man's height, with a cone set on top open to the sky to let out smoke and let in fresh air, which could be closed when a storm was blowing. The 'walls' are simply a circular wooden skeleton which carries several layers of felt, fewer in summer than in winter.

And how snug his ger's, any ger's, interior when you enter from the freezing cold through the low wooden door, and the hot blaze of the fire made of dried cow's dung hits you in the face. The warmth pervades your body quickly, and when your eyes have adjusted themselves while you are sitting on a comfortable rug, they dwell lovingly on the familiar cabinet, the Buddha, and Tibetan religious books. Even the simple gers of the poor breathe a pleasant, lived-in atmosphere, Asaray remembered, although they can also be greasy, dirty and smelly. He realized how fortunate he had been, because the Khan's tents, like those of the high lamas, were much larger than average and far more luxurious; cleaner too, since the tea-maker, the cook, the pastry-cook, and the baker each had a separate ger for a 'kitchen'.

The greatest advantage of living in a ger, of course, was the fact that it never stayed long in one place: it was always on the move. Did not the Dondukovs miss this

style of living, this wonderful mobility? Or had they forgotten all about it in their headlong rush to become one with the oppressors?

The Dondukovs lived on Konnogvardeiskii Boulevard in a large house, where they frequently entertained their many Russian friends. Princess Vera was still a remarkably beautiful woman and a gracious hostess. In various subtle ways she attempted to awaken Asaray's interest in things Russian and to help him adjust to his new surroundings. Every time they were having guests she introduced him to them and steered the conversation towards subjects which might interest him. Young female guests drew him out about his nomadic life, which they appeared to find fascinating. He did his best to be polite but it was difficult: the two ways of life seemed irreconcilable.

Time dragged by without even a word from Counsellor Kuropatkin. Then one day his cousin Alexei took him to see the sights of the capital, as he had promised, on horseback.

The weather was glorious. It had stormed and rained heavily but now, when they stood on the embankment of the River Neva — the high windy sky washed pure — brilliant sunlight poured down on the dancing blue waters and the golden palaces in the distance. The immense, bright panorama took Asaray's breath away. The Neva was more a huge lake or gulf than a river.

Seen from their vantage point on Admiralty Isle the sombre prison-fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul on the opposite shore seemed miles away. From within its dark stone mass rose the gilded, needle-like spire of a cathedral which reflected the cool northern sunlight.

After viewing the Admiralty and the imposing Winter Palace, and a stroll through the lower garden they returned to the Neva. From where they now stood they saw, farther down, hundreds of ships anchored or moored. Foreign merchants supervised the unloading of their cargoes, workmen shouted in various languages, barrels rolled noisily, and the air smelled of tar, salt and spices.

Crossing a long, floating bridge of boats over the Neva, the two young men reached Vasilievskii Isle. Alexei halted in front of the palace originally built for the powerful statesman Prince Menshikov and now housing the Cadet Corps, whose famous academy he and his brother had attended:

“This is where you will probably be educated.”

Asaray looked at it with special interest now. It was a three-storey building, roofed with large iron slates painted a russet red. A portico with four columns formed the entrance. Behind the mansion was a beautiful shaded garden with an elegant pavilion, open to the public. They walked around to look at the building from all sides.

There had not been any students about but at this moment a class of young boys, about ten years old, came out into the garden to walk silently up and down the paths with their tutors. They wore uniforms of a drab, chocolate brown; their faces had an

unhealthy look, almost a prison pallor. Obviously not a cheerful lot, Asaray concluded.

Asaray observed his surroundings carefully; in the back of his mind was the thought that he might one day get a chance to flee. But while he could instantly memorise any countryside, this maze of intersecting streets thoroughly flummoxed him.

At last Counsellor Kuropatkin sent for him. Asaray entered the tall brick building with a heavy heart and was conducted through the vast and dusty purlieus of the Collegium of Foreign Affairs to the chamber of the Head of the Asia Section.

A stocky figure, nearly bald, with a round, clownish nose and small eyes resembling glittering black beads, Kuropatkin looked unimposing and friendly enough and he received his visitor with a beaming smile. But Asaray knew his appearance was deceptive: he had a reputation for great intelligence and was a shrewd negotiator.

“Mende, Prins Asaray!” Kuropatkin welcomed him in the Torghut-Oirat language; he was indeed fluent, as Princess Vera had said. He spoke with such sympathy, knowledge and genuine enthusiasm about his past visits to the Kalmyks of the Volga that Asaray’s heart softened somewhat. Unexpectedly Kuropatkin treated him, not as a hostage, but as a foreign Prince to whom all respect is due.

“At first you will probably find it difficult to adjust to life in a big city. That has been my own problem too, for I have always lived in the countryside. But it will be worth your while to live in St. Petersburg for some years, my dear Prince. Indeed I can now confirm what you may have guessed already: you have been admitted to the Land Forces Cadet Academy, so you will have the unique advantage of studying at Russia’s finest school!”

“You speak about a unique advantage, Counsellor,” Asaray interrupted, “but I do not think I need any more studying. I am past the school-age, you know. I find it degrading to be put in a class with young boys who have not had a taste of life yet, whereas I have already been an active leader in my country.”

“How well I understand your feelings! I am well acquainted with your excellent reputation as a young leader. But one is never too old to learn, dear Prince, and you will be taught many subjects which you have not had before. I have seen to it that you will be placed in a group of advanced students who are more or less your age. You will have to work hard to catch up with them, even though you are more advanced in other areas and have had more experience of life.

“There are in all five grades or age groups,” he explained, “totalling about four hundred boys whose ages range from 6 to 21, each grade taking three years. You will be sharing the most up-to-date knowledge available in the world and this will later help you improve conditions in your own country.”

Kuropatkin told Asaray to report to the Director of the Academy the next day and wished him well. Though the Russian Counsellor had not made any firm promises, he had subtly raised Asaray’s hopes of returning home after a few years. The next day with an air of inevitability Asaray entered the grand, vaulted and pillared hall of the Cadet Corps Academy, built in the style of an Italian palazzo. In the hall there were

several marble, nude figures of human beings which, strangely, represented Greek gods, he subsequently learned.

The officer on duty, an unsmiling blond young man of spiderish silhouette, wearing a red and yellow bordered tunic and white jodhpurs, took him straight to the office of the Director. With a curt nod General Philosophov dismissed the thin-faced sub-lieutenant and continued to read the document on his desk.

While Asaray stood waiting he looked around. The study was decorated with mosaic parquetry and a light-heartedly painted ceiling in cheerful pastel colours; it was wainscoted with walnut panels which lent it a warm intimate air, and its windows looked out over the Neva.

The Director was still reading. What sort of a man would he be? He appeared severe, though he was perhaps more scholar than soldier. Asaray's intuition sensed that the Director's heart was warmer than he was prepared to show; he hoped he would be proven right. At last the General fixed his dark, intelligent eyes on the newcomer and said coldly:

"So you are Prince Asaray of the Torghuts. This school is a famous institution and you are very lucky to be admitted. We shall have to see whether you deserve it. Never forget that you are here as a hostage of the Russian government! You will be taught our rules and regulations which you will follow strictly. Any infraction will be punished severely and without further warning. You can go now. Good luck."

After such a cold shower, Asaray shivered inwardly. He wondered whether the Director had not been deliberately severe, as if he had been instructed to let the new boy know right away where he stood. Lieutenant 'Spider', who had been waiting outside, took him to the fourth grade where all the boys were staring and gawking at him, some with intense curiosity, others with open contempt. One of them whispered, "Oh God, a dirty Kalmyk!", which produced a general giggle. The teacher, a shortish man with protruding eyes of an extraordinary light blue, hollow cheeks and no chin, stared like a cold fish and pointed out his seat.

It was clear this first school-day was going to be a miserable one and Asaray armed himself mentally against what might be coming. The tight-fitting dark blue school uniform made him feel even more uncomfortable. The boys were about his age and as tall or even taller. Yet he immediately felt superior to this bunch of Oross boys who seemed to be mere children and boorish ones at that. It was a dreadful prospect to have to live with them but he emptied his mind as the lamas had taught him and neither saw nor heard what was going on around him. He was rudely brought back to reality, however, when the teacher rapped on his knuckles with a sharp rule and demanded that he answer a question he had not heard.

From the start he felt that the students and teachers were hostile to him. He wanted to keep to himself but soon discovered how difficult that was. They were constantly thrown together and there was no privacy at all, the entire class of over eighty boys sleeping in one large dormitory. That first evening, a few of the more

heavily built bullies were waiting for this outlandish newcomer to give him a rough welcome:

“Faugh, how he stinks!”

“Hey, Kalmyk boy, wash your dirty face before you come in here!”, and someone started to pour a bucket of piss over his head. But before he had emptied it completely, Asaray swiftly grabbed it, pushed it down over his attacker’s head and kicked him in the groin. The boy doubled up crying out with pain, and now three of his heftiest friends came for Asaray:

“You crazy wretch, we’ll make mincemeat of you!”

During the savage fight that followed he nearly succumbed but, being agile and an experienced wrestler, he was able to make them pay with broken ribs and crushed nasal bones for the black eye and bloody nose with which he emerged. The uproar they caused alerted the officer on duty. When he saw the shambles they had created he summoned his colleagues and, before Asaray knew what was happening, they had handcuffed him and thrown him into a coal-cellar. Covered with urine, blood and coal-dust, the Torghut prince spent a horrible night in this filthy hole. When after washing up the next day he was led before the Director and reprimanded for his unruly behaviour, he burst out:

“What kind of a school is this? Is this a country of barbarians? I was cruelly punished, damn it!, without anyone even asking me what happened, or who started the fight. There is no justice here. I cannot stay in this so-called academy and demand to be sent back home!”

General Philosophov looked angry and puzzled.

“Mind your tongue, young man! We do not make light of disorderly behaviour and insulting language. So calm down and tell me exactly what happened.”

This Asaray did and although the Director never said a word about it to him, he subsequently learned that his attackers were severely reprimanded.

He would have minded the violence with which he had been welcomed less if he had been one of them, but he was the only non-Russian. Their various minor harassments, which continued for days, only increased his loneliness. Asaray was revolted by their indecently white and pustular, hairy torsos — so different from the lean, smooth, cream-coloured bodies of the Torghuts; he abhorred their unwashed pricks, their pasty, flabby faces, big noses and very trying odours. They slept in their underwear which was seldom changed and washed.

Breakfast consisted of one breadroll and a glass of milk and water in equal proportions or, on feast days, a glass of sbiten (hot water, honey and spices). They marched two by two to prayers, to breakfast, to dinner, and to everything else, but he remained solitary in the midst of many. The Russian boys were at times unbearably cheerful and not one of them was likely to understand his desperate mood. For them he simply did not exist save to torment or ridicule.

* * * *

When Asaray closed his eyes and ears, the sounds and sights of the lama camp came back: the deep-toned voices of the great mass of dedicated servants of the Lord Buddha, heads shaven, faces grave, all sitting cross-legged, in brown, yellow, purple or crimson robes which left their right arm bare, the lamas wearing a high, yellow hat or shawl. Now and then the high-pitched voices of the young novices chimed in:

Existence involves suffering and sorrow.

The cause of suffering is craving and the lust of life.

For suffering to end, the craving must cease.

The chanting came in rolling waves of melancholy sound, moving in rhythmic monotony. Words, words...., but what, the Kalmyk students had often asked themselves, was their meaning and purpose? Unceasingly the boys were taught by the lamas that every hardship, every difficulty, mishap and sorrow in their lives was a challenge to overcome, absorb and learn from, an exercise on the long path towards Enlightenment. By performing good deeds they could acquire merits which would help them and others progress on the holy path, reaching ever higher stages of development as they moved on through this and other earthly lifetimes.

Asaray remembered how he and his classmate Kirep, a cheerful, fat little boy, often made fun of the lamas and monks and their sombre chanting. Why all this talk about suffering? Was it because they had no girlfriends? They themselves had begun to be interested in the opposite sex but had no opportunity to pursue the subject further except in their talks and fantasies.

He had to admit that many of the lamas were ignorant and stupid, but some of them were great scholars. It was his wise spiritual tutor, the venerable Lobsang-Norbu, one of the highest-ranking lamas, who had really opened Asaray's eyes to the relevance of the basic tenets of lamaism. This extraordinary man had helped him see the world with a different perspective.

He had often taken Asaray on his visits to the poor and sick. The learned lama was renowned as a physician, having studied in Tibet at the Tashi-lhunpo monastery and its famous medical school.

Asaray remembered one such visit particularly vividly. They had gone to see a boy called Ukhur who was dangerously ill and whose parents had given up all hope (the lama eventually saved his life and Ukhur, though a common boy, later became one of Asaray's closest friends). When they had left the patient after that first visit Asaray asked,

“How did you make this boy feel better, reverend sir?”

Lobsang-Norbu pointed to the shadow cast by the ger they had visited and asked a question in turn:

“What is this?”

Hardly had Asaray answered that it was the shadow of the ger when the sun hid behind a cloud and there was no shadow to be seen.

“You see? That was only an illusion of your mind. All that we see or experience does not really exist. It is Emptiness, Void, Illusion.”

“But is the boy Ukhur not ill then?”

“Illness is an illusion too. The herb-tea I gave him is good for his body but much more important is the mind. If I can purify his mind and give him confidence, he will be well.”

Asaray was silent while he turned these thoughts over in his mind as they rode on. Then he asked,

“Honoured Master, but if everything is void and illusion, how can there be good and evil and why should we try to perform good deeds if they are the same as bad ones?”

“That is a good question and we shall examine it. Look at that huge cloud yonder,” Lobsang pointed with his hand. “Does it not look like an enormous dragon, dangerous and threatening?”

“Why, yes, it does.”

“But now, look carefully. Could it not be a grey mare galloping happily along?”

Asaray looked again and conceded that this was exactly what he now saw.

“The world we perceive and experience is but a series of dots, short momentary appearances,” the learned lama said, his face grave, his slanted eyes almost closed as if looking inward.

“You see, the true nature of our sems — our mind, is light; it is a luminous and thinking energy. But mostly the mind is stained and defective. Only if we reach the higher realization that samsara — the world around us, is but an illusion, only then can these stains and defects be removed. And this is necessary because they are obstacles. Obstacles to what, Asaray?”

Here Lobsang suddenly opened his eyes wide and cast a penetrating look at him.

“Well, reverend sir, they impede our vision, is that it? Are they not obstacles to our seeing more clearly?”

“Listen, my boy, you have seen a shadow. You have seen a dragon and a horse. Did you or did you not see them clearly?”

“Yes, master, I did.”

“Then where are your obstacles?”

“I do not know, sir.”

Patiently, the lama went on:

“You have seen a shadow, a dragon, a horse. Yet, when you looked again, they were gone. When did you see clearly, when they were there or a moment later when they had disappeared?”

Now Asaray was at a loss again. But after some reflection he said: “Both.”

“Exactly! Obviously what we call our vision is defective then. It is not that we should learn to see more clearly, but in a different way. We must learn to see ‘the rest’, i.e. that which can be seen beyond the appearances (This Asaray understood: he often saw things that others failed to notice).

“You will learn, if you study hard, that the stains and defects of our mind are obstacles to the purification and liberation of the mind. We cling to what we see and draw the wrong conclusions. Thus our minds become more muddled. But when we learn to purify the mind, we can distinguish between good and bad.”

“How can we learn to do this?” his pupil asked.

“By following lam-rim — the Gradual Way: studying holy books, through meditation and practising yoga techniques.”

Lobsang-Norbu had fashioned a new life for him, a spiritual and monastic life in the first place, yet also a highly practical one. He was an exceptionally gifted man, and Asaray knew he had been very fortunate to have him as his private tutor. Many lamas, even some of the higher-ranking ones, were lazy and ignorant, sheltering in the monasteries from some of the harsh realities of the world outside.

From this teacher he had learned much that would be of use to him later on: economics, animal husbandry, medicine. The lama’s great knowledge and wisdom were essentially pragmatic, excluding any notion of religious fanaticism. Asaray, who by nature strove to be a perfectionist, was taught to put things in perspective and deal with what he found in the imperfect world.

The first two years at the lama school had been devoted entirely to intensive study and hard physical labour. “Old Grouser” had not allowed them much leisure. In the senior classes the boys did not have to study all day anymore and their household chores were eased. There were many sports activities and serious debates but also games which could be hilarious fun.

Later he had wondered what he had done with all those things the dear lama had taught him. Not a great deal, he supposed, but he had not had much time either. Was it surprising that after graduation from the lama school he had gone into raptures at the sight of every pretty girl who smiled at him? And there had been so many of them. It had become increasingly difficult for him to feel ‘disgusted’ with the world and to believe that it was nothing but misery as Buddha had taught.

For a time he had given himself over to worldly pleasures, including martial exploits, and he remembered with pride the armed attack he had led against a camp of the Nogay Tartars to avenge a raid they had made on his own camp some months earlier. That had only been a minor affair but, to teach them a lesson, Asaray and more than two hundred of his warriors had launched a serious attack. The Nogay were also tough nomads but they were taken by surprise. Asaray had participated in fights before but now he was the commander and he was borne on a wave of elation — a giddy combination of adventure, tension and responsibility. With raw battle-cries they had hurled themselves upon the enemy. When a sufficient number of them

had been put out of action, Asaray and his men had returned in triumph with hundreds of captured horses and a number of Nogay women.

Thus after his graduation from the lama school Asaray had shaken off most of all those prayers and holy texts much as a dog shakes every drop of water out of his coat after a swim. Only later had he fully realized the importance of the lama's lessons and had he been determined to put into practice in his own ulus what he had learned.

* * * *

Now he was a captive and everything had changed. Here in the very heart of Imperial Russia, in this hostile school, he found it very difficult to act in accordance with Lobsang Norbu's teachings and to purify his mind. In his present state it was nearly impossible for him to sit still and meditate. Nor could he easily tolerate his separation from his beloved Badma. He could neither relax nor subject himself to the lamaist discipline of the mind, for he was constantly much too angry and upset. He could not accept being a hostage of the Russians, at the mercy of a barbarian government which would punish him whenever it was dissatisfied with Torghut behaviour, or make use of him to blackmail the Khan into even greater submission. The Torghuts were 'allies' of Russia but were increasingly treated as vassals. The contrast between his present and his previous situation was such that he decided, out of protest, to neglect his studies and make life for those foreign teachers as unpleasant as he could.

"Asaray, tell us when and with whom the Treaty of Nystad was concluded and what were its contents."

"I do not know and I don't care."

"You don't care? Answer me now, immediately!"

"No, I refuse."

"Disobedience and insolence are detestable vices! You will be caned after class and write out a hundred times this chapter of our textbook before tomorrow morning."

"I have no intention of doing so!"

In a rage, the history teacher called the duty officer who with the aid of some others forcibly moved Asaray out of the classroom and after fifty strokes with the cane locked him up for the rest of the day. But a week later he would act in the same manner during a mathematics class and be punished with greater severity. As often as he could, he would make a nuisance of himself during classes.

The days at school dragged on, filled with lessons in a great many subjects such as Russian and French, geography, history, physics, mathematics, military science and drill, religion and the arts. Of the many outstanding teachers a good number were foreigners and some of them had execrable Russian — to the intense delight of their pupils.

In the afternoons the students sat studying in the large hall, which echoed with the soft, unremitting susurrus of boys' voices conning over their lessons. At that time of

day, it was particularly hard for Asaray to concentrate on his home-work. He would see his favourite mare and his fastest stallion running ahead of the herd; the young foals jumping crazily with sheer joy and vitality; the green, wide-open spaces and the thousands of white and grey tents; the inexpressible beauty of the mountains outlined in vigorous relief, indigo and pearl-white, against the westering sun; the grizzled dark-skinned herdsmen squatting around the fire on long tranquil evenings, conversing in their guttural, dispassionate voices; his mother's playful smile; the Khan's stern countenance when sitting in judgement; Badma's bright round face and laughing eyes — a lovely brown with grey light in them, like agates, the slope of her shoulders and the curve of her breasts and buttocks.

He yearned for his 'Brown-Eye' and in those sultry afternoons the desire became unbearable. Sometimes he saw his half-brother Ubashi courting Badma, she offering little resistance... He longed for a letter from home, which never came, and he felt constantly troubled about his people and herds. He had made so many plans to improve their lot. Asaray was aware that he was now idealizing somewhat their happy pastoral way of life, as if the nomads had no worries at all. In fact their life was hard too. No trouble, no loss, no distress was unknown to them. Yet it was a beautiful life, it had been his life, whereas here he was leading the existence of a nonentity, of a ghost, no life at all.

After the drowsy hours of studying there was another hour for recreation — when again he was lonely and isolated — before their evening meal of black bread, cooked fruit and water, which was followed by more study and revision. Bedtime was at 9 o'clock.

During his stay with the Dondukovs he had found strength in saying his Buddhist prayers in the presence of Shakyamuni, the statuette which Badma had given him. He secretly continued this practice here at school. Asaray felt keenly that if he were to live up to the commission which Lobsang-Norbu had invested in him — the special mandate 'to preserve the soul and identity of his nation' — then he must first of all make sure that he did not lose his own.

The school's priest, a tall, black-bearded man of great intelligence, had several long talks with him and attempted to convert him to the Orthodox religion but Asaray wanted none of it. It was part of his fight against becoming Russified; in any case, the obligatory church services left him indifferent, save for the beautiful singing. His heart went out to the lamaist faith of his people as if here, in exile, it was taking on a far greater importance than it ever had before. While the other boys slept, he frequently spent hours trying hard to meditate and empty his mind of all negative thoughts, or silently reciting mantras. Then he would kneel down on the ice-cold stone floor and say his prayers to Shakyamuni. Although he slept little as a result, it did help him to start the day at five in the morning.

But one morning he was dismayed to discover that the statuette of Shakyamuni, his only companion and solace, had disappeared. He searched everywhere among his possessions until some of the boys began to laugh and make opprobrious remarks about his 'heathen idol'. Shocked by the thought that they might have stolen it, he grimly started to go through their belongings and searched their beds as well. When they tried to stop him he fought them off with such determination that a whole crowd was needed to overpower and restrain him. Then, as soon as his enemies relaxed their grip somewhat, he jerked free and continued his hunt. The duty officer appeared, and when his commands were ignored went to seek help. The Russian boys returned to the attack and Asaray, in his despair, drew a knife and slashed at several of his tormentors. Blood spurted from someone's wrist, the boy fainted, and at that very moment the officer in charge returned:

"You rascal, give up that knife!"

But Asaray doggedly went on searching the room. He was mad with rage and nothing could stop him. When the doctor arrived to treat the profusely bleeding student, other officers joined in the wild fight to overpower Asaray and lock him up. Never before had they witnessed such vicious ferocity. All alone in a cell he fumed and banged the walls with his fist. When he sat down at last he remained stunned for a long time and could not think clearly. Now he had lost everything: the last line of communication with his own world had been rudely broken off.

Later, during the long weeks of his confinement, it gradually began to dawn on him that the loss of his revered, irreplaceable statuette, however painful, might not even be the worst thing that had happened to him. A poisonous doubt was creeping into his heart about his father's good faith: why had he allowed the Russians to take his son away and treat him as a common criminal? Could he not have done more to liberate him? Had he secretly entered into a pact with the Oross?

When he thought he had detected his father's real reasons for sacrificing him — to obtain the title of Khan from the Russian Empress — his anguish became insufferable and grew into something akin to hatred of his father and even of his mother, who had not opposed his being led away like a lamb to be slaughtered and who would always side with her husband — even if it meant giving up her son. No one wanted to have anything to do with him any more. None of them had written, not even Lobsang-Norbu. Surely Badma had given him up too: was not he a hopeless case? Whereas Ubashi was free and Vice-Khan! He would no doubt exult in his advantage over Asaray and do everything to win Badma and make her his wife. Asaray hated him.

There was the old saying of the 'three bitter things of this world':

Bitter — the biting wind from the North;

bitter — the camel's tears for her young;

bitter — the pain of love gone wrong.

When Asaray was released from his cell three weeks later, the commanding officer warned him sternly that any further indiscipline on his part would be punished with the utmost severity, but he did not listen. Asaray left his prison bitter and cynical. If your own father betrayed you, what could be worse? And whom could you believe? Having lost trust in others and in himself he turned completely inward. His classmates now left him alone: they were another enemy, although none dared tease or oppose him. When any of them tried to be helpful or ingratiate himself, Asaray remained cold and aloof. He never discovered who had stolen the Shakyamuni nor where it had gone.

Asaray at last decided to give up being a constant hindrance during classes as he realised this would achieve nothing. He told himself he should take whatever he could from his Oross captors: he could never know what might prove useful in some dim, unforeseeable future. He also plunged into his studies as a means of escape and because it was his nature to want to do well, whatever he was doing. He soon became one of the best in his class.

Life at the Cadet School was hardy and rugged, and much time was devoted to physical exercise. Having ridden on horseback since childhood, the young nomad prince had done little running and now had a hard time developing his leg muscles. It took him many hours of painful training before he could leap over a six-foot vaulting horse or get an average mark for sprinting.

But on a horse, no one could compete with him, and his fame as a horseman soon spread; officers from prestigious cavalry regiments came to watch him. Standing with both feet on the saddle or riding two horses, one foot planted on each, he was able to shoot accurately with bow and arrow or pistol, even at a gallop. Secretly he enjoyed the attention and admiration his horsemanship commanded.

Whilst working hard at school, Asaray remained a solitary figure, steadfastly resisting foreign influences and avoiding personal contact. He was a Torghut and must remain one; he was a Prince also, responsible for his people. However, living like this became more and more of a strain. He was sick of the sight of Russian schoolboys, the closeness of the dormitories and classrooms, the stench of stale sweat and cabbage and worse, the thousand and one alien things that surrounded him. Despite his progress he began to suffer deep depressions: why did time pass so unbearably slowly? Whatever was happening around him during that autumn and long, dark winter passed him by almost unnoticed. Asaray had withdrawn into a world of his own, with fantasies and memories which comforted him less and less.

VI

Whilst Asaray languished, lonely and abandoned, amidst the imperial splendour of St. Petersburg, the Torghuts had moved south from their pastures on the Volga and were wintering in the sheltered valley of the Kuma river. Ubashi waited anxiously in the royal orgê where his stern father had summoned him.

“I must speak with you about the management of your ulus, Ubashi. You are doing very badly. And this at a time when a special responsibility came to rest on your shoulders. Not only are you my only son left here, but you are also the titular Vice-Khan and will in all likelihood succeed me. Naturally people will judge you as a future Khan by the manner in which you manage your own affairs.”

The Khan paused a moment. Ubashi remained silent.

“You have too feeble a grasp of things. It is plain for all to see that your ulus are prospering less than those of your neighbours. There is too much laxity and sloppiness in the way your herds are tended. Cows are often not milked on time, horses are left for too long in the same pasture, too much mare’s milk is set aside for making araki and other alcoholic beverages rather than for food. There has been noticeably more drunkenness among your people and there have been fights. What sort of a weakling are you? Are you the Khan’s son? A humble shepherd’s son could do better. Unless you win the respect of your people as a wise and firm ruler you cannot expect ever to become Khan.”

There was a short silence, then Ubashi answered in a low voice:

“Yes, Father, you are right. I have made many mistakes. I hope you will forgive me and give me a chance to prove myself.”

“We shall see. Naturally I’d much prefer my son to succeed.”

Ubashi was determined to win his father’s approval. He thought he knew why he had not lived up to the Khan’s expectations. He had always felt inferior to his brother Asaray, which had made him nervous and wavering. If he wanted to rule one day he must overcome his hesitancy and act with certainty. So many perceptions depended upon the appearance of competence rather than any real ability which Asaray might have shown.

As a little boy he had admired and wanted to be friends with his active younger brother, to be loved by him. His frequent visits to Asaray and his mother had been his chief delight. Asaray was so carefree and happy, his energy and inventiveness knowing no bounds. He always took the initiative to play all sorts of games, often with sharai — the sheep’s bones of which they had an abundance. They loved to play ‘pitch and toss’, ‘marbles’ and ‘odds and evens’.

Sometimes exciting things happened when he was with Asaray. He remembered how one day, while playing hide and seek, they had strayed away to a distant, unknown part of the camp, with Asaray in the lead.

“Aren’t we getting rather far away from home?” Ubashi had asked worriedly.

“And why shouldn’t we?”, his fearless younger brother had answered, adding: “I can easily find our way back.”

But when it was Ubashi’s turn to find and touch Asaray, he could not locate him. After having looked in vain in every conceivable corner, he got into a panic. He had never been in this camp before. An eerie atmosphere reigned in these parts, the shabbily dressed men looked rough and tough. Ubashi felt lost and threatened. And when the harsh sound of gongs and cymbals and fearful shouting was coming his way, he screamed with terror.

Then, whom did he see in the procession which was running around in a wide circle? His brother Asaray who gaily waved at him! A group of shamans followed by two men holding an old, frail woman between them and by a crowd of other people, were sprinting around a burning effigy representing a demon. They were shouting at this manggus to chase it away. When nothing but ashes was left of it, the sick woman who had at first looked more dead than alive, seemed to have her spirits revived and was proclaimed healthy. Ubashi was fascinated by the spectacle and amazed to see that the burning of a demon could cure an illness. His panic forgotten, he joined Asaray and together they cheerfully went home.

The boys always had a marvellous time together. Tseren-Jalla, Asaray’s mother, was quite different from his own: calm and serene, smiling and tolerant, she created an atmosphere in which Ubashi felt at ease. At home, although he loved his mother, he could not bear the tension he always felt there. Sometimes Naijitana’s tragic face and her obvious unhappiness nearly made him weep.

Then, for some reason he could not understand — he was only five years old then — she began to consult a sinister-looking shaman of ill repute called Kirin. Little Ubashi heard people say that he was a pseudo-shaman of ill repute, a quack who was despised by the lama’s and shamans alike. He did not know what it all meant.

One day, after having visited this man, his mother came home white and shaken, and called him to her. Ubashi was told to break off his friendship with Asaray and not to see him any more. If he did, he would be severely punished. Ubashi was bewildered and started to cry. When his mother explained that Asaray was not to be trusted and could do him great harm, he protested that he did not believe her and would not obey her orders, for he loved Asaray and Tseren-Jalla. But Naijitana had been very firm with him and kept a close eye on his movements. Ubashi bitterly resented the embargo on their meetings. He could not help comparing Tseren-Jalla’s happy home with his own.

Only later, when he grew up, did he begin to understand that his mother’s grief and suspicion were at least partly due to the fact that his father the Khan lived with Tseren-Jalla most of the time and seldom visited them.

As a result of Naijitana’s strict orders, the two boys hardly ever met, except on more or less official Family visits such as during the Tsagan Sar (White Month, or ‘Cottage Cheese’ Month) — festival, the Buddhist New Year. Asaray’s attitude always

remained friendly and he showed Ubashi the respect an elder brother is due. But a strange incident happened, when during one of the twice-yearly crossings of the Volga, the young boys were standing close together at the railing of a ferry-boat, looking out over the river. Ubashi was suddenly pushed by Asaray, and it was such a violent shove that he nearly fell overboard; at the last moment someone pulled him back. Frightened, Ubashi took refuge with his mother who cried that this was attempted murder and accused Asaray, who angrily retorted that the shaman Kirin, who had stood behind them, had shoved him against his brother.

This incident had jolted Ubashi and he had begun to believe some of the things his mother said about Asaray. They consulted Kirin, in whose occult powers Najjitana believed unreservedly. He held private sessions with them, performing weird rites which frightened Ubashi, yet made him strangely reliant on Kirin. The 'priest' told him that his life was in danger from evil demons who intended to use Asaray against him. Ubashi should be careful and do as Kirin told him. Ubashi asked him to burn an effigy of those demons but Kirin declared that would not affect them. Ubashi fell under his spell and believed everything he said.

In his gloomier moods, which became ever more frequent, Ubashi lived in terror of these spirits. There was by then no doubt any more in his mind that the demons wanted to put Asaray in his place as future Khan, as Kirin had affirmed.

Later, when the boys grew up it was inevitable that they should meet occasionally, and whenever he had a chance Ubashi would force himself to overcome his fear and challenge Asaray, whether at a shooting match, a horse race or an intellectual game. He believed that if he could prove himself stronger than Asaray the evil spirits would also have less power over him.

There were times when he seemed to succeed. Both of them were excellent riders, but Ubashi proved better at their kind of 'polo'; when the two opposing teams were galloping madly in pursuit of whoever held the precious slaughtered goat, it was usually Ubashi who was able to wrench it from Asaray or another opponent and throw it into the goal. But in most other games Ubashi would be nervous when facing his brother and thus lose the contest.

Ubashi's moment of glory came when some years before, in an official ceremony and with great pomp, his father was installed as Khan by the Russian Governor of Astrakhan province and he himself as Vice-Khan. The leading members of all the ulus and some five thousand Torghuts had been present to watch the inauguration. Governor Zhilin had come to the appointed rendez-vous with the senior officers of his garrison, a company of grenadiers, three regimental cannon and the regimental band. He had read out the Empress's edict and her proclamation to the people, whereupon the Khan and Ubashi had sworn oaths of allegiance. For days they had feasted. The Oross had honoured them with magnificent presents and the Khan had received a much decorated standard. How proud Ubashi had been! Asaray, as the Khan's younger son, had not been singled out for any honours.

But Ubashi's triumph over Asaray did not last long, for even without that high-sounding title it was Asaray that people still looked up to, not to him.

When Ubashi met the young Dürbet princess Badma, he knew at once that she could give him the peace and harmony that he longed for. She reminded him of the atmosphere which reigned in Tseren-Jalla's household. Not only was she a girl of great beauty, but she radiated vitality and, though still very young, she seemed wonderfully secure and composed, in direct contrast to Najitana's permanent state of anxiety and frayed nerves.

As if a fairy had touched him with her magic wand, gone were his fears and sombre premonitions. He was a man of extremes and now exuded so much gaiety and charm that Badma, it seemed, was not entirely indifferent to him. He pictured her as his wife and his precious possession. Her presence would enable him to overcome the dark forces which assailed him.

But he was fated to be struck with disaster. He was at the horse-races with Badma and they were engaged in lively conversation when Asaray approached them and met Badma for the first time. Ubashi saw their eyes lock and at once felt that something irremediable was happening. Inexplicably his tongue was suddenly tied and Asaray took over the conversation. Badma's eyes were shining and Ubashi stood helplessly by while his brother cast a spell on his girl. From then on Asaray courted her assiduously and conquered her.

When it became clear that there was nothing he could do to separate them the blow had left him totally unnerved, and in his misery he had withdrawn into himself. Asaray and his demons had won again and would have their way with him from then on. He had never hated anyone with such virulence.

Then one day a wonderful thing had happened quite unexpectedly: Asaray had been taken hostage by the Oross and carried off to their capital. Since then Ubashi had felt more free but had hardly dared make full use of his freedom yet; he had been unable to cast off completely the spell that hung over him. From lack of leadership the affairs of his ulus had gone from bad to worse. The Khan had severely reprimanded him.

Now he was determined to assert himself as the leader of his people and as the future Khan. He would make his ulus prosper more than anybody else's. With Asaray out of the way, he was sure he could even win Badma's favour again.

* * * *

VII

In St. Petersburg, Asaray woke up one morning, startled by a terrific noise such as he had never heard before. The sound of heavy gunfire? Was it war? His classmates, who were also awakened, laughed and rushed to the windows: the ice on the Neva was breaking up with earsplitting thunderclaps; this went on for many days and nights. The broken floes went on their way to the sea, loudly colliding and climbing on top of each other, forming mountainous piles of ice, then crashing down again and racing ahead towards the sea. There they would vanish soundlessly and painlessly. If only he was one of them..

Spring was a short season; it was followed by a beautiful summer but Asaray still languished in depression. One sultry summer-night, while he lay tossing in his bed, he decided that life could not go on like this any longer. Noiselessly he got up, packed a few belongings, sneaked out of the dormitory and managed to slip past the sleeping night-guard unseen. He made directly for the stables. His mare started to neigh but he quickly threw a cloth over her face, stroked her and whispered to her to keep quiet. He led her through the darkest parts of the grounds he knew so well; he was lucky for there had been a celebration of someone's Patron Saint's Day and now everybody was fast asleep. He was riding away to freedom! Asaray felt drunk with light-headedness.

The cannon of the citadel had not yet announced the day's end and he crossed the long bridge of boats across the Neva well before its drawbridge went up to let the nightly shipping pass through. The hooves drummed a triumphal march on the wooden surface. When he passed the Admiralty, the naval guards payed no attention to the young cadet of the land forces, and he rode on through the sleepy city, meeting only an occasional carriage with late revellers on their way home or to yet another party. Everything seemed easy, no obstacle on his way! Soon he found himself out of town on the Novgorod road.

The sky was moonless and overcast, the darkness suited him well. Asaray felt elated. Free at last! Going far, far away: home! No more tiresome studies, no more stupid discipline and obedience to the hated Oross, no loneliness, but working with his own people, in his accustomed role of responsible leadership.

When he approached the first post-station he made a detour to remain unseen. It was a risky manoeuvre and he had to be extremely careful. His mare seemed indefatigable, so he let her rest only a short while and pushed on. The following day the weather was clear, the air brisk, and Asaray felt safer now. The next night, too, all went well. But again he had to go in a roundabout way and this time he got lost. Endless fields of golden, ripened wheat, some of which had already been harvested, stretched out on all sides without a house or a living being to be seen anywhere. Asaray became worried and tense. Every unfamiliar sound or sight seemed a menace.

If they found him here, there was no hope for him. He could expect the most severe punishment.

That evening a heavy rain started to fall and in desperation he decided to knock at the door of the first izbá that he came across. It was a miserable hutch and looked even more dreary when he looked inside. An old peasant-woman had opened the door for him and invited him in. In the dark interior, lighted by a single candle and further obscured by a dense, acrid smoke, he distinguished with difficulty four other adults, three children, and two goats, all of them as thin as a lath. The old wrinkled couple and their two sons and daughter-in-law welcomed Asaray with smiles so genuinely warm and kind that he felt deeply touched.

But they had bad news for him. A detachment of cavalry had passed by and searched their cabin for an officer-cadet on horseback, a Kalmyk about eighteen years old. The soldiers had threatened them on pain of death not to hide this fugitive if he should appear. But they would, of course, give him shelter, the old peasant said quietly. There was a hay-barn in which his horse could be hidden. Asaray's first reaction was to leave immediately so as not to endanger these people but they insisted that he should not refuse their hospitality, that it was still too dangerous for him to go outside.

To his embarrassment they wanted to share with him their watery soup, the only food these utterly poor people seemed to have, but then he remembered that he still had some loaves of bread in his bag. At first they refused but hunger overcame their modesty.

"How is it that you have no bread, you who are living in the middle of this ocean of wheat?"

"We are deeply in debt to our master, sir." It was the elder son who answered. He looked over fifty and worn out but said his age was only thirty-five.

"We have been terribly sick, one after another. Therefore, even though we went on working while we could hardly stand on our legs, part of the crop was not harvested on time. Our children are too small to do much work for the landlord although they also did their best. Now we have to make up for his losses and give him our private share of the crop as well. He demanded at first that I give my wife to him but we decided that we'd rather starve than sacrifice her."

Asaray was astonished. He now looked a little more closely at the young mother and noticed that in spite of her emaciation she was still a beautiful woman. The dark shadows under her eyes made her look even more attractive.

He spent the night there but slept little. His host's story had touched him deeply, and there was also the nagging fear that his pursuers might find him here. That would be disastrous for himself and for his protectors. The next morning before leaving Asaray offered them a gold coin so as to relieve some of their misery. The effect was startling. The old peasant and his wife shrunk back from him as if he were the devil tempting them to commit a mortal sin. They put up their hands to ward him

off when he held out the coin and explained how much food it would buy for themselves and their family.

“Oh no, Your Honour, we thank you a thousand times for your kindness, but gold is not for us, not for our kind. We are but poor serfs, sir. There is nothing that we can call our own, everything belongs to our master. The land, our little cabin, these goats, even our children, our grandchildren and we ourselves are his.

“Gold? For us? Oh no, sir. Thank you, thank you sir, no, no, no! Oh Lord, have mercy upon us!”

The tears burst from their eyes and they were on their knees, crying, “Oh, dear sir, you are too good to us!”

When he was on the road again he looked out for the search-party. Were they lying in wait for him? He now felt even more tense than before. Around every corner that he turned, behind every bush which he passed his pursuers might appear. He knew he was in grave danger but he was also determined to leave this country come what may. His disgust with Russia had been deepened by the tale of those people who had sheltered him.

At the next post-station there was no way of leaving the road without getting stuck in the swamp. Here, to his horror, he was confronted with a quite unexpected obstacle. A coach had just drawn up from which a tall uniformed figure alighted, who called out to him, “Hullo, Prince Asaray, come over here!” Asaray made as if he had not seen or heard him, and spurred his horse on. The officer shouted to his men: “Stop him!”

The fierce Cossacks blocked Asaray’s way but he drew his sword, hit one of the men on his right arm, and was about to hack his way through when he received a heavy blow on the shoulder which paralyzed his arm. His horse was hit in the belly and reared with fright. Asaray had to admit defeat. They took him to their commander, who wore the uniform of the illustrious Gardes à cheval. Now Asaray recognized him: this gentleman had a son in the Cadet Corps and often came to watch their horseback riding and dressage training.

“What on earth are you doing here, and why the devil did you attack my men?”

“I am on my way to visit friends. These Cossacks had no right to block my way, so I fought them. I had not recognized you, sir. I am sure you will now let me pass through.”

Count Chernyshev looked at him sternly: “I do not believe one word of that.” When he noticed how much Asaray had been affected by his failure to escape and saw his bleeding shoulder, he relented. He had a weak spot for this young man whose horsemanship he much admired.

“I did not like what you were doing to my men. But come into the post-station, you rascal, where we shall treat you and the other wounded.”

Later he chuckled: “Just visiting friends, eh? In Moscow perhaps? I am sorry, but it is my duty to take you back to school, you must know that. However, I shall put in a word for you. Come, get into my coach.”

Asaray sat down, angry with himself and the world around him. This was a cruel disappointment. Everything was going so well. Why the hell did he have to run into Chernyshev here? Back in St. Petersburg, Colonel Chernyshev handed him over to the Director of the Cadet Academy but he did keep his promise: since he was an intimate friend of the Director and had spoken well of him, Asaray was given a relatively light punishment. General Philosophov was, as Asaray had guessed correctly, less severe than he looked.

Even so, he was locked up in a cell once again, all his hopes dashed. Bitter thoughts of his failed escape, of the gloomy present in a hostile country and the even darker future alternated with sweet memories of the past. How happy he and Badma had been. If they had not been forcibly separated, they would have had children by now: a son, a daughter?

The pain of what his father had done was never absent. Had it been sheer vanity or lust for power? Why should any decent Torghut want to receive a title from the Cross? Was there much difference with what the Dondukovs had done? He simply failed to understand why his father and his half-brother Ubashi had allowed themselves to be heaped with ‘honours’ by the Russian Governor when they were inaugurated. That had been only two years ago, and now here he was, locked up by these same Russians — and his father not lifting a finger to free him. How unfair it all was.

There was a rustle of silk, a familiar sound which pleased him. A hand lightly touched his shoulder in greeting and his spiritual tutor, the venerable old lama Lobsang-Norbu, sat down with him in his cell. Asaray was not really surprised, as if he had expected this all along.

“Your father has not abandoned you, Asaray! He has tried many times to obtain your release, but in vain so far. Still, you should not give up hope. Be patient, you will return home one day, I assure you.”

Asaray heaved a deep sigh. “Thank you, reverend sir. I was despairing, I am ashamed to say. I am so happy you have come. Are you well, sir?”

“Yes, I am in good health, and so are your parents and Badma who miss you very much. I have come here to lighten your heart. Your strong will and fighting spirit deserve respect but what you now need above all is patience and endurance.”

They prayed together and sat in silence for a long time.

“You have greatly comforted me. But when you will be gone, everything will seem so hopeless again. What am I to do?”

“Do you remember what I told you once? When you are worried or upset, ask yourself first whether you have a problem that you can solve. If you can, take the necessary action. But if you cannot, it is useless to worry.

“And there is something else. Very often, when people are concerned and anxious, they tend to move nearer to the problem which caused their anxiety, and so it will loom ever larger. They will find that if they look at it from a greater distance, the problem itself will shrink. This is a simple but valuable truth.

“Look at your situation realistically. There is no way of escaping from here at this time, and of discharging your duties as a prince towards your people. Remain faithful to them and to your religion but do not make superhuman efforts to isolate yourself completely from everyone around you.”

“If I do not isolate myself, sir, I risk losing my identity. Then how can I ever fulfil the gods’ command?”

“Be patient, Asaray, you will be allright as long as you keep your ultimate aim in mind. If you do that, the day will come for you to act in accordance with your Mandate.”

Lobsang-Norbu was gone as suddenly and silently as he had come. During three weeks of solitary confinement Asaray had ample time to ponder what his tutor had said. He began to see more clearly how bitter and fruitless his life would be if he continued to flee what was obviously his fate, his karma — the result, that is, of his actions in this and previous lives. His attempted flight had not been the act of a man; he had been childish.

When he prayed, he discovered that he could do so without the presence of Shakyamuni’s image. Asaray understood at last that he could not keep up a struggle on all fronts. He should resign himself to his new life which was only a temporary one after all, while keeping faith in his long-term purpose.

Once this decision was made he felt already free spiritually and a great burden lifted from his heart. Perhaps he had been chosen to live among the Russians in order to prove that he could still remain a Torghut. For if he could, right here in the Russian capital, then his people on the Volga could.

VIII

Soon after Asaray had found such peace within himself, his confinement was ended and he resumed his classes. One sunny day in autumn, while he was walking by himself in the garden, a boy came up to him and asked timidly:

“Asaray, can you come with me for a moment? There’s something I want to show you.”

It was Andrei Miakov, who had never teased or denounced him, would never toady to his teachers as so many others did, and in many ways seemed to be a good sort. He was a quiet, shy boy of slender build, with a round, cheerful face and curly blond hair. After some hesitation Asaray went with him to a secluded corner where Andrei produced a small parcel: “This is for you.”

What could it be? Was it a practical joke? When he looked into Andrei’s frank blue eyes he decided to open it. It gave him a shock of surprise and sudden joy, for he held in his hand a statuette of Shakyamuni which, though it could never replace the one Badma had given him, the one that had been stolen, was just as beautiful.

Wide-eyed he asked: “Where have you found it?”

“I hunted all over town until I saw it in an antique shop on the Nevsky.”

“Is this really for me?”

“Of course it is. I hope you like it,” Andrei said with a happy smile.

Asaray was speechless. Taking Andrei by his arm he walked slowly back with him. Someone had cared enough to notice his misery and had looked everywhere for an ‘idol’ for which his own religion had nothing but contempt, until he had found one and had purchased it for the foreign boy who shunned them all! He also realized that now he had learned to pray alone, the seemingly irretrievable Buddha had returned to him. It was a miracle which he could hardly believe.

He discovered that Andrei was direct and natural, innocent of any prejudice, and they soon became fast friends. Asaray’s decision to accept life as it came and Andrei’s cheerful manner and warmth changed his outlook radically. He gradually began to regain his good temper. Though he was still suspicious of his other schoolmates and was given to furious outbursts of temper when he felt he was wronged, he realised that his judgement of his fellow students had in many respects been too uncharitable.

Before, when they had been cheerful, he had despised them; now he could often join in their laughter. He had drawn a dark veil over his eyes which Andrei had lifted, at least partially. Russia now did not seem to be quite such a hostile country after all. Still, he had no kindly thought for the Russian authorities who kept him hostage and whose purpose was to make a ‘Russian’ of him. He would, of course, never knowingly allow himself to be used by them but if he now showed himself more ‘Russian’ and less hostile, they might let him return to the Volga sooner.

While Asaray’s world was growing lighter and more cheerful, the days were becoming shorter and darker. When he looked out over the Neva in the early

morning, the universe was bathed in a livid haze and drained of all colour. The Winter Palace and most of Admiralty Isle, on the opposite shore, had evaporated into the air. Snow began to fall and the buildings on the near shore trembled behind a curtain of fine flakes. Later, when it stopped snowing, a grey vapour rose up from the river towards the low-hanging clouds which somehow seemed to dwarf people crossing the bridge. To Asaray's recollection the Torghut horsemen looked much taller; was it because the clouds always sailed high, very high over the steppe?

November came and the first drift ice floated down the great river from Lake Ladoga. From the Cadet School the students watched the long pontoon bridge comprising twenty-one boats being taken apart; it only took two hours. Six days later, when the Neva had frozen over, it was put together again on the ice for the convenience and greater safety of people crossing the river in their carriages.

Soon innumerable footpaths and carriageways were cleared on the ice and marked with fir trees or branches, their fresh dark green contrasting pleasantly with the immense, dazzlingly white surface on which a multitude of carts, sledges and horse-drawn carriages — their wheels replaced by runners, glided to and fro.

The Neva and the Gulf, now as smooth and level as a bowling green, was crossed by a road which was cleared all the way to Kronstadt, complete with firs, guardhouses and, of course, a tavern.

Asaray marvelled at these sights which he had failed to see during the previous winter. Belatedly he realized that he was in the midst of living history; it seemed strange how these sites he learned about in his military and history classes could be used so banally for everyday commerce.

At the Cadet School, as everywhere else, all the windows were sealed in double frames. The dormitories remained ice-cold but in the study and recreation halls logs burned and crackled in the high stoves covered with Dutch Delft tiles, giving off an even warmth and pervading the rooms with the pleasant fragrance of birch and pine.

Two of their officers, nicknamed 'Spider' and 'Porky', invited a number of students from Asaray's class to visit the famous winter market on the Neva. Asaray was delighted to be included in the group; it meant his self-imposed isolation was over and that he was now accepted by the teachers and students as one of their own.

They went down onto the frozen river and walked along the 'market street', more than a mile long and lined on either side with an inexhaustible store of provisions — sufficient to supply the entire capital, they were told, for the next three months. Asaray had never seen anything remotely comparable. Spider wanted to hurry them along but Porky took his time and continually slowed them down.

It was a miraculous sight. There must have been thousands of carcasses of oxen, sheep, hogs, pigs, geese and fowl as well as a profusion of game — partridges, pheasants, moorfowl, woodcocks, and every kind of frozen food, all offered for sale. The larger quadrupeds, their hind-legs fixed in the snow and their heads facing inwards, were grouped upright in circles. They towered above the rest and occupied

the last row; next came the smaller animals, intermixed with poultry, game hanging in festoons and heaps of fish, butter and eggs.

The boys' eyes goggled. Porky enjoyed himself hugely: he had the important and pleasant task, as a supply officer, of ordering an enormous stock of provisions for the Cadet Corps staff and students. He loved to haggle but the merchants still seemed to make good bargains for he was presented with all sorts of delicacies for himself and his colleague, which disappeared in large bags brought for that purpose and carried by the students: the choicest sausages, steaks, herrings and caviar. Porky's face, a round, pale moon with two dark dots for his eyes (he had been called 'Moonface' originally, but 'Porky' had stuck), was shining with delight:

"Look at all this!" he exclaimed. "These delicious foods come from every part of the Empire and even abroad. This veal here, the very finest, comes all the way from Arkhangelsk. Do you know where that is?" he asked Asaray, who confessed he had no idea. He liked Porky and his unabashed enthusiasm for the material things in life.

"Oh come, don't you know? A port in the far North on the White Sea. And the caviar, of course, comes from Astrakhan but I expect you know where that city lies!"

The entire Neva had been taken over by the population as if it had been a permanent part of the city's network of streets. It was a lively scene with the constant movement of people walking, skating, or tobogganing down artificially constructed ice-hills, nimbly trotting horses and colourful sledges flying past. No wonder the Embankment was crowded with spectators. Even Lieutenant Spider shed his stern and officious manner and become more affable. They were all in a jolly, festive mood.

Asaray had enjoyed the outing itself and the friendship he was establishing with the other students. Perhaps St. Petersburg did have its attractions after all.

* * * *

Once a month, on a Sunday, the Cadet Corps held 'open house'; parents, relatives and friends were allowed to visit the students. One bleak Sunday morning his cousin Alexei Dondukov came, looking sombre:

"I bring you sad tidings, Asaray, about your father. One of our messengers, just back from the Volga, reported that the Khan has taken on a Buddha form."

Asaray was stunned. When he was able to collect his thoughts, the first thing he realized was that Alexei, though himself a Christian, had not said "died" but had, out of piety, used the lamaist expression.

When Alexei had left, Asaray sat down in a quiet corner of the garden to collect his thoughts. His heart went out to his mother who would be in great sorrow and need his support now. It was unthinkable that he would never see his father again, and he, who thought he hated his father, now became painfully aware how much he had really loved him. The chance to tell him so was now irretrievably lost. Nor would there be an opportunity to clear up all the uncertainties and doubts which had gnawed at him for so long.

Asaray knew how much his father had yearned for the freedom and independence which he had not been ordained to obtain. How he had dreamed of 'having no lord over him'.

He clearly remembered an evening when his father — Asaray had still been a young boy — was entertaining guests. The Khan had invited a famous minstrel to recite from the great Mongol epic of Jangar Khan:

“The mighty Lord Jangar lived in the divine country of our forebears, Jungaria and the Altai, the ‘centre of the world where on the summits of the snow-capped mountains that glitter in the rising sun, tens of thousands of Buddhas live and where, if one looked in the direction of holy Tibet, six thousand golden-yellow temples stood out against the black storm clouds’. In this enchanted world, ‘surrounded by the dazzlingly white peaks, in the verdant valley of Shikürlük on the shores of the Bumba Sea, rose the great golden palace-ger of the sacred Lord Jangar. Hidden behind gardens of sapphire, in boundless valleys, his ten million subjects led carefree lives sharing all they had, for the difference between mine and thine they knew not.”

These majestic opening lines had evoked a profound nostalgia in the audience which had even affected Asaray, young as he was.

Lord Jangar, the minstrel had further sung, possessed a magical horse which could speak, a ‘beautiful sorrel whose unclipped mane resounded like violins and harps’; from his thick tail ‘a five-coloured rainbow spread across the sky; his eyes were like the morning star and he spoke the tongues of the ten zones’.

One day the horse warned his master that a dangerous, evil giant was preparing an attack against him. Thereupon Jangar Khan and his knights went to fight the giant monster, who was assisted by fierce female demons. As soon as one of these was killed, she immediately turned into two live demons; and when these two were slain, they became four...and so on. It was a battle no one could ever hope to win. The epic went on for a long time, and whenever Asaray looked at the audience, he noticed that the faces of the listeners, bent towards the singer, were alive and glowing in the light of the fire, and that their expressions changed with every line and every inflexion of his voice.

“Yet”, the poetic tale had continued, “in spite of the superior enemy forces, Jangar Khan miraculously did win this fight, brought back to life the knights who had been killed, and together with them built a high and magnificent palace-tent in which he lived ever after.”

“There was no lord over him,” the poem had ended, “there were no enemies who could attack his flanks, and he lived happily and in well-being”.

All had been moved by the story and the poetry. That night, while the guests were taking their leave, Asaray had stood with his father outside their khibitka to see them off, and when they had all gone, the camp fell silent. The lamps went out one by one

and the moon rose high over the steppe. The Khan looked around him and Asaray had heard him say softly:

“There was no lord over him...”

Asaray had been profoundly impressed. When he grew up, he prayed that the gods might favour him; that he might become strong and powerful, and help his people to become independent, so there would, save for their own Khan, be no lord over them.

Now his father was gone without having achieved his dearest wish. Who would succeed him as Khan? Probably that weakling Ubashi! Or perhaps the ambitious but capable Tsebek-Dorji who had a strong claim?

When he was summoned to the Collegium of Foreign Affairs and officially informed of the Khan’s death, he immediately applied for permission to visit his home. Counsellor Kuropatkin gave him a look of sympathy but raised his hands:

“I find this most regrettable, Prince, but I see no way to grant you even a compassionate leave at this moment, for you are in the middle of an important semester and the journey would take too long. The school would never allow it.”

“To the devil with that school! You can’t deny me a visit to my homeland to take part in the mourning for my father and settle affairs! You do not have the right to do this. It is inhuman.”

“I can’t tell you how much I regret that decision, Prince Asaray, but there is nothing I can do about it.”

Something in the Counsellor’s manner told him that even this high official did not have the power to let him go back to his family. Asaray was very angry and grieved. He was up against a brick wall and would have to accept his fate once again. It was a cruel world. Fortunately, however, their days were crowded with studies and exams, and these soon absorbed Asaray completely.

Some months had gone by when Yuna, Alexei’s younger brother, visited him on a Sunday in early spring. He had smuggled in some letters, he said, which he would give him when the guard was out of sight.

“You know who brought them? Our cousin Prince Tsebek-Dorji!”

“Tsebek-Dorji? I know him very well. What in the name of Tsong Khapa is he doing here?”

“He is gone already, but he stayed a week with us, and we are all exhausted. This dear, distant cousin is a very forceful and demanding personality, as you probably know.

“He came to ask the Russian government to appoint him as Khan. Tsebek-Dorji’s claim is after all nearly as strong as Ubashi’s, since he is a direct grandson of Donduk-Ombo Khan.”

Asaray was eager to see the letters from home but they could not be handed over yet with the guard watching.

“Did Tsebek-Dorji believe he could persuade the Russians to appoint him Khan after my father’s death?”

“Yes, he did, but he failed. It seems the Russian authorities had already decided that Ubashi would take your father’s place. The shrewd Kuropatkin did not want to send Tsebek home empty-handed, though, and also saw a good opportunity to weaken Ubashi’s position. Following his advice, the Government decided that the Khan’s Council, the zarga, will from now on be chaired, not by the Khan, but by Prince Tsebek-Dorji! So the Russians can play them off against each other, though that does not worry our cousin Tsebek. He sees this as a first step on the road to power. His spirits were undaunted and he seemed supremely confident of the future when he left here.”

The news that Ubashi would be appointed Khan, though it was to be expected, still gave Asaray a bad jolt. How could that faintheart rule the Torghuts and defend them against Russian encroachment? If only Ubashi could be freed from his fears and total lack of confidence. Damn the Russians who knew how to exploit Ubashi’s vanity! It made Asaray furious to think that he who had been entrusted with a special Mandate, was rotting away in a Russian school. He realized he would have to give the Cross greater credit if he ever came to deal with them or plan strategy against them. They had often made clever use of the disunity and struggle for power between the leading Kalmyks.

Even if he ever returned to the Volga, any attempt to fulfil his task would meet with resistance not only by the Russians but also by Ubashi, who was set up against him by that fake shaman: in the background he saw the ugly face of Kirin, with his small shifty eyes, who appeared to hold Ubashi and his mother Najitana in thrall.

Before the two young men realized it, visiting hours were over. When the guard had his back turned for a moment, Yuna deftly slipped the letters into his cousin’s hands. Asaray quickly put them under his shirt. As soon as he found a chance to be alone, he opened the letters: one from his mother, one from Badma, and the third from his old tutor Lobsang-Norbu. So far he had only received one letter in all from home — a short one, containing only a few bare facts, because most of its contents had been censored. Probably his own letters had also been heavily mutilated if not suppressed altogether. These were the first which had not passed the censor.

Badma’s letter was not long but heart-warming. It told him in her own special way how much she longed for him to return, that she loved him more than ever and hoped fervently that he still loved her. He saw her sitting at her writing desk, her head bent, her hand moving slowly to draw the strong, regular lines. If he could surprise her just once and be near her!

Tseren-Jalla who wrote a beautiful, flowing hand, had filled many pages with the Mongol script that was so familiar to him — she who had taught him to write. In her letter she wrote that his father had died suddenly, in the saddle, while riding home from a visit to friends. He had been anguished, the letter explained, by Asaray’s continued captivity and the lack of news, and he had blamed himself for what had happened. It had greatly distressed the Khan that Asaray, his favourite son, was

sacrificed but he had been proud of the moral courage this son had shown in accepting his bitter fate.

She hoped that the Oross would not do her son any harm, that he would keep a stout heart and would profit from the opportunities of learning which the Russian capital offered him. In the Torghut country, she wrote, Asaray was admired for his courage and had become a national hero!

Jalla sounded brave and full of energy:

“After your father’s death, Asaray, I have taken over the reins of my own personal ulus and yours, and I am glad to tell you that they are doing very well. You were planning to lower the taxes for those whose income was insufficient. This has now been done. And you need not worry about your own income, for there is enough revenue left.

“Badma is a great help. She comes here regularly and I am doing all I can to keep her cheerful and happy. That is not too difficult, since she has such a sunny nature. She loves you very fondly and will wait for you, however long it may take. We think of you always, with sorrow but also with optimism. We often sit weaving and knitting all sorts of garments, we laugh together and have a lot of fun. Badma and I are convinced that in the near future you will be with us again. What a feast we shall have!”

The letters awoke conflicting emotions in him. Badma’s message and what his mother wrote about her, made him infinitely happy. It gave him new hope that they might yet be re-united. It was also a relief to know that she and his mother were well and that their ulus prospered.

But it distressed him that they were so far away and he had no prospect of seeing them. It also grieved him that he and his father had known so little about each other’s real feelings while the Khan was still alive. His sadness was mixed with shame and regret at having distrusted his parents, and bitterness about the Russian high-handedness which had prevented them communicating with one another.

His mother was right about his income from the revenue of his possessions. In fact, together with the allowance paid by the Russian government during his stay here, it had piled up into a tidy sum for he lived frugally and spent little.

He had hastily read these letters in between lessons and waited until recreation time to sneak away and read his tutor’s message. Lobsang-Norbu spoke in terms of the highest praise of Asaray’s father. He wrote that Asaray’s sacrifice had served a purpose: to save the peace, and that his people knew this. He reaffirmed that Asaray would be back one day to fulfil the mandate given by the gods, to preserve the nation’s soul and identity. How and when, Asaray wondered, was he to accomplish a task of such importance? He, a pawn in the hands of the Oross...

The old lama further wrote that the candle of his worldly existence was slowly burning up and that he was preparing for his transformation. His letter ended with these words of Shakyamuni:

“Grieve not for me, but mourn for those who stay behind,
bound by longings the fruit of which is sorrow...”

“Even were I to return to my kindred by reason of affection,
yet we should be divided in the end by death.

The meeting and parting of living things is as when the leaves are parted from the trees. There is nothing we may call our own in a union that is but a dream...”

So he might never see his beloved teacher again! The thought affected him greatly, and he prayed that they would meet in another incarnation.

Asaray read and re-read the letters until he almost knew their contents by heart. A damp breeze from the river entered through the open window where he sat, unable to keep the tears from his eyes, tears of melancholy and of frustration. There was a faint gurgle of water trickling down from the roof and a rustle of beeches and elms. One day all of this water would dry up or freeze and the leaves, now young and eager, would wither and fall. Was life worth living when there was nothing one could achieve, nothing one could own, and when all beauty and wisdom, friendship and love were bound to fade and perish? When everything was nothing but an illusion, a dream?

Andrei came in silently and laid a hand on his shoulder. Asaray looked away.

“I am acting like a woman, Andrei, but I cannot help it.”

“You are not. But do you want me to go away?”

“No, please stay: I need someone to talk to. I received letters from home which made me both happy and sad.”

He told his friend what they had written.

“I should feel terribly sad too, Asaray, if I were in your place. To be cut off from your own people right now must be unbearable.”

Andrei sat down and looked into his friend’s eyes:

“Asaray, look at the positive news too. Your mother and Badma are well! Your fiancée is waiting for you! The least you can do is to match her courage and patience. Did not the lamas teach you that a few years is nothing? In less than two years you will be back home.”

Asaray smiled through his tears:

“You’re right, of course, Andrei. I simply must pull myself together and be patient. Isn’t it ironic that I, a lama’s pupil, should be told this by a Russian?”

Andrei grinned: “Philosophy has no national boundaries.”

The daily routine of the Cadet Corps kept Asaray fully occupied. In the end his thoughts of home receded into the background, for the Cadets were drilled remorselessly. With the letters that Tsebek-Dorji had brought the flow of news from the Volga steppe ended. No further message reached him, neither from his relatives nor from Lobsang-Norbu or anyone else.

IX

On clear days Asaray could look out from the Cadet School across the Neva, where the vast baroque block of the Winter Palace — the seat of Russian power — rose in all its splendour, with its freshly painted green and white walls, and white columns of magnificent proportion, but so massive, arrogant and predominant as to look hostile.

Often, too, when a haze hung over the immense river, the palace indistinctly loomed up in the distance, a dark, mysterious blur, and one could only guess at what policies the fertile mind of Catherine II might possibly conceive or adopt. Would they affect his own people, the Oirat-Kalmyks in any way? Her foreign policy aims were said to be expansionist but they were directed westward, towards Poland and, furthermore, she was still fully occupied consolidating her position internally.

When Asaray had first arrived in St. Petersburg he had had difficulty comprehending what autocracy was; it was something awesome and unknown to his people and he could see no sense in it. Here in Russia the monarch who lived in that immense Winter Palace apparently could do as she pleased and no-one could oppose her.

Asaray, who had left the Volga in the summer of 1764, had now completed his second year at the Cadet Academy but this was the first Russian summer he hoped to enjoy. In such beautiful warm weather he could not help his festive mood.

“At last we’ll be free to spend a long week-end at home — just four days only, aren’t they mean? We’ll have to make it worth our while. Why don’t you come and stay with us?” Andrei asked.

“I’d love to. It will be a wonderful change.”

“All right, our coachman will come for us tomorrow.”

Andrei’s parents had a large mansion on Peterburg Isle, shaded by tall trees, where Andrei’s mother, a cheerful woman with twinkling blue eyes, warmly welcomed them. That afternoon they all sat around the samovar in a garden filled with flowers, under a dark beech-tree, and after tea went for a stroll. Calashes drove by with smiling girls in white and pink summer-frocks with blue or white sashes. In the nearby park elegant ladies with wide-brimmed hats and brightly coloured sunshades could be seen walking at a leisurely pace. The sunny days were lengthening into dreamy, luminous nights. The evenings in Andrei’s cosy home were devoted to long discussions, card-games or music. It was easy to feel at home here and Asaray enjoyed the weekend which ended much too soon for him. After the long summer of 1766 and a short autumn, yet another winter arrived with howling blasts of desperately cold winds blowing almost constantly from the north-east and bringing immense quantities of snow. Outside the school building the level of the snow rose higher every day along its grey and dirty walls; the whole world seemed to have become thickly padded and silent; the occasional bells of a passing sledge accentuated the unearthly stillness.

But this season also had its attractions: a greater cosiness — the lamplight, the log-fires — and companionship. There were evenings of poetry and music. Though day in, day out, the sky was dull and grey, this, rather than inhibiting the Peterburghers, encouraged them to throw themselves with even more energy into the gay round of parties and balls. It was not, of course, given to the cadets to participate in such festivities, except for an occasional collective outing . Sledges and carriages sped day and night through the city in all directions. In front of the mansions and palaces stood numerous carriages with their coachmen, icicles hanging from every hair of their long beards. They sat there, enveloped in sheepskins and fur bonnets, but almost frozen to death, patiently waiting until at daybreak the revellers appeared, laughing and unsteadily.

When the cold, dark winter came to an end, the glorious spring suddenly exploded all around them. A mild breeze dissipated the fog that hung over the Neva. The mighty river freed itself of its icy armour which broke into innumerable floes. The snow melted and everywhere water was splashing and gurgling, rushing from the roofs and gutters. The streets were turned into pools of slush and water as trees and plants broke free from the wintry grip in which they had been held: tender green leaves and the first shy flowers appeared and under a delicately blue sky the birches put on their spring-dresses of fine, greyish-green down which contrasted with the dark pine-trees.

In the Cadet Academy, as in all the houses and palaces, the windows were unsealed; there was a sweet breath on the wind and mild, fresh spring air streamed into rooms which had grown stale and dusty over six months. The coaches and carriages which had sailed silently on their runners through the snow-hushed city all winter were re-fitted with wheels, and now all the bright, cheerful noises of spring filled the streets: the clatter of hooves and wheels on cobblestones, the chirping of thousands of birds, the clear voices of schoolchildren in their dark-blue uniforms, passers-by joyfully greeting each other, the shouts of street-vendors.

For the third-year students, regulations were now a little less strict and they were allowed short walks outside the school compound. Whenever they were free Asaray and Andrei went to the next street-corner whence came the most tantalizing smells. Here they bought steaming, freshly baked rolls and delicious, thin waffles, hot and filled with whipped cream.

As the years went by Asaray came to understand Russia better, but for a long time nothing of great importance seemed to happen in his private life, which remained one of constant expectancy. No letter ever arrived from the Volga. But it wasn't only letters from home that he missed; it was more complicated and he couldn't explain it. He was forever waiting, but for what? Would he ever know? He was always painfully aware that he was an outsider and a hostage, and that his fate hung forever in the balance. His living conditions had improved greatly but he kept longing for his

former, normal life. Or was he? Was it finished forever? Was Badma married to someone else and Ubashi an hostile Khan? The thought of the Oross manipulating the new Khan worried Asaray and revived his dislike of the Russian authorities. It was always there, even though he had now found quite a few friends here.

The senior students had little cause for boredom. In their numerous free hours there was always something going on to divert them. Andrei and Asaray were inseparable; they were great organizers of games, fancy dress parties and theatrical plays, or just boyish pranks, while Petrusha could be counted upon as a catalyst at any party.

All kinds of sports were practised. Andrei was good at running, boxing and dancing, but Asaray won easily at wrestling and he was of course a champion rider. Andrei, on the other hand, cut a rather sorry figure on a horse, and sometimes even before he was in the saddle: he once tried to mount his horse too fast and slipped from his stirrup, so that his face hit the saddle hard and he fell. When it became clear he was not injured, there was general laughter and Asaray remarked:

“I think we ought to find you a nice donkey.”

“Please do, I can just see myself in the full uniform of an Imperial Cadet, sitting on a donkey, and swearing my oath of allegiance! Will the Empress be able to stop herself from laughing out loud?” Andrei could also be quite serious. He told Asaray more of Russian history and culture than was to be found in books, and explained his simple religious faith in a way none of the theology teachers had done. Asaray was filled with a mixture of scepticism and wonder by his story of Christ, born among men as God’s son and suffering for them on the Cross, then miraculously resurrected after his death.

“Through His suffering,” Andrei explained, “men can be cleansed of their sins and forgiven.”

This, however, was more than Asaray could comprehend.

“The lamas taught us that it is our task to overcome our defects and liberate ourselves. No God can do this for us. What you call sins, Andrei, we see as stains on our mind about which we do not have to feel guilty and for which we do not have to be forgiven. What matters is that we make every effort to remove those stains and strive towards Enlightenment.”

“We Christians are perhaps more realistic then. We do not believe that man can do this all by himself. Only by the grace of God can we find salvation.”

Asaray thought it strange that a god should have to sacrifice his son and have him nailed to a cross and killed in order to save mankind. A cruel father! But he did not want to offend Andrei and said nothing more.

He was to stay with Andrei and his parents during the Easter holidays. Bur first, on Easter Eve, they all went to attend Mass at the Kazan Cathedral. Before going in Andrei explained:

“You must not be surprised to find the interior of the church dark, almost without any light, for this is the eve of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ who died on the Cross.”

When they entered the great cathedral it was indeed enveloped in near-total darkness. It seemed to be crammed to capacity but ever more people were pushing their way in. A catafalque bearing a gilded, open coffin stood in the centre. It contained the Plashchannitsa, an effigy, painted on silk, of the dead face of Christ. The only light in the huge cathedral was from the few candles surrounding the bier around which black-robed priests chanted the mournful Office for the Dead. A feeling of deep sorrow and strong tension in the hushed, densely crowded cathedral had risen to an almost unbearable degree.

From behind the doors of the iconostasis now came the sound of soft voices singing “Your resurrection, Christ the Saviour”, then the singing swelled, the doors opened and the gold-crowned Metropolitan and his priests in their magnificent festival vestments of cloth of gold and silver, blended with the brightest coloured velvets and embroidery, emerged with lighted tapers from the still darkened sanctuary, and the clear, joyous bass of the Metropolitan rang out:

“Christ is risen!”

At once the choir burst into the beautiful, triumphant Easter anthem:

“Christ is risen, through his death has triumphed over death, and given life to those who were in their graves.”

The holy procession proceeded through the church. The worshippers standing in front lit their candles and passed the light on to the others. In minutes there was a blaze of light all over the cathedral illuminating the thousands of ecstatic faces. Every time the priest repeated with his extraordinarily deep bass the sacred words of the Resurrection, the choir responded with jubilant, passionate hymns.

This was the sublime moment for which the believers had waited a whole year. Deep joy and total enchantment had taken possession of them all. Asaray looked sideways at Andrei’s radiant face. There was a general embrace with the Easter greeting:

“Christ is risen!”, and the answer, “He is truly risen!”

Asaray received kisses on both cheeks from Andrei, from bearded bystanders and soft women’s lips. Again the choir sang its heavenly, exultant hymns of endless joy:

Paskha the holy has now appeared unto us,
Paskha the new, Paskha the mystical,
Paskha the venerable, Paskha Christ the Saviour,
Paskha the pure, Paskha the great,
Paskha of the faithful.
Paskha that opens the gates of Paradise...

For the young Torghut Prince it was a profound personal experience. The lamaist service could be highly dramatic but it never scaled such dazzling heights or plumped such depths as this Russian Easter: the sudden change from dismal gloom to brilliant light; from the laments of the funeral service to the exultant strains of the Easter Mass; from death to Resurrection.

As one who believed in reincarnation he should not find it extraordinary that Christ was risen from the dead, yet he was deeply moved. What impressed him most was the intense joy, the boundless happiness of the congregation, old and young, rich and poor, all bound together in a common brotherhood, all equal before God in joy and fellow-feeling he had never seen at a lamaist religious service at home.

He lay awake long into that night, thinking about this. Next day, all those things that followed, the Easter cake, the gaily coloured eggs, the companionship and general rejoicing of Easter Sunday, the quiet holidays, all of it was most agreeable, but he could not forget the drama and the jubilant mood of that Easter night in the Cathedral. But most of the time they were now working hard for their crucial examinations. The end of the school term was approaching and with it came great excitement. They both passed the exams and Asaray especially was overjoyed for he had now completed his three years' course:

"Andrei, just imagine, I shall at last go home. I can't wait! I shall miss you, of course, but I cannot stay another week, you understand that, don't you?"

"Of course I understand! I'd feel the same."

They talked about their plans for the future.

"I'm absolutely sick of schools and I want to start some real work," Asaray said emphatically.

"Naturally I'm not very keen either to stay on at the Academy, but since these extra years are required for becoming a public servant, I have no choice. You know I hope to join the diplomatic service one day."

"I'm sure you'll be very good at it."

"I've no idea. But wouldn't it be wonderful if I had to handle Torghut-Kalmyk affairs, and you with your knowledge of our country would be chosen as the Torghut negotiator? Between us we could settle all problems!"

Their euphoric mood did not last long. When Asaray had waited in vain for the happy news of his release, he asked for an interview with Kuropatkin. He confronted the wily Russian official with his earlier promise and asked when he could leave St. Petersburg.

"I am afraid you must have misunderstood me, Prince. That is most regrettable but..."

"Misunderstood?, Asaray interrupted him. "Do you deny having said that I need only finish this three years' course?"

The Counsellor's face was an angry crimson now:

“Yes, I do! In fact I only hinted that your case might be reconsidered after completion of these three years. And now I must further disappoint you. It has been decided that you are to continue your studies for one or two more years. Only then will your case be reviewed but I must stress that your return home will then again be a possibility only, not a certainty.”

Asaray was horrified. In his extreme anger and indignation he could not control himself. He stormed and raged:

“You miserable bureaucrat! I hate you and your glib talk. Stupidly, I had thought you were a gentleman who kept his word. How wrong I was! I never want to see you again, Kuropatkin, go to hell!”

Without waiting for the Russian’s reaction he left the room in a fury. Another two years at this school! Two more years — entirely useless ones for him, since they were meant for prospective Russian military officers and civil servants.

He went straight to the stables of the Cadet Academy and went for a long ride to cool his nerves. A strong wind was blowing, the grey waters of the Neva splashed against the wood of the pontoon-bridge and screaming gulls skimmed low over the waves. He left the city far behind and galloped along the shore of the Gulf of Finland, occasionally stopping to allow his horse to catch its breath.

Asaray was restless and feverish. Several times he took his sharp Mongol dagger out of its sheath. He was tempted: one quick cut and it would all be over. And nobody would mind. Or those few who might would soon forget. Shied at something his horse suddenly jumped neighing wildly, as if it had sensed his tension. Asaray calmed her down, patting her neck and, thus diverted, he abandoned his sombre plan.

Feeling badly hurt and disillusioned, he withdrew from all social activities and would not speak to anyone except Andrei who shared his indignation. For nearly two months Asaray led a hermit’s life. He was bitter and in a dreadful temper but almost everyone understood and respected his feelings. Often his outbursts were directed at innocent teachers and students; even Andrei was not spared.

Yet with infinite patience Andrei gradually succeeded in arousing his friend’s interest again in their day-to-day life. In the fifth grade the students enjoyed still more freedom: they were allowed to organize games or stage plays on their own, and even to spend their holidays with friends or relatives. This fourth year at the Cadet Academy therefore passed more quickly.

Andrei invited Asaray to stay with him on his parents’ estate. He had spent weekends in their city house but this was entirely different. A whole month in the countryside! The friendly wooden house, surrounded by a large veranda, seemed to smile at them when they arrived in their carriage and Asaray was again welcomed most warmly by Andrei’s mother, whose round face and clear-blue eyes radiated joy

and heartiness, as well as strong determination. This stout, cheerful woman, her blond hair plaited around her head, immediately made him feel at home.

He shared a lovely room with Andrei, where he browsed among old Russian children's stories. Sonia, Andrei's ten year old sister, knocked on the door and asked whether he would come for a walk with her. Andrei's sister of ten was a delightfully spontaneous creature. She leaped rather than walked and her long curls danced up and down. Her sister Natasha, four years older, was quite different: shy and reserved, with sleek hair and melancholy eyes, she withdrew to her room where she devoured one book after another.

Andrei's father, a born story-teller, possessed an endless store of old Russian tales, which filled many an evening. Boris Mikhailovich was the absolute master of the house. The tufts of hair standing out on either side of his shining bald pate and his dark bushy eye-brows were awe-inspiring, especially when he was angry. When crossed or lied to, he could fly into the most terrible rage, and his blue eyes would darken or — worse still — light up, an unmistakable portent of an approaching thunderstorm. Despite his temper, they all loved him.

The Miakovs were a close-knit, truly Russian family, and they enveloped Asaray in genuine warmth and love. Here, on this estate, he came to know Russian ways more intimately than in the fashionable, 'modern' and 'western' atmosphere of the city.

Asaray noticed that their peasants stood cap in hand waiting outside for their master on those rare occasions when they were allowed to see him.

"How servile these serfs are!", Asaray said to Andrei. "When our poor, common people want to see the Khan, they just come into his ger without asking, even if he has visitors, and they laugh and chat noisily. Our ways are very free and easy."

Andrei was surprised. In Russia such a thing would be inconceivable, he said. On another occasion he told Asaray that when he was a young boy, a barchúk (little master), he had played every day with the children of the domestic servants and the village serfs, had directed their play and ordered them about at will. That was as it should be. But now Andrei felt slightly ashamed when he remembered that quite frequently at the village school his innocent serf classmates had been caned in punishment for his pranks and unruly behaviour. He had not thought much of it at the time and accepted the established practice as normal.

One day a pretty serf girl, or rather young woman, crossed their path, greeting them and giving Andrei a strangely defiant look. When Asaray asked who she was, his friend told him:

"She was the first girl I had. My father chose her and ordered her to share my bed as part of my education. That was some years ago. Since then he has married her off to a cripple, a rather nasty man unfortunately but a good woodcarver who turns a tidy penny. She hated it but had to obey. Seeing that she was a strong and competent peasant girl my father obviously thought she would make him a good wife and housekeeper."

Asaray was amazed. "Do they have children?" he asked.

"They did not have any but my father arranged for her to become pregnant. She has just had her second child, a boy too. You know, Asaray, serfs are a valuable commodity here on the land; my father always says we cannot afford to let them go around childless."

"They are total slaves then!" Asaray exclaimed. "Even our prisoners of war are freer. We do not prescribe their marriages and sexual life for them."

Andrei smiled. "But are marriages normally arranged by the parents in your country?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well," said Andrei, "the peasants here are often too dumb to do this for their children. Therefore my patriarchal father, whom they consider their *bátiushka*, performs these duties for them. We are like one big family, you know, and they all love and fear my father."

In the evenings their aunt Anna Timoféevna who had a lovely voice, would sometimes sing, accompanied by Andrei's mother. Asaray entertained them with Mongol stories and riddles:

"After ten thousand sheep have gone to pasture, a stout white ram awakening from sleep rises and goes to join them..."

"Any idea what this is? Asaray asked.

"It is a lot of sheep," Andrei remarked, "but a white ram? Oh, I have got it: the moon among the stars!"

"Very good, and almost right: it is the morning star."

Asaray came up with another riddle:

"This may be a difficult one:

There came a toothless guest; they cooked boneless meat for him."

No one could find the answer.

"A baby being breast-fed."

They all shook with laughter.

"You Torghuts are crazy people. Whoever would think up such a thing?"

"There is more to come. Let me see what you make of this one:

A sorrel horse behind a fence of birch trees."

When they looked blank, Asaray opened his mouth wide, and Andrei's sister Sonia exclaimed: "A tongue!"

"Yes, how clever of you, Sonia. Now this:

The enclosure is white, the sheep are black."

Andrei was also learning fast:

"Something to do with paper and ink?"

"Exactly. We shall make you an honorary Torghut yet."

The Miakovs were always entertaining many guests. Of course Peter (Petrusha) Golovin, fellow-student and close friend of Andrei and Asaray, also came to stay. The

three of them regularly had interminable discussions about politics or philosophical subjects. While Andrei, warm-hearted and sincere, was always the idealist, Peter was down-to-earth, practical and often cynical. Asaray usually found himself somewhere in the middle. Petrusha was witty, and handsome with his wavy dark hair and jet-black eyes set in a slightly sardonic face, his manly, curved nose, and erect carriage; he was also an excellent rider, even in Asaray's eyes. At the Cadet School he was the life and soul of their wildest parties, but here, in deference to their host, he and Asaray were on their best behaviour and Andrei would not dream of displeasing his stern father.

"Have you seen the new ukaz?" Andrei burst in on them. They had not. The excesses of serfdom, that curse of Russian society, had frequently been a subject of discussion. They agreed that those serfs who were sent or bought to work in the new mines and factories were the ones who suffered most.

"Look!" Andrei exclaimed. "This new ukaz says that no serf can henceforth be taken away from the farms to work in industrial enterprises except of his own free will and under an agreed contract. This is truly a revolutionary step! Think of what it will mean to the tens of thousands of peasant-serfs who have been put to work under appalling conditions in the Urals and Siberia."

"I don't agree," Petrusha interjected with a sceptical air. "These newfangled French ideas of freedom and equality are no good in our country. A serf's 'own free will'! It makes me laugh. The Russian peasant is a lazy drunkard, ignorant and superstitious. You know as well as I do that he will never work unless he is forced to. If serfdom (mind you, I'm not referring to the excesses of serfdom), if serfdom were abolished or reduced — Heaven forbid! — and the knout thrown away, those stupid serfs would not only cease to work but would riot and rampage. The existing order would be seriously endangered. It is absolute rubbish to think you can make them behave well through kindness."

Unfortunately, in this last respect the young Count was soon to be proved right. The decree had an electrifying effect on the workers in the Siberian mines, who laid down their tools and rose up in fury against their hated masters. The rebellion had to be put down by the military, and the decree was never executed.

It became clear that Catherine was now discovering the difficulty of translating into practice her earlier good intentions. But in other respects the Empress had taken the reins firmly in her hands, it seemed. The Russian bureaucracy was heavy and slow but she managed to inject some energy into some of the higher ranks. She was known to be a well-read woman and under her rule education, literature and the arts were encouraged.

Asaray dearly loved his Russian friends, but even so his nostalgia for the life of the nomads was never quite absent. He still did not receive any message from the Volga, and his own letters, including the fervent love-letters he addressed to Badma,

remained unanswered. To his distress he found Badma's image fading in his memory.

For Badma life had lost its lustre and extra vibrancy when Asaray had left. She lived for the day when he would return. She had become very close to his mother whom she had come to love almost as much as her own parents. Tseren-Jalla was a strong personality, whose inner calm and serenity matched Badma's but who could also, like her son, infect you with a sort of pent-up exuberance. They shared a feeling of loss but whenever they talked about him, they would put heart into each other. Never, even when year upon year went by without news, did they completely abandon hope.

After her husband's death Tseren-Jalla had not minded being burdened with so many new responsibilities; on the contrary, they stimulated her and she became a very efficient administrator of her own and Asaray's ulus. Badma proved an enormous help to her. Yet, in spite of their efforts, general conditions in the steppe were deteriorating.

"I can't understand why our leaders are simply letting the Russians establish more settlements. If Asaray were here, he'd know what to do. How can we survive if our pastures are ploughed under by foreigners? We are only weak women, but is there nothing we can do?"

"Weak women? You are such a good horsewoman and better with a rifle than many a man. I think you've already done a great thing — far beyond the call of duty — organizing and training your group of young women."

"Well, that isn't much really. After all, we only got together to nurse and help families in distress. And then we started a regular programme of riding and shooting practice as well, that's all."

"You are too modest. Your Amazons have helped ward off attacks by Kazaks⁴ and Kuban Tartars on several occasions, and very efficiently too! You remind me of a famous Amazon, the beautiful and heroic Anudara, wife of our great Oirat Khan Galdan, who fought the Chinese armies a century ago. But she was killed in battle, a fate you will, I hope, avoid."

"Oh, Mother, I'm far from being heroic. I'm only trying to be of some help. The Oross have become ridiculously suspicious about our activities. As you know, we have explained that our purpose is purely humanitarian. We cannot, of course, fight the Russians. But is there nothing else we women can do?"

"I'm afraid there isn't, my dear, unless we start an uprising. If this process continues and conditions get worse, the people may well take up arms against the invaders. I had hoped that Tsebek-Dorji would react more strongly, but with a weak-willed Vice-Khan and a number of indecisive elders his power is limited. There are only a few nobles who would actively support him."

"Yes, it's exasperating. If only Asaray came back, he would know what to do."

"The Oross are having a bad influence on our life-style, even in minor ways. You told me the other day that Russian merchants are selling vodka or brandy, and

cheap, factory-made goods to our people. As a result there is more drunkenness and our arts and crafts are being neglected. It may soon become hard to find a good silversmith.”

Badma sighed. “I wonder what Asaray would do. I suppose he would imperturbably follow the course he had laid out for himself. We often discussed his plans together. I was surprised that Asaray, when only eighteen years old, seemed to know exactly what his duties were.”

“Oh, he was remarkably idealistic. He wanted to eradicate poverty which should not be allowed to exist in a nation as rich as ours, he used to say. But he sometimes had an air of ‘knowing all’ which could be irritating to others.”

“Hadn’t he? And he had a roguish streak in his character, don’t you think? With people who were easily irritable, he would often overdo it on purpose. Being younger than he, I did not suffer from his superior attitudes. I must have gazed up at him with eyes full of wonder and admiration at that time.”

“That can’t have been very good for him, Badma!”

“No doubt! But seriously, mother, what do you think of his idea to widen the field of education to everyone? Is it feasible?”

“Well, I wonder whether he has ever given any thought to the practical difficulties. Not only would one have to find enough volunteers to teach the basic subjects,” Tseren-Jalla remarked, “but many children of the poor have to help their parents earn a living. How can you expect these parents to send them to school? These problems in themselves are difficult enough to solve. But the greatest obstacle to Asaray’s scheme that I foresee, is the opposition with which it will meet from the conservative elders and most of the lamas.”

“You are probably right. But if we started in a modest way, we would find out soon enough where the difficulties lay. In your own ulus we need not fear much obstruction, do we?”

“Why do you insist that education is so important?” Tseren-Jalla asked.

“Didn’t Asaray ever talk to you about the necessity to preserve the identity of the Torghuts?”

“Identity? No, I can’t remember that he did. What did he mean by that?”

“He meant that we must not merely defend our political independence, we must also remain ourselves. We were in danger, he said, of losing our way of life as free nomads, our language and religion, our closeness to nature.”

“And what did he propose to do about it? He was keen on our men undergoing regular military training, as the Mongols did in the old days. But surely that would not be enough?”

“That’s just it! I was coming to that. General education was essential, Asaray said, for the preservation of our identity. At the time I thought he was exaggerating, but now it looks as if he might have been right. Anyway, you know how he was, always exploring some new horizon, always looking ahead. Only, when he had hardly started

carrying out some of his plans he was taken hostage.” Badma’s voice was hoarse with emotion.

Tseren-Jalla was pouring tea and her hand remained suspended in the air. She looked at Badma in wonder and put the teapot down.

“It is strange how even a mother who thinks she knows her son, can overlook the most essential things. I see now that he had a definite pattern of action in mind, and I begin to think that he may indeed have been right. Let us get on together with the work he wanted to do, Badma, in a modest way at first, as you suggest. I shall be glad to do my part.”

Tseren-Jalla said this but it irritated her that her future daughter-in-law knew more about Asaray’s plans than she herself.

As a starter they established a primary school for about sixty illiterate children of poor families. All went rather well, in spite of some obstruction by conservative nobles and lamas who disapproved of schools for the poor ‘black bone’, which would — they maintained — only give them wrong ideas.

But imperceptibly some friction grew between the two women. Now that Badma came to know Tseren-Jalla even better, she discovered that this charming woman, who had such a strong character and was loved by all, could also be annoyingly dominating and self-willed. Badma was by nature accomodating, but she was an independent woman who did not like to be ordered about, even if it was done in a calm and friendly manner.

Asaray was by far the best cavalryman of the Corps and had done well in his studies during this last, extra year. He had therefore every hope of being allowed to return home, despite the wariness which his previous experience of the Oross and their machinations had cultivated in him. After four years in Russia he was feeling the tug of his duties more than ever and he longed to see his family, Badma and his own people again. Impatiently he waited for an answer but several weeks went by before Counsellor Kuropatkin summoned him.

The spacious office, unlike other Russian government offices sumptuously appointed, was as dark and gloomy as before. What on earth had happened to the bald-headed, deceptively ridiculous-looking official who spoke Mongol so well? He hardly recognized Kuropatkin because those friendly, yet shrewd, dark eyes looked at him from under a wig which seemed much too big for him. He was also dressed more elaborately and addressed Asaray more formally than on previous occasions — and in Russian:

“Please accept my sincere congratulations, Prince Asaray, on the successful completion of your studies. It is most gratifying!

“As for your request to return home, it was, of course, duly forwarded to the higher authorities. I am now in a position to inform you that the highest power in the state, Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Catherine II, has dealt with it personally and taken a decision which I have the honour to convey to you. Your request, my dear Prince, cannot be granted yet,” and when he saw Asaray’s face fall, he added:

“...to my sincere regret, for I know how you must be longing to be with your people. But it is for a reason which deserves the warmest congratulations:

It is Her Imperial Majesty’s personal wish that you should serve for some time in one of Her most prestigious regiments, the Horse Guards, as the principal riding-master. You have been appointed a full lieutenant! As you will be aware, Prince, you could not possibly refuse such a signal honour. Besides, it is an Imperial command.”

In utter amazement Asaray had heard Kuropatkin out, then he exploded:

“This is outrageous! I have been here four years now! You can’t keep me on a string like this for years on end! I want to go home, now!”

“Then you had better tell the Chancellor himself, Prince Asaray. Count Nikita Ivanovich Panin, wants to see you.”

It was clear the Counsellor wanted to avoid a repetition of the blazing row they had had when they had last met.

When they were ushered into Panin’s office, Asaray saw a smallish, pale man in his late forties, meticulously dressed as the perfect courtier and wearing a wig with a long queue bound by three bows hanging down his back. Count Panin, who had a pleasant, intelligent face, an indefinable look of breeding and charming manner, congratulated Asaray on his success and asked him some questions about his life at

the Cadet Academy. The Chancellor was about to dismiss him when, in his languid way and a weary look in his eyes, he added:

“Oh yes, I hear that you have been made an officer in the Guards. It is an honour which I myself have never been able to attain.”

Asaray sharply remarked that he had no intention to stay on in Russia and would not serve as an officer there. He refused the appointment and would return to his homeland where his duties lay. An ironic smile played around the Chancellor’s thin lips when he interrupted the impetuous Torghut Prince and wryly remarked:

“As far as I am aware, you owe this special honour to ‘General’, ‘Count’ — both titles were pronounced derisively — Grigorii Grigorevich Orlov, who appears to have seen you perform on horseback and to have been greatly impressed. For he now wants you to teach the Russian army all your tricks. You had therefore better address your protest to that ‘General’, whom you will doubtless meet when you are presented to Her Imperial Majesty.”

“Presented to the Empress?” Asaray asked, taken aback.

“Yes, my dear man: you are on your way there now. She expects you this morning, and Kuropatkin will take you there.”

On their way to the Winter Palace Asaray, his head whirling, was seized with panic. How should he behave? What should he say? He suddenly assumed the weight of responsibility: anything he said to the autocratic ruler of Russia might affect not only his own but his people’s destiny.

Kuropatkin wisely advised him that a word of praise for Her illustrious reign would be well received. He might say something about the famous Nakaz (the Instruction to change the existing laws) which the Empress was rather proud of having drafted personally.

What Panin had said about addressing his protest to Orlov was nonsense, of course. Even if Orlov had suggested it, it was obviously the Empress herself who had taken the decision to appoint him riding-master. Asaray had better weigh his words carefully, for an Imperial order was a serious matter.

The enormous, reverberating halls and marble staircases of the palace, the numerous paintings and tapestries filled him with wonder. Kuropatkin handed him over to a Court official, who guided him to an ante-room and, after a long wait, ushered him into the Empress’ study, where General Orlov received him. He held up his hand for him to wait for another moment while Catherine was still busy at her writing-desk. Thus Asaray could observe them both.

Orlov was a man of striking physique and large, very fine brown eyes; he wore a short wig above his high forehead and was dressed in the splendid scarlet uniform of the Imperial Life Guards. His movements were nimble and betrayed an athlete. Something in his expression told Asaray that he could be both or either a charming fellow and a dangerous adversary: his manner was suave but his eyes were hard.

The Empress was wearing a wide, high-waisted, flowing dress of heavy, sky-blue silk which suited her colouring well; its décolletage, without being immodest, showed her ivory-white skin to advantage and if the blond curls hanging down on both sides of her face were meant to give her a girlish look, this impression was immediately belied by her authoritative air.

When she rose from her desk, Orlov presented Prince Asaray. He made a deep bow and when he looked up, found himself face to face with a woman of truly impressive bearing, a dominant personality: her blue-grey, serious and clever eyes had a commanding and open gaze, her jaw showed firmness and determination. When she smiled, her eyes and lips hinted at her sensual nature. Asaray knew that this all-powerful monarch had a voracious appetite for men but she did not strike him as especially attractive as a woman; if she were a man, he thought cynically, she would certainly have a great deal of appeal for women. When she addressed him, her smile was most engaging.

“You are the first Oirat-Kalmyk student of the Buddhist faith to graduate from our Cadet Academy, Prince, and I am told you have done very well there. I wanted to meet you because I know so little about your people. During my recent most instructive journey along the Volga I did not travel far enough south to see your people. I know, of course, that you are a nation of excellent horsemen. By the way, Count Orlov (she nodded in his direction) has seen you ride and is full of praise for what he called your astonishing horsemanship.”

Asaray said he felt most honoured to be received by Her Imperial Majesty, whose fame as Empress of all the Russias was said to be greater than that of any monarch since Peter the Great.

When the Empress playfully asked what it was that she was famous for, Asaray answered:

“I have noticed that Your Imperial Majesty is loved by your people as a wise and firm ruler, a *mátushka*, who cares as a mother for her subjects. It is also well-known that Your Majesty is personally drafting a *Nakaz* which will change the old, backward laws of the Empire completely and establish true justice.”

This obviously pleased her. The way she looked at him now seemed positively inviting. Surely she was not thinking of including him in her circle of favourites? He had heard so many fantastic stories about her sexual appetites. She kept looking at Asaray in a disturbing, seductive way but her speech was serious.

The Empress confirmed that it was indeed her aim to clean out the corrupt and inefficient administration and to establish justice. There was much to be done still in Russia.

Then she asked what laws the Oirat-Mongols had and what they lived on.

Asaray explained that their legislation was based on a Code of Laws adopted by all the Mongol peoples in Asia and Europe, dating from 1640. These laws were generally considered fair and liberal. However, even with this system, if a feudal lord was

unjust, the common people were not always adequately protected. There were also poor people, some of them little better off than the serfs in this country.

The Empress nodded. Serfdom was damaging to the state, she said, for it destroyed initiative and motivation, and was bad for the economic development. The system was degrading for both the serfs themselves and their owners. It would not be easy to eradicate but she would strive to do so.

In answer to her second question, Asaray described their pastoral, nomadic way of life, how they depended on their herds for food and most other necessities, the rest being obtained through bartering. They therefore always needed vast grasslands for their herds.

Her Majesty then stated that it would undoubtedly be in the interest of the Torghuts to settle permanently in one place and to diversify their economy since they were now entirely dependent on animal husbandry. Not only would such a measure enhance their prosperity, she said, it would also in her view increase their security.

Speaking with fluency and conviction about scientific methods, efficiency and modernization, she painted a picture of a rich Kalmyk people, tending their magnificent herds while growing wheat, fruit and vegetables and netting tons of fish from the Volga. The leather industry alone would yield an immense income. They would live in spacious, comfortable houses, or tents if they preferred. The semi-annual migration would become unnecessary and they would be better able to defend themselves against attacks. If they secularized the property of the lamaist church (as she was doing in Russia with the Orthodox church), their wealth could be more justly divided.

Asaray knew there was some truth in what she said, and that counter-arguments would be based more on sentiment and tradition than on rational analysis (and he also suspected that only rational arguments would carry weight with her).

He said: "Your Imperial Majesty has spoken many words which we ought to ponder. Yet I should not hide from you the fact that my people have been nomads for many centuries. That is the way they want to live. It would be like inviting Your Majesty to leave the Winter Palace forever and live in a travelling tent, a beautiful one, but even so not to your liking.

"My people would find it extremely distasteful to settle in a fixed area and work the land. It has been tried before, as Your Majesty will know. Those few Kalmyks who were Christianized and settled in the Sarepta region, who received Russian arable land free of charge as well as financial subsidies, what did they do? Rather than tilling the land, they hired Russian peasants to do it for them! I therefore fear that such measures, if introduced among our people, would be unpopular and result in lower productivity. My people prefer their present way of life to any other, even if the system you propose could bring them greater riches and prosperity.

“About our security, Your Imperial Majesty, permit me to point out that we have so far always been able to defend ourselves and have never failed the Russian government whenever they needed our troops.”

“I own your people have served us well in war, my dear Prince,” Catherine answered. “And I do have their happiness in mind.

“But there is more at stake. I am responsible for the security of all the borders of our Empire. Under the present circumstances the Volga steppe is almost empty in the winter, while in the summer — when you have migrated back to the Volga — the area north of the Kuma, near the Caucasus, is wide open. This is not a satisfactory strategic situation, as you can well appreciate.

“Therefore, de deux choses l’une: either the Torghuts settle permanently in the Volga region and enjoy prosperity and security there, or others must do so. In that case I shall have to increase the number of Cossack outposts along the Volga and the Terek and these colonies will have to till the land in order to live. Our Empire is too thinly populated, you know. I may even have to invite more German colonists to fill the empty spaces there. You are free to choose but it would be an act of wisdom on the part of your brother, the Khan, to make your people take the right course.”

Asaray went cold as he listened to Catherine expound with compelling logic her policy with regard to his people. What solely mattered to her, so much was obvious, was not the security of the Kalmyks — which was not endangered — but of the Russian Empire. She had been extremely frank; the threat could not have been made more clear. All he could bring out as a reply was the fact that the Torghut Khan could not ‘make’ his people do things against their will and tradition. Unlike the Russian sovereign, he was not an autocratic ruler but traditionally a *primus inter pares*, and only in time of war an absolute leader.

The Empress replied that they lived in an age of new ideas and radical reforms. Even a *primus inter pares* should be able to introduce changes if he went about it wisely, for the Kalmyks were an intelligent people. Asaray’s own results at the Cadet Academy and the reports she had received had impressed her.

“I am sure you will agree with me, dear Prince, that ‘reason conquers all’. Perhaps one day, as Khan of the Volga Mongols, you will be called upon to execute those rational policies I have outlined.”

Was she holding out a prospect of appointing him Khan? There was a caress as well as a hint of dominance in her clear blue eyes.

“Your Imperial Majesty would no doubt be disappointed if I were Khan.”

“Why, Prince?”

“For the simple reason that I would act as a sovereign Khan solely concerned with the interests of my own nation.”

“But as a *primus inter pares*?”

“Yes, Madam, but there would be no Lord over me.”

“Not even a Lady?”

“No Lady either!”

She laughed and on this note she was about to end the interview, when Asaray said:

“If Your Imperial Majesty allows me, I should like to draw your attention to a personal problem.”

She nodded encouragingly and asked him what it was.

“It is this, Your Majesty: I had been given to understand that I could return home after graduation. Now Chancellor Panin has informed me that Your Majesty wishes to appoint me an officer in one of her guards regiments. This I consider, of course, a great honour. But I have been here four years already and feel I owe it to my nation to go back to work there and discharge my duties as a Prince among my people. I have stayed here much too long already. Therefore I beg Your Majesty most earnestly to reconsider the appointment.”

“Your wish to fulfill your duties towards your own people, Prince Asaray, deserves respect. But in the four years that you have been here, you have learned many things which will be useful to you and your nation. Now, in return for that knowledge, you could do us a very great service. Our cavalry is badly in need of re-organization and better training, and you will have heard that we are taking drastic measures to improve that situation. I feel that your assistance will be of vital importance. Therefore I should be most grateful if you would accept the appointment I had in mind for you. Will you please do this for us?”

She flashed her most charming smile. Asaray felt..., well, he did not quite know how or what he felt. It was highly embarrassing. The Empress had made a request, and in the most gracious way. Could he refuse? Dare he refuse? He wanted to be back home, but he suddenly wondered: did they want him there? Would his brother Ubashi, the new Khan, be friendly or hostile? He had many good friends here now; would one or two more years matter all that much? Would it not be in his nation's interest to establish good relations with this mighty Empress rather than thwart her designs the very first time he met her? And in any case, what was now a request could easily become an order. Should he therefore not accept in good grace and prepare what he might profitably take from the experience?

After some hesitation, he said with a courtly bow:

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, I shall, if it is a temporary assignment only.”

She nodded with a look of smug satisfaction (was she ever opposed or contradicted?) and wished him success.

Orlov accompanied him to the anteroom.

“You've made a very favourable impression on Her Majesty, Prince Asaray. I had indeed told her that I had watched you ride and jump, and admired your superb horsemanship. So much so that I wonder whether you would be willing to teach me also something of your art.”

Asaray thought he might as well be on friendly terms with the Empress' confidant and said it would be a pleasure.

He returned to his temporary quarters both impressed and a little disturbed by the Empress, an highly intelligent and outspoken woman, strongly determined to implement her policies. The situation in which the Torghuts found themselves looked far from favourable if Catherine decided to carry out her threats. How were they ever to cope with all those foreigners — Cossacks, Germans and who else? — who were to descend upon them from the west and the north, threatening to take over more and more of their pastures? The Empress firmly believed in science, modernization and efficiency, but what about Nature? Where were the days of greatness of the Mongols, of magic and miracles?

'The great Lord Jangar possessed an heroic, magical horse, a beautiful sorrel whose unclipped mane resounded like violins and harps...

'Jangar Khan brought back to life the knights who had been killed in the fight, and together they built a high palace-ger in which he lived ever after. There was no lord over him, there were no enemies who could attack his flanks.'

Not far from his barracks Asaray found a suitable house for a more permanent stay. His Torghut servant Gambil, having served the Dondukovs during his master's years at the Cadet School, now returned. He and a Cossack orderly, Arkhip, took care of his daily needs as best they could — and as little as they could get away with — but Asaray did not mind. Arkhip was a comic figure with a shock of reddish hair, a purple nose and a shaggy beard. Having once served a French-speaking General, whom he called 'mon Général', he invariably addressed Asaray in Russian as 'my Highness' or 'my Excellency'.

Gambil could be trusted. As for Arkhip, one could not be sure. After a while Asaray began to suspect him of being in the pay of the secret police, although what they hoped to obtain from a nitwit like him, was beyond understanding. Perhaps that was a measure of that organisation.

If Asaray had no high regard for the various public institutions in this country, he rated the political police as one of the lowest. One could laugh at their stupidity had it not been so annoying to be confronted every now and then with an atmosphere of deep suspicion. Asaray's footsteps were dogged almost constantly by the ubiquitous plainclothes agents of the several secret police agencies which spied on nearly everyone as well as on each other. Andrei congratulated him on his commission in the Russian cavalry:

"I am glad you accepted it, not only because we shall continue to see each other, but I think this could be very useful for you and your people."

"Well, that had also occurred to me. Do you remember, Andrei, our fantasies about negotiating between us an honourable Russian-Torghut treaty?"

“Thinking of what the Empress said about the security of the borders, I wonder whether the Torghuts could not permanently man a number of military outposts with mobile forces taking turns. That might go a long way to meeting Russian security requirements. Moreover, if we Torghuts defended our ‘almost empty’ steppe, that would be in our own interest also.”

Petrusha, who had joined them, said right away:

“I think that would be an ingenious solution to the problem! No-one but a cavalryman, who knows the advantage of mobility, would have thought of this. Chapeau bas, Asaray!”

At the Empress’ command Asaray was now officially appointed principal riding-master of the Horse Guards and he found himself drilling a number of carefully selected cavalymen several days a week. His best pupils were destined to be assigned to other cavalry units as teachers, in the context of the general reorganization of the army, and particularly the cavalry. He soon came to enjoy tutoring these men and watching their style improve.

In addition to his regular job he gave special lessons to Count Orlov and in this way got to know him well. Grigórii Grigórievich Orlov’s summer residence at Gachina was a madhouse at times. On his first visit there Asaray happened to arrive at the very moment when, in a cloud of dust, the master of the house was returning from a hunt. A pack of hounds, wildly barking, yelping at the top of their voices and wagging their tails, were followed by servants who had trouble keeping them on the leash. Others drove a cart on which lay a bear, two wolves and some hares. In the rear rode Orlov with a friend. Asaray was about to dismount when Grigórii Orlov called out,

“Stay where you are! Let’s all ride up the stairs: much more fun!”

The next moment the three of them mounted the steps on horseback, entered the hall and rode up another flight of stairs to one of the large reception rooms. With a wide grin Orlov welcomed his guest and introduced him to his friend, Nikolai Rostóvtsev. Several drinks, brought on silver trays, were downed before dismounting. A bath had been run for each of them; when they reappeared and dinner was announced, some thirty guests — mostly cheerful and noisy young people — were sitting down at the tables. Orlov, a giant, towered above the crowd. His large eyes shone with pleasure and animation; he was a perfect host. The young nomad prince had no difficulty in entering into the spirit of this carefree company. There was music, dancing and card-playing until the early hours of the morning.

When a servant woke him and drew back the heavy silk curtains of the guest bedroom, fountains were playing in the park. The grass, fresh and wet from the night’s soft summer rain, glistened in the brilliant sunshine. The sky had been washed completely clear of cloud.

After breakfast the men rode in a group along the shore of the Gulf of Finland, when Grigórii Grigórievich showed them a precious lacquered box which he threw far out into the Gulf and shouted:

“Let’s see who gets there first!”

His friends hardly had time to realize what was happening, when Orlov made his horse jump into the deep waters. Without a second’s hesitation they all jumped in after him. There was a strong current which pulled everyone out to sea at an alarming speed; they had to swim alongside their horses, one of which went under several times. They were in danger of drowning. The precious box was nowhere to be seen. Asaray inwardly cursed Orlov for his foolhardy action and himself for following this madman blindly.

It was a hard struggle to keep from drifting farther out from the shore, but luck was with them: they had come to a spot where the water was shallower and the current less powerful. From here the group managed, though not without difficulty, to swim ashore. Orlov was grinning wickedly, all his magnificent teeth showing, and — the devil take him! — triumphantly holding his tobacco box aloft.

Asaray frequently returned to Orlov’s large, sumptuous palace at Gachina to teach him the finer points of horsemanship. His new, highly-placed pupil was already an accomplished rider and learned quickly. It was sometimes said that his position at Court had gone to his head but Asaray always found him extremely friendly and natural. Though ten years older, Orlov often invited Asaray along on his outings. Russians of high rank could be very pompous and indifferent but this set of dashing, daring young men was the complete opposite. And what seemed to Asaray a typical Russian trait: all of them showed a total lack of concern about both the present and the future, unlike the Empress who was, after all, of German origin.

When alone with Orlov one night, both having imbibed a great quantity of alcohol, Grigórii Grigórievich said an extraordinary thing:

“The Empress is a man-eater, Asaray. I fear she may have designs on you, so beware! I myself would not mind but you might find yourself in a difficult situation.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“You do not believe me? I am not joking, you know. This is a serious warning, between friends. You don’t know this, but she had an eye on a handsome young hostage, the son of a Caucasian chieftain, and made him share her bed.”

“Really! What happened to the Caucasian hostage thereafter?”

“She dropped him after some time but he was richly rewarded with a small estate and serfs, if that’s what you’re interested in. But he was not allowed to return to his country.”

“Well, thank you for your warning. If that is the situation, why don’t you casually drop a remark to the effect that ‘poor Prince Asaray is suffering from such a nasty skin disease’? That would put her off, wouldn’t it?”

Orlov was a real madcap, a handsome laughing fighting cock, a prodigious gambler and lover, a man of devil-may-care courage, who in combat had shown an heroic disdain for death. In the past, as everyone knew, he had not shrunk from having a love affair with the beautiful mistress of his commanding officer, and even

now, as the Empress' favourite, he did as he pleased. Taking risks was what he enjoyed most. Asaray and Andrei had once watched him gamble away half his considerable fortune in one night.

In addition to his duties as riding-master the young Torghut prince was now leading his own squadron in reconnaissance and patrol exercises. He was promoted to the rank of rotmistr — captain of the cavalry; in the Guards this was the equivalent to two ranks higher in a regiment of the line. How his life had changed since his years in the Cadet Corps. Not only was he now free from the restrictions of that severe institution but the city of St. Petersburg had much to offer a bachelor with money to spend.

The young, smart cavalry officer with his 'exotic' background had become a popular figure in the capital; every now and then Arkhip would come in — "Beg pardon, my Highness" — and hand him another invitation to a ball or dinner-party. Asaray looked healthy and attractive with his dark-tanned face and colourful uniform: a gold-trimmed, scarlet shirt over which he wore a sky-blue tunic with red and gold borders; red breeches; black riding boots, and a gold-trimmed three-cornered hat. It amused him hugely when he put it on for his first parade. He thought he looked absolutely ridiculous but did not mind that. His work he took seriously, himself much less so.

More than once, when Gambil poked his nose around the door and asked:

"Will you be in for dinner, Your Highness?" and Asaray said he would not, his servant would raise his hands in despair and exclaim:

"You do not like my cooking! I am useless. Perhaps I should go home."

He had a singularly mobile face such as comedians have, his expressions encompassing every shade of gloom and joy. Looking at his melancholy eyes surrounded by hundreds of tiny wrinkles and the deep, mournful creases at the mouth, one was nearly tempted to take him seriously.

"No, Gambil, you must stay here, my friend, if only because I should forget my language if you were gone!"

And indeed he always tried to find time to converse in his own language with Gambil. He had even taken upon himself to instruct Gambil in Torghut culture and religion and often spent entire evenings reading to him from the epic of Lord Jangar — Asaray did this for his own pleasure too — or teaching him lamaist prayers.

Having been received at Court, his relationship with Orlov added to his prestige. For a hostage he enjoyed an incredible degree of freedom so that he almost began to forget his true status.

Apart from Andrei who was studying law, and Petrusha who had, like Asaray, become a cavalry officer, though in another Guards regiment, the Life Guards or Chevaliers gardes, another friend regularly joined them. He was Grigórii Nikoláevich (Grisha) Stroganov, a brilliant mind, who was forever studying different subjects and always had an interesting story to tell. Grisha had not taken a job and did not need

to. His family was one of the wealthiest in all Russia, yet he was not pampered, remaining extremely modest.

“As you know, Asaray, one of my hobbies is Russian history.”

“What isn’t?” Asaray teased him.

Grisha smiled.

“Now listen, you joker, this will interest you. I’ve been especially interested of late in the period of Mongol domination during the 13th-15th centuries. You probably know that at that time Russian Grand-Dukes paid taxes in the form of ‘tribute’ to the Mongol Khan at Sarai, the capital of the ‘Golden Horde’ on the Volga.”

“Yes,” Asaray said ironically, “and they also contributed troops to the Khan. The good old days!”

“Right, but I discovered something you may not know. It also happened that a Grand-Duke was required to leave his son as a hostage in Mongol hands. Even the great Alexander Nevsky was one of those. If history has reversed itself, could it do so again one day?”

Asaray laughed: “I would not mind!”

All of Asaray’s friends had at least one country house, on one of the islands of Petersburg or on the road to Peterhof along the Gulf of Finland. Some of them had pavilions on the beach, where one could bathe or just sit looking out over the pale-blue waters and in the evenings watching the spectacular sunsets. That was always a perfect setting for silent contemplation or one of those highly theoretical, philosophical discussions which Asaray’s friends loved and Asaray was learning to enjoy.

They were lounging in long chairs, Andrei, Grisha, Petrusha and Asaray, on the terrace of Peter Golovin’s dacha, when Grisha suddenly asked a rhetorical question, directed at nobody in particular:

“Some people seem to think that nature is stronger than reason and they advance all sorts of arguments for this thesis. But are they right? One can always find ‘evidence’ for something one believes. Perhaps it is indeed valid for primitive societies but surely, in a civilized society such as ours reason is stronger than nature?”

No-one responded. The sky was splashed with such a wealth of vivid colours as no painter had ever dared put on canvas. Petrusha went inside to order fresh drinks and when he returned broke the silence:

“What a perfectly useless theory that is! Look at that sunset: have its beauty and the emotions it evokes in us anything to do with reason? Is love, or friendship or hate, subject to reason? When has reason ever triumphed over nature? In politics, in statesmanship? Don’t make me laugh: not even there it has! Let’s not deceive ourselves, my friends, man is not rational. He is practically everything else, but rational he is not.” Andrei professed he did not know the answer but what did it matter anyway as long as we can distinguish between good and bad?

“Well,” Asaray remarked, “I do think that ‘reason’ is rather overrated these days. In my humble opinion neither nature nor reason can be proclaimed the stronger. For neither can enable man to achieve complete harmony and serenity.”

A hot debate ensued on what should be considered ‘complete serenity’, which Petrusha opened with the cynical remark:

“Come now, Asaray, you with your absurd Mongol ideas! Serenity does not exist, much less ‘complete serenity’. There’s an illusion if there ever was one. It should be our aim in life to develop ourselves fully, each in his own way. And, of course, we must not let ourselves be hindered by the morals invented by narrow-minded schoolmasters or by the fear of sinning which is instilled in us by stupid priests. Then all those experiences — love, hate, adventure, danger, gambling, drunkenness — are essential to one’s self-development.”

Petrusha took a pull at his glass. Waving his arms and raising his voice he exclaimed:

“To hell with serenity! I cannot think of anything more dreadfully boring than wasting one’s life by experiencing uninterruptedly what some lunatic hermits or monks of contemplative orders claim to be ‘complete serenity’. I’d rather be dead and buried.”

“Shut up, Petrusha, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Asaray countered calmly. “Your pedestrian ideas about self-development and self-fulfilment are far removed from what I mean. You are still a barbarian Russian at heart. If you should strive for Enlightenment in the Buddhist sense, you would be able to reach harmony and serenity through meditation and yoga practices. It isn’t easy though. I am only sometimes successful in this, but often fall back on the kind of ‘real life experience’ you refer to. For me, though, that is not my aim in life.”

From the darkened sea the empty chill of the night arose, distant and hostile. They went inside and warmed themselves with more wine and brandy.

“What now remains, my friends,” Grisha said, turning to politics, “of all those ideals we always talked about so much? Of those reforms the Empress Catherine was supposed to have planned? Nothing has come of them! Instead of abolishing serfdom she has actually given the nobility more power over their serfs. Serfdom is even being extended to the outer regions of the Empire, the newly acquired territories where men were still free. When will your people be affected, Asaray?”

“They would never submit,” Asaray interjected. “They are proud nomads, not peasants!”

“We also hear a lot of vainglorious statements,” Grisha continued, “about Russia’s greatness. But where is this ‘greatness’? While Russia becomes stronger militarily and her Empire expands, her moral and spiritual force declines.”

Andrei agreed that the soul and spirit of Russia were in danger of being sacrificed for false glories, foreign ideas and material riches.

“Ha!” Petrusha exclaimed. “Isn’t that typical of our intellectuals, always seeking ‘profound, spiritual causes’ and ‘lofty purposes’? Blind to our country’s glory, they see only decay and doom. They all speak with reverence of this mysterious ‘soul and spirit’ of Russia. My goodness, what is the use of this spirit if you are backward, weak and poor? Our country is at last on the way to becoming a great power. We are making great strides in the expansion of our economy: mines are opened, factories are going full-blast, trade is flourishing. Can’t you see, Grisha, that this is the important thing and all the rest is day-dreaming?”

Grisha retorted that without idealism and spiritual well-being all so-called realistic achievements would come to nought. They continued the debate with voices hoarse from wine and tobacco, the passion and the melancholy, until the flames of the candles lost their lustre in the first, ash-grey light of the new day.

A week later, together with Andrei, Petrusha and others, Asaray was invited by Grisha Stroganov to see a play in their private theatre. When he entered the Stroganov palace, he was directed straight from the main hall to the tastefully sculptured and gilded theatre where a number of guests were already seated. Grisha was the acknowledged intellectual in their group and it was typical of him that he should apologize for the fact that this play conveyed no message; it was just a silly little comedy, un petit rien; but then, he added, this evening was meant to be a lighthearted diversion from the cares of life.

Grisha’s dark, serious face was animated as he circulated and said nice things to the guests. He was not handsome but had a certain charm and a persuasive, low, musical voice. Andrei was already there and when Petrusha entered a little later, many heads were turned. His striking good looks and panache made him popular in society. How different he was, Asaray thought, from Andrei who was soft-spoken, gentle, quietly cheerful and kind-hearted, a dreamer and optimist.

Asaray was just wondering how they would size him up, when with something of a shock he was reminded of the difference between him and the Russians. He was talking with Madame Stroganova and her little daughter, when the girl remarked:

“Are you a...Kalmyk? People say they are ugly, but you are handsome!”

Her mother looked embarrassed and apologized. Asaray was shocked but laughed and said he regarded it as a compliment. It was not the first time he had noted what most Russians thought of his people. Their idea of the ‘Kalmyks’ was based on the few Kalmyk servants they had seen here, poor and backward drudges.

The play was indeed a very light French comedy, in a not altogether successful Russian translation, but it was amusing enough and well performed.

“These actors are good, what company is this?” Asaray asked.

Grisha looked surprised: “Our own serfs, of course.”

Petrusha then explained that the aristocracy who could afford to have their private theatres, could usually find sufficient acting or musical talent among their innumerable serfs. He winked when he added:

“All sorts of talents. Last month, at the Yusupovs’ theatre, I saw some extremely pretty female serfs who had been ordered to perform in the nude.”

After the performance guests and hosts boarded the huge gondolas, each with eighteen oars, which had been waiting for them on the adjoining river, the Moika. In these comfortable pleasure-boats the passengers let themselves be conveyed over the wide waters of the Neva. The first gondola towed a sloop carrying a choir and horn-players chosen from among the Stroganov serfs dressed in gaudy colours and hats with feathers.

It was a lovely summer evening of tender, melancholy stillness. Only the sound of lightly splashing oars, singing voices and musical instruments floated across the river. From their own and from other gondolas far and near came the inexpressibly sweet part-singing at which Russians excelled, accompanied by soulful horns and oboes or cheerful tambourines.

Sipping hot tea or cognac, they toured the huge lake of a river for hours. Asaray joined in a game of cards but ended up sitting quietly with Andrei and Grisha, just listening to the sounds. He was transported to a world he had never known.

On evenings like these he felt more at one with his Russian friends. But was he really? They might not be basically very different but there was no denying that their standards and beliefs were totally at odds with his own. As in most religions, Asaray reflected, the faithful asked to be forgiven for what they called their ‘sins’; but instead of working hard, as a true Buddhist would, to acquire merit and achieve a higher stage, they seemed to think that burning candles, kissing icons, saying prayers, and much chanting of *Góspodi pomilui* — ‘God have mercy upon us’, were sufficient to save their souls. A shallow and easy faith?

If that were so, how could there be such pure joy, such sublime happiness and utter devotion as in the Easter service he remembered so well? Asaray asked himself critically:

“What about me, a Buddhist? Have I reached a higher stage yet? Or are these just words, and is it, as Andrei said, impossible for man to achieve this on his own? Do we indeed need a Saviour? Jesus Christ? Is it only through Him that we can know God and ourselves, and that we can be washed pure?”

But after that night of stars and sounds on the Neva it was not often that his thoughts turned to religious or philosophical problems. Asaray was now fully enjoying the pleasures of this wealthy capital and his honoured status. He was leading what he thought of as an easy, pleasant and satisfactory life. There were some minor ‘love’ affairs which did not touch his heart. As time went by, he rarely felt homesick any more, and when an inner voice or the sight of Gambil occasionally reminded him of his duties and the need to remain a true Torghut, he shrugged it off with the convenient answer that as long as the Russians did not permit him to return home, he was forced to adapt himself to his surroundings.

What alternative did he have? The letters he had written to Badma and his mother had remained unanswered, so he had given up writing. Since the letters Tsebek-Dorji brought he had only received one short, heavily censored letter from his mother, telling him all was well. He was now convinced that Badma had not waited for him. She had not written and there was nothing about her in Tseren-Jalla's letter. How many twelvemoons was it now: four or even more? Badma would be married to another man, most likely have borne him children. That explained why his mother, with her usual tact, had not mentioned her. Or had the Censor erased it?

These thoughts helped him overcome the slight embarrassment he sometimes felt when he realized that he was feeling almost at home in Russia. The warm and generous hospitality of these people, their genuine friendship, their high if ineffectual idealism and eloquence, the beauty of their incredibly rich and melodious language made him admire and even like the once-hated Oross. But he also knew he would never be completely one of them and whenever he thought of this and what the future might bring, he became restless and depressed.

On the distant Volga steppe the Oirat-Kalmyks were preparing for the celebration of the ürüs -sar festival which, in the second week of the first summer month, commemorated the conception of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

As usual, this religious festival combined serious events with dancing, games and merry-making. After a busy week of preparations the lamas announced the beginning of ürüs with muted, long-drawn trumpet blasts, the blowing of conch-shells, the clash of cymbals and the beating of drums. In the large temple orgê religious ceremonies were observed.

As Yuna had predicted, Ubashi had been confirmed by the Russian government as his father's successor with the title of Vice-Khan and Tsebek-Dorji appointed President of the Council. Ubashi exulted in the power he now enjoyed as ruler of all the Torghuts and their allies, the Dürbet and Khoshut Mongols. For the first time in his life he felt he was taken seriously, that people paid attention to him, sought his opinion or favours, and honoured and flattered him; it fed his considerable vanity. If only he could win over Badma, he thought, his happiness would be complete.

But Badma was still thinking only of Asaray. However, the torment of the long, painful wait, the impossibility of communicating with him, the resulting uncertainty and gnawing doubts were wearing her down. Had Asaray been locked up by the Oross, were they torturing him, had he... died? Or was he alive and well, and perhaps even enjoying himself?

Had he indeed forgotten her? Why did she not get a single letter from him? Heaven only knew whether he was faithful to her now, or had been seduced by a beautiful Oross woman with golden hair and large, cornflower-blue eyes. And while this might be going on, her youth was wasting away. She was already twenty now. Every day she knelt down before the altar praying fervently for a sign that Asaray was still alive and in love with her.

Ubashi had not given up his attempts to win her, and sometimes his persistence made her waver. This handsome young man could look utterly miserable and lonely. Clearly he craved a tranquil, sane and secure home. As she knew him, he was not a stable person and needed a companion to give him the strength he lacked.

Here he came again, riding his splendid chestnut and looking very cheerful:

"Oh Badma, you look lovelier than ever! No queen, no princess could ever match you. Before such a jewel all things of great beauty pale."

"Come now, Ubashi," Badma said, blushing slightly and hating herself for it. "If you talk like that I should send you away! Tell me, why have you come?" she asked as they were entering her parents' ger.

"It's about the ürüs festival, of course! Don't you get excited when the greatest horse-races of the year are going to be held? And a whole week of feasting is beginning?"

Turning to her parents he said, after the appropriate words of greeting:

“I should be very happy if you and your daughter would do me the honour of coming to watch the ürüs events from the dais in front of my ger. You will get the best view from there, and my mother and I would love to entertain you all.”

“Thank you for your kind invitation. We shall be glad to come,” Badma’s father answered.

Ubashi seemed genuinely pleased and whilst having tea with them explained which wrestlers and which horses in his opinion had the best chance of winning.

The day after the religious opening ceremony, wrestling matches were held which they watched together. Najjitana, Ubashi’s mother, was unusually kind and hospitable. Ubashi was in high spirits and looked handsome in his long blue silk robe which glittered with gold and silver. Twenty to thirty pairs of wrestlers fought, all of them powerfully built but lithe and agile. Their upper bodies were bare, their wide trousers tied up high. Four referees dressed in scarlet supervised. The wrestlers advanced towards one another, each of them behind a large white sheet. They knelt down, then proceeded again. When the sheets were removed, they stood eyeball to eyeball and the fight could begin.

With wild gestures they circled each other, gripped the other’s arms, wrenched themselves free and made a grab for the head, legs or belt of the adversary. If he fell down, he would jump up again with an incredibly swift movement. They were sweating profusely, and the referees threw water over them to cool them. Sometimes it took even the most experienced wrestler a long time before he could get a proper hold on his opponent and force him down with his back on the ground, to win the match. Others were so swift that they won practically unseen.

The exciting thing about these matches was that each wrestler was given only one chance; he was wholly committed to a fight which within seconds could end in complete victory or utter defeat; and there were no comebacks, so strict were the limitations of the game. It was a thrilling experience, especially for those betting for high stakes. One could lose one’s money in a flash, almost before one knew what was happening. Badma was not betting, but Ubashi was, and he was lucky too. He said he considered this a good omen for his future happiness.

During the week-long festival there was endless feasting and drinking. It was always astonishing, Badma thought, to see the enormous quantities of roast and cooked mutton, lamb and beef that were consumed and washed down with deliciously refreshing, soured mare’s milk — fizzy and light as the foreign champagne which travelling traders sometimes sold, or with the stronger, fermented araki. As Buddhists the Torghuts should not eat meat or fish, and normally only slaughtered wounded or incapacitated animals; the killing and eating of wild animals, such as foxes, wolves and boars, was also allowed. Only the lamas followed a strict vegetarian diet.

From Ubashi's royal orgê Badma and her parents had an excellent view of the many boisterous games and of the people parading through the encampment. They sat for hours watching the brilliantly colourful throng of men, women and children in festive dress, the women's faces prettily made up. Their laughter and shouts rose at times above the sound of the never-ending, deep-toned and doleful chanting that wafted across from the nearby monastic quarter.

Towards the end of the festival came the long-anticipated horse-races. The best five-year-old Mongolian ponies had been selected for this event, wiry and tough, the fastest of their kind, and with beautiful long manes. Badma watched as they came trotting up to the grandstand where the Vice-Khan and his guests, the Supreme Lama and other nobles were seated: twenty splendid ponies mounted by young riders — boys and girls chosen for this signal honour. She looked on with special interest; she often took part in horse-races she and her girlfriends organised.

They drew up for the start, the riders standing up in their stirrups, immobile as though made of bronze. A musket shot and they were off, leaning forward over their horse's neck; their red and purple silk coats billowing out behind them, and their slender bodies nearly hidden by long flowing manes, they galloped away at an astounding pace. Each time they tore past, the hooves made the hard steppe tremble. Badma gripped her seat or jumped up with excitement, her face flushed. To her embarrassment Ubashi kept looking at her every now and then. Finally all the competitors went through the finish in a thundering gallop and were greeted with loud cheers. The winners were rewarded by the Khan, and the first prize winner was presented to the Supreme Lama.

The festivities were over and life in the camp returned to normal. The next day Ubashi intercepted Badma on her way to their herds:

"Look, Badma, it is such a beautiful day, and I have a basket full of wonderful food and drink. Let's have a picnic together. I know an enchanting place. Do come."

He looked so boyishly eager that she found it difficult to refuse. They went to a lovely valley where she had not been before. It was a warm summer day. When they were enjoying their picnic he was so charming and so much like Asaray, that it seemed for a moment as if her fiancé had come back to her in another shape.

They lay down in the tall grass, happy and contented. She had never felt so much at ease with him before. Ubashi's hand stroked her gently and she pushed it away but he came back and said softly,

"Badma, I love you, I have loved you from the moment I first set eyes on you, you know that. We are both terribly lonely. Is it a bad thing then, do we harm anybody, if we are kind to each other? I want to make love to you, Badma, if only this once, I want it so much."

"No, we can't, Ubashi. Though I like you very much, that would be wrong", and she moved away from him. But when his strong hands came and touched her everywhere, her resistance faded as her long-suppressed passion suddenly exploded.

Ubashi thought he had found heaven until at the height of their love-making she called out "Asaray!"

They parted abruptly. Furious, without a word, Ubashi leapt on his horse and was gone.

From then on she avoided Ubashi as much as she possibly could. He had been terribly hurt, she could see, but contained his anger and remained coolly correct in his behaviour towards her. Yet his calm seemed unnatural and almost ominous.

XIII

Sometimes Asaray would be seized with the horrifying fear that if the time came, he might be so estranged from his people as to be incapable of exercising his duties as a Prince. Had he forgotten his secret, sacred Mandate, to ‘preserve the soul and identity of his people’? Where was he heading? Was he on his way to losing his own Torghut character and identity? The process of change was subtle and unwitting; it gave him a weird sense of dissociation.

In spite of his popularity in St. Petersburg he realised that the life he was leading here had no purpose. And his Russian friends, did they have a purpose in life? They seemed to have one — and it made him feel envious, however vague their goal might be and however little thought they themselves ever gave to the future. They belonged, whereas Asaray knew he never quite would. His relatives, the Dondukovs, demonstrated that: they had requested permission to return to their ulus and Alexei had wanted to marry a Dürbet girl with whom he had fallen in love, but both requests had been refused by the Russian government. And they were ‘free’, ‘Russian’ princes, not even hostages.

Asaray knew he would be the eternal outsider, an exile, suspended between two different worlds. His friends were supposed to accept him as one of them, but there was at times a vague intimation that they still saw him as an alien. When he first appeared in his cavalry uniform, Petrusha had whistled softly and said, “You look almost real!” He, of course, was a Golovin and would never have to worry about his future role in society. That was also true for Grisha and Andrei.

In their many long discussions it was often Grisha who dissected and analyzed society with razor-sharp, irrefutable logic; who would boldly list its defects and their possible remedies — even revolutionary ones; who could speak with intense bitterness about human injustice; and who then — paradoxically, but like a true Russian, Asaray thought — would end on a note of predestined hopelessness or some undefined, half-glimpsed notion of spiritual awakening. It all seemed rather grand but unreal and ineffectual.

While Asaray sat musing, it had grown dark in his room. Outside, the rain clattered down from heavy black clouds and the branches of the acacia tree brushed the window-pane. Gambil came and lit tapers.

“Your Highness, may I talk to you?”

He seemed upset. There was anxiety in his doleful clown’s eyes. What was the matter with him? Gambil, usually a rather placid person, had been noticeably restless of late.

“Yes, what is it?”

Gambil came nearer, as if he had a very confidential message to convey. His long nose quivering, he almost whispered:

“Please forgive me, Master, please do not be angry.”

Asaray raised an eyebrow,

“Well, speak up, man! What sort of mischief have you been up to now?”

Gambil spoke with difficulty: “I...I was so lonely here, Your Honour, it was simply unbearable, and then I met a girl, a...a Russian girl, and fell in love with her.”

It had ceased raining and a ray of sunshine illuminated a penitent Gambil, down on his knees.

Asaray burst out laughing:

“Is that all? Is she expecting? And do you want to marry her?”

Much relieved, Gambil almost shouted,

“Oh, yes, Your Highness, yes! If that could be arranged! She is kitchen-maid with a family named Arkadev, just around the corner from here. Her parents are peasant folk. She herself gets hardly enough to eat from her miserly owners but she still sends some food home whenever she can. There is starvation in the countryside and it is said that in some areas peasants have even resorted to cannibalism.”

Gambil had become quite eloquent.

Asaray had often been impressed by the fortitude and endurance of Russian women. This girl surely deserved a better life. And poor Gambil was an exile, just as much as he himself was, but without the compensations that Asaray’s position in society gave him. He would, of course, help those two.

“A kitchen-maid, eh? Could give you a hand with the cooking? All right, with a little money to buy her freedom, I am sure it can be done.”

His Torghut servant thanked him profusely, swore eternal loyalty, and withdrew. When he was gone, the thought of the old goat falling in love set Asaray off into fits of laughter.

The Russian girl proved to be very efficient, and Gambil was mad about her.

Asaray himself had had no lack of love affairs. The one which had lasted longest but was now, he felt, nearing its conclusion, was with an attractive gypsy girl whom he had met in a restaurant-cabaret. He had been dining out with friends that evening but nevertheless felt horribly lonely, a useless figure — a mood that would at times suddenly seize him. All through dinner, the gypsy violins, now plaintive, now triumphantly joyous, and the heart-rending notes of the clarinet-like tárogató, of the familiar balalaikas and cymbals, had been played with great abandon when Masha stepped onto the stage, shook her long black hair and began to sing.

Her voice had the raw, harsh quality of the dry, burnt steppe, of suffering, toil and labour. She was singing with an intense sadness of love lost, betrayed and forgotten, of the pain of solitude. And then of wild passion, fast, faster, while the violins reached a crescendo until the glorious climax was reached and she sank to her knees, utterly spent.

Their eyes met as she sang in gypsy-Russian, ‘I never meant to love you’ (polsó byló liubiátse) in that deep, throaty voice. Asaray sent a message that he wanted to meet her after the performance. She joined him in the entrance hall and took him up

two flights of stairs to her room where they drank brandy and talked. Her mother came from Hungary; she had taught her to sing and play the violin. Her father was a gypsy from the Crimea.

She would not let him undress her at first and fought him wildly. When she stood at last before him in her resplendent whiteness, her loose long hair flowing down to her knees, and he pressed her against him, she started biting him, clawing and fighting like a wild animal.

A picture flashed through his mind, a scene he had heard the elders describe, sitting around the camp-fire when he was a young boy: the great Mongol conqueror — perhaps it was Genghis Khan himself — had won a decisive battle, his enemies all captured or killed, and he sat appraising with cold disdain as the beautiful wives and daughters of slain princes and nobles were stripped naked and, their long hair hanging loosely down their backs, were paraded before him. There were some wild ones among them, it was said, who resisted desperately, biting and scratching until they were tamed.

Masha fought him for what seemed a long time, and he knew, of course, that this was just play, but finally she too was subdued and they came together in a stormy embrace. As they made love, she abruptly opened her eyes — looking at him with a fixed unseeing stare that bore deep into him and was strangely exciting.

Afterwards, she got up to make coffee. He watched her smooth movements and the ivory glow of her body. When she came, the cups were left untouched, for their desire flared up anew. As the early morning light, cool and pale, reached their bed, Masha began to sing softly, *Polsó byló liubiátse* (I never meant to love you).

When, that first time, he was leaving Masha's house, Asaray heard furtive footsteps. Looking back, he saw a man resembling Arkhip run away. Could it have been his snoopy Cossack orderly? Not likely. At this early hour he would be in bed; if he had the chance, he would lie snoring all morning. But when the droshky dropped Asaray off at his home and he passed Arkhip's cubicle, the scoundrel was not there.

Asaray took a bath, had Gambil saddle his mare and went for a ride along the Moika river and the Fontanka canal. The sunshine glistened on the foliage of the elms, on the freshly painted palaces and mansions: white and orange, turquoise blue, emerald and pistachio green, glittering gold, silver and bronze, all the colours of St. Petersburg.

And then everything was suddenly dwarfed by the vista that opened before his eyes: the wide lake of the Neva, the greatest and loveliest river he knew, flowing around the islands on which the various parts of the city are built. The soft northern light accentuated the tender, dreamy quality of the pastel hues: pink and yellow, light blue and green. Green ... Masha's green cat's eyes had captured him and pursued him even here.

Every season in the Russian capital had its own seductive quality, and Asaray came to know them all. Now there were the long, soft 'white nights' of the northern

summer, filled with mysterious, glowing light. He would sit on a terrace or in the garden with his friends for hours on end, talking, smoking, and enjoying the cool air and the quiet. Sometimes a fox or a badger would come into the garden and sit in the grass watching them intently as if absorbed in their conversation. These were delightful evenings, the noise of the construction works stilled, the dust thrown up by rattling carriages settled.

On such nights, when sunset and sunrise met and jointly painted the sky, when the day had no ending, a favourite ride or walk was along the left bank, on Milliónaia Street, to a spot near the Winter Palace, where one could gaze over the immense, shimmering sheet of water down to Vasilievsky Isle. Seen in this unreal light, this chiaroscuro, the passers-by had a phantom-like appearance.

Meanwhile things in the Kalmyk steppe had not gone well. The situation in which the Torghuts and their allies found themselves had worsened. The Russian advance in the Volga region during Asaray's absence had been steady and inexorable. Several more Cossack military outposts had been established along the Volga, where the Torghuts' herds had grazed for a century and a half; the settlers were occupying valuable pastures which they ploughed for their crops.

When an official ukaz was issued reserving all of the best land on the right bank for the Russians, Prince Tsebek-Dorji, as Chairman of the zargo, called a meeting of this Council. Being a man of action, he did not waste much time.

"Gentlemen, we cannot possibly accept this latest imperial ukaz which is in flagrant violation of the agreements between us and the Oross government. If we do not resist it, we shall be ruined. I therefore propose that the Khan proceed to Astrakhan in person and deliver a strongly worded ultimatum to Governor Beketov. We must make it clear that if the Russian measures are not withdrawn, we shall fight and drive those illegal colonists from our territory by force."

Ubashi was clearly embarrassed by this proposal. When some members of the Council spoke in support of Tsebek-Dorji and an equal number, for fear of hostilities, disagreed, the Khan quickly proposed a compromise: he would go to Astrakhan, but not deliver an ultimatum; rather, he would lodge a protest and await the results before considering any further action. This was agreed.

And now Ubashi congratulated himself on his cunning, isolating Tsebek-Dorji in the zarga. That man was throwing his weight about far too much. What business has he anyway, Ubashi wondered, presiding over the Council and ordering me around? Let him lose a few pastures, as long as mine are not affected. All he wants is to protect his own interests and at the same time provoke trouble between me and the Russians.

That is the last thing I need right now. When my father was Vice-Khan he had to wait years before officially becoming Khan, and I have been Vice-Khan for an equal number of years now, so I should be due for promotion. But the Empress will not dream of making me Khan if Governor Beketov advises against it, and he will certainly do so if I make trouble.

Ubashi's vanity was indeed badly wounded whenever he was addressed by the Russians as Vice-Khan or Acting Khan. How high his hopes had been and how he had enjoyed that ceremony at Soliánoe Záimishche (Salt Water Meadow), when his father had been inaugurated as Khan and he himself as Vice-Khan with all the pomp the Russians could muster!

There had been one tense moment when his father, that old fox, had made a short speech of thanks. Saying that Her Imperial Majesty's residence lay to the east(!), he had fallen to his knees with Ubashi and bowed towards the east, when expressing his

gratitude to the Empress. Ubashi had feared that the Russians might be angered but they had not even noticed that the Khan had actually turned in the direction of the Dalai Lama, who in the past had always confirmed the Khan's title, a prerogative the Russian Empress had usurped.

Everything had gone smoothly and the festivities had lasted several days. They had both been given costly presents, and the Khan had received a magnificent standard with his title in golden Cyrillic letters and the coats of arms of the Imperial Court, of the Russian government and of various provinces.

While travelling to Astrakhan, Ubashi considered bitterly that this standard still had not passed into his hands, years after his father's death. He had been appointed as his successor, which was fine and just, but without the title, and had been informed of the appointment not by the Tsarina but simply by a letter from the Governor.

Now it was high time that he received both the appointment and the title of Khan from the Empress herself, with all the honours and pomp which were his due. That would give him greater authority among the Torghuts, something he craved and badly needed. Indeed, he felt less and less inclined to lodge a strong protest about the Cossack settlements, which would only spoil his own chances of advancement.

In his personal affairs he had been unlucky as well. That fateful picnic had cruelly brought home to him that Badma was thinking only of Asaray. He did not stand a chance of ever making her his wife. All he could do was surreptitiously take revenge on her and Tseren-Jalla as soon as he got a chance.

In Astrakhan, Governor Beketov received the Kalmyk Vice-Khan with full honours and proved a most amiable host. He was a handsome, refined gentleman. Ubashi knew that as a young Cadet he had, when performing a play by Sumarokhov at the Cadet Academy, attracted the former Empress Elisabeth Petrovna's attention and become her favourite. Soon he had been flaunting his precious watches, diamond buckles and shirts of the finest lace. Count Razumovsky, the Imperial Master of Hounds and himself a favourite of the Empress, had promptly appointed this handsome boy his aide-de-camp, thus establishing an additional direct line to Her Majesty's bed-chamber. In this way Beketov had quickly risen to the rank of colonel without ever having seen active service. However, when he had become too intimate with the members of the Imperial boys' choir, he had lost her favour. That had happened a long time ago, Ubashi reflected, and now he held the high office of Governor of the gubernia of Astrakhan.

During their talks Beketov showed his warm understanding for the difficult position in which the Council had put the Vice-Khan, and expressed his sincere regrets when told that the Russian measure caused the Torghuts great inconvenience.

"Believe me, my dear Khan," he added (did he say Khan? Yes, he did!), "I am always thinking of your welfare and trying to defend your interests in the capital as

best I can. Do tell me now, have the Khan's ulus suffered in any way from the new ukaz? According to my information it is Tsebek-Dorji rather than you, who is losing some grazing-grounds."

The Governor looked at Ubashi with an air of confidentiality.

"That is so, Your Excellency but...", and before Ubashi could go further, Beketov interrupted:

"I met that arrogant man Tsebek-Dorji in St. Petersburg years ago."

"You met him in St. Petersburg?"

"Yes, at Princess Vera Dondukova's, when he was asking the Russian government to appoint him Khan. That was long ago but he may not have given up all hope. I have been thinking, my dear Khan, that a re-distribution of Kalmyk pastures could be both profitable to you personally and to the Russian government which, unfortunately, must establish these Cossack fortresses in order to defend the Empire against outside enemies. I understand that Tsebek-Dorji would not like such a scheme."

The Governor rose and stood near the high window with a far-away look in his eyes as if seeing the future, and showing Ubashi his handsome profile, then turned to his visitor with a beatific smile:

"You will recall that when your late father was appointed Khan, and you Vice-Khan, by the late Empress Elisabeth Petrovna, it was my predecessor, Zhilin, who performed the ceremony. I assure you that if I am to inaugurate a Khan of the Kalmyks, it will be done with such pomp and splendour that the previous performance will be a poor and bleak show in comparison. Our great Empress, Her Imperial Majesty Catherine II, knows how to reward those who are loyal to Her.

"Her Majesty has made many plans for Her Empire. One of Her dearest wishes is that for the greater security of this region, the Kalmyks, or at least the greater part of them, should give up their nomadic life and settle down permanently."

Ubashi gasped, "But that is im..."

"Wait, my dear Vice-Khan!" Beketov held up his hand; his tone had suddenly lost its softness and a steely look had come into his eyes:

"It would be most unwise to speak out against Her Imperial Majesty. You have not been appointed Khan yet. Do not forget that your brother Asaray is still in St. Petersburg and has excellent connections there. I have even heard rumours that the Tsarina might wish to make him Khan. However, I am on your side and will continue to speak in your favour to Her Majesty. But do not make it too difficult for me! "

"Your Excellency, I shall do as you please, I assure you, as long as you see to it that Asaray stays in St. Petersburg. I do not want him back!"

"That will be easy to arrange," Beketov replied. "And now, my dear Khan, it is time for us to have dinner, our friends are waiting." He laid his arm around Ubashi's shoulder and was a perfect host who warmly complimented him on all his achievements. The subject of Ubashi's 'protest' did not arise again.

Upon his return from Astrakhan, Ubashi reported to Tsebek-Dorji and the zarga that Beketov had been adamant. They were angry but at Ubashi's urging decided to wait a while before considering any further action. But what sort of action nobody knew. How could they stand up against the superior might of the Cross?

Whatever her other qualities, Masha was rather empty-headed, and their relationship could hardly be called profound. There were times when Asaray could not bear the presence of the dark, passionate and absurdly jealous gypsy girl. She railed over his other love affairs and made scenes. When he told her roughly that his life was his own and he was not accountable to her, she would storm out of the room to his intense relief, hoping she would not come back, but often enough they would make matters up, and their love-making would be the wilder for it.

But they began to see less of each other: he had countless social obligations and those minor love affairs which he could not resist. Nor were the high-level Russian friends whose life of fun and talk he shared his only male companions. The moralizing sort would say that a dark stain had come into his life; he himself, in his more sober moments, would rather call it a fever or passion. He had joined a small band of fellow-officers with whom he spent nights of carousing, gambling and adventure. Asaray had always known that gambling was a Mongol weakness, and he had resisted the temptation stoically for a considerable time.

But some Russians were even worse than his own people. One of their most notorious addicts was a dashing young officer with an attractive smile, who played cards with intense concentration, yet, however high the stakes, with a devil-may-care flourish which Asaray envied. Whenever Captain Vasilii Semiónovich Popov — Vasha to his friends — dared him take part in a game, Asaray did not hesitate and from then on was lost.

It was a dangerous drug, an all-consuming addiction: he was simply forced to go back all the time. Often, having just made love, Asaray would hurry straight to the gambling table, the scent of a girl's ardour still on his hands, and without delay sit down and play.

Oh, the delight of the first double brandy which was automatically put in front of him and followed by more, and by champagne. And the tense excitement caused by the erratic, treacherous cards, which so clearly reflected the cruel dichotomy of life itself: win or lose! Even when he had no money left, he found it impossible to stop gambling, and he soon got deeply into debt.

Card-playing was not their only pastime. The craziest bets were made. One night, having drunk a bottle of brandy all by himself, Vasha announced that he would walk a tight-rope stretched from his roof to the one across the street. Asaray laughed derisively:

“That's child's play, anyone could do that.”

“Oh really? Have you anything better to propose, my dear sir?”

Asaray thought for a moment.

“Well, look, you drink another bottle of brandy first, then do your silly trick, and if you make it, I shall give you one ounce of gold.”

There was a cold silence but it did not last long. Vasha grabbed a fresh bottle, uncorked it, grinned, and started drinking it slowly.

“And you, what are you going to entertain us with, foreign Prince?”

“Oh, I need a little more time to prepare myself. I’ll do it tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night you’ll do what?”

“If you keep it an absolute secret: I shall drink my two bottles of brandy here, then sneak into the Winter Palace.”

“The Winter Palace? Are you mad? What for Heaven’s sake do you mean?”

“My friends, have you never heard of the Winter Palace? Nor of a lady, the Empress Catherine II, who lives there? What I shall do is this: I shall steal a painting from that palace, from under Her Majesty’s shapely nose, so to speak, and bring it here for you gentlemen to admire.”

Loud laughter and clapping of knees.

“You’re drunk! You are out of your mind! You could be hanged for that or, if you are lucky, go to prison for life. You are just fooling us!”

“You will see. But do not believe that I shall do this for nothing. I want three ounces of gold, and...I shall return the painting to the palace for another ounce.”

“It’s a deal, Asaray. But don’t say we have not warned you. We shall miss you here when you are rotting away in prison.”

“Wait a moment!” Vasha shouted. “What if this braggart comes back with a tiny painting, the kind you can put in your outside pocket?”

“You don’t have to worry,” Asaray countered after a long pull at his bottle, “it will be at least 100 by 70 centimeters. In fact, I had in mind a fairly large Vermeer which hangs in the main hall, not the kind of picture they will not miss.”

The bets were laid. A cable was stretched from their chimney to one across the street after Vasha, despite his inebriety, had thrown a lasso with great precision. It was a dark night, with the moon occasionally shedding a pale light when the clouds parted. Vasha stood on the eaves-gutter, swaying slightly and holding the bottle from which he took a last gulp before throwing it away. He stood, then waggled a bit, trying to get his balance. At last he steadied himself and cautiously put his feet on the tight-rope, one in front of the other. It was a breath-taking performance. There were moments when he lurched perilously, but he reached the other roof, where he collapsed, loudly cheered by his friends and passers-by who had looked up in horror and shock at the creepy scene.

The next day, in cold daylight, Asaray soberly considered his chances of pulling off his coup and decided he did not have any. He had been in the Winter Palace on several occasions — receptions, masquerade balls — and knew what a hopeless task he had taken upon himself in his reckless, drunken mood. He had been totally mad. But a bet was a bet, and he needed the money, so he went to have a look at the servants’ back entrance of the enormous building. As far as he knew, the armed

guards usually stayed at the front and only at regular intervals patrolled the back. He noted that this occurred every hour on the hour.

That night he came back with Vasha and Tolia to keep a lookout. It was pitch-dark. Asaray had noticed a small window which he hoped could be pushed in. He screwed up all the courage he could, knowing that only with full confidence might he have a chance of success. It was a tougher job than he had expected (why were these palaces built as sturdy as fortresses?), but it gave way and he heaved himself inside. He groped his way along. With his fine sense of direction he found the main hall without much difficulty. At any moment someone might pass this way or he might stand face to face with the Empress!

The hall was brilliantly lit and he heard voices from a corner room. He had to be extremely quick, grab the painting and get away before anyone came in. He swiftly wrapped the Vermeer in a dark cloth and ran into the corridor from which he had come. In the dark he stumbled and pushed against something heavy that fell with a bang.

“Who is there?” a deep male voice came from the next corridor where a gas-lamp was lit.

Asaray froze for a moment, then hastily moved on, silently shutting the door behind him. More voices came, more lamps were lit. The damned painting was even larger than he had remembered. He had great trouble wriggling through the window with his precious load. The gilded frame was damaged, but he got out. He ran as fast as he could towards his companions and they reached Vasha’s house safely.

The extraordinary feat was celebrated with an endless number of toasts and never had Asaray enjoyed his drinks as much as now. The painting was admired by all, then stored away safely in Vasha’s cellar.

Some days later Asaray thought the time had come to return the property to its rightful Imperial owner. He went down into Vasha’s cellar, but it was not there.

“Vasha, where have you put it?”

With a nasty sneer his ‘friend’ flourished an official-looking paper which stated that Prince Asaray owed Captain Vasili Semiónovich Popov a debt of six ounces of gold. Asaray’s signature on it was forged of course. Asaray laughed; he assumed it was another practical joke, but Vasha said firmly:

“Do not pretend you’ve forgotten how much you owe me. I’m entitled to pocket the money which these rich betters are giving you for your thievery and to sell the painting. Only then shall we be even. Or would you rather I denounced you to the Palace?”

Asaray looked at him coldly.

“If that’s your game, you’re crazy, Captain Popov, and stupid as well. For whom are you taking me?”

With an unbelievably swift movement he pulled the ‘document’ out of Vasha’s hand and tore it up. Vasha went for him with a vicious kick between the legs and while Asaray staggered off balance, the scoundrel drew a pistol:

“You’ll sign a new one!”

But his opponent had recovered quickly, with a strange war cry diverted his attention, and then, with a chop that could have broken Vasha’s pulse, made him drop the weapon. A sharp blow on his neck floored the treacherous captain.

“Where is the painting?”

Still dazed, Vasha muttered,

“Go to the devil!”, but when Asaray applied an iron grip on Vasha’s arms which he had learned from Torghut wrestlers, his victim cried out with pain, and the words came out with difficulty:

“I hid it in a cupboard in the back-room.”

Asaray packed the captain’s pistol, found the painting, and left.

The palace was guarded more closely now. It cost Asaray an immense effort in which he nearly got caught, to take the heavy oil-painting back there. He could not risk hanging it in the main hall, of course, so he left it in one of the many corridors.

Whether Popov had talked or someone else, Asaray was warned by friends with ‘connections’ that the police suspected him of the theft. He was in an extremely unenviable situation, for the punishment could be very severe. He decided to confide in Grigórii Orlov, knowing full well that he was taking a huge risk but counting on Orlov’s sense of play.

When he confessed his deed, Grigórii roared with laughter:

“Capital! Absolutely superb! Tell me again: how did you do it?”

Asaray briefly recounted the event, omitting the fact that he had been full of brandy.

“The palace is in an uproar, and the commander of the guard fears for his life. Perhaps you should have kept the damned painting. Catherine has far too many of them already. But no, you did the right thing, of course. I say, you have a nerve, going back there again, cool as a cucumber!”

“Thanks for your understanding. You’re taking a load off my mind. But what do you suggest I shall tell the police if they question me?”

“Yes, that’s no laughing matter. Look, tell them you were with me at Gachina during that weekend, and I shall confirm your alibi.”

Asaray thanked him again. This was true friendship.

The same day a police inspector did come and question him closely, but when the powerful Orlov vouched for him, no more was heard of the affair — except that Popov found himself posted to a distant border garrison soon afterwards.

During this whole rather turbulent period, when every night he had lived in a feverish dream, Asaray had remained serious about his job as a cavalry-officer. His superiors valued him highly, his men adored him and had a great respect for his

extraordinary competence. When it became known that he was gambling recklessly and living it up in all sorts of ways, this had only increased their admiration for him — they were Russians and Cossacks after all. When and wherever he appeared his authority was immediately recognized.

But now he was growing heartily sick of the life he had been leading of late. All his energy had left him and he felt tired. Popov's nastiness, backed — he knew — by some of his gambling 'friends', had not so much shocked him as left a bitter taste. Orlov had only just been able to save him from the police and imprisonment. He gave up gambling.

Asaray was also disgusted with the town. A city of ghosts, it now seemed to him, eerie, unreal, where one rubbed elbows with a great many alien creatures, all hurrying past without ever a greeting, unseeing and unseen. How different the steppe and its fresh open air, how natural, pure and virginal. There, when spying a solitary horseman far away, he would ride up to him, wish him well and ask him whence he came and whither he was bound. The nomads were not secretive, and a man's individual qualities were recognised and appreciated.

He felt he badly needed a rest and a change of atmosphere. Therefore he eagerly accepted Andrei's invitation to spend some weeks with him in their dacha on the Gulf of Finland. It was a most welcome antidote to the restless life he had been leading. Weeks of doing nothing but lazing around, reading, talking, riding, bathing in the fresh waters of the Gulf and breathing the salty sea-air made Asaray feel new again.

* * * *

Counsellor Kuropatkin had long sought an interview with his boss about Prince Asaray, for whose development he bore a special responsibility. He was worried. In his opinion, many opportunities to win him over to the Russian cause had been neglected; little or nothing had been done to convert Asaray to Orthodoxy; and generally, his case had been handled with the usual, bureaucratic stupidity of the [secret]police.

For a long time the Chancellor had evaded him. Only now had he been able to make an appointment. Chancellor Panin was notoriously indolent, particularly in matters which were of little interest to him, and even when something important was at stake. Rumour had it that when he was younger and seeking ways to advance his career, friends of his had given him a golden opportunity to become the Empress Elisabeth Petrovna's lover; but apparently Count Panin had not been keen enough, for while he sat in Her Majesty's bathroom, waiting for the right moment to present himself in the bed-chamber, he had fallen asleep.

"Tell me, Alexander Vasilievich, what do you want to discuss with me? Is it this Kalmyk prince?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. Prince Asaray has been in our country more than four years now, but we have made little headway with him. Most regrettably, if you allow me to

say so, there has been no consistent policy with regard to this hostage of the Russian government. All kinds of methods have been used, but unfortunately without ever consulting me, in spite of the fact that Kalmyk affairs are my responsibility.

“It is true that Asaray has adapted himself to our way of life much better than could be expected from his earlier, rebellious behaviour, but — allow me to stress this point, Your Honour — not as a result of the treatment he has received.”

“Does it matter much, Kuropatkin, how it was achieved, as long as he’s doing well?”

“The way Prince Asaray exercises his duties as a cavalry-officer and riding-master is admirable. Unfortunately there has been a change in his private behaviour. May I humbly remind Your Excellency of my repeated recommendations to arrange for a marriage with a girl of a decent Russian family? Instead, the Secret Branch recruited a gypsy girl to seduce him, not the kind of person to make an orthodox Christian of him! She seems to have a bad influence on him, for he has started drinking, gambling and carousing with disreputable friends. May I therefore respectfully propose, sir, that you put an end to this fruitless exercise of the no doubt lower echelons of the Secret Branch?”

“Well, Kuropatkin, when I was highest authority in the Preobrazhénskii Prikáz, I already wanted to have as little as possible to do with their dirty work. I did not even want to know much about it. So I am quite happy that its successor, that so-called Secret Branch, is none of my business. However, I shall see what can be done, I’ll have a word with Prince Viázemsky.”

Thus Masha vanished from Asaray’s life as suddenly as she had appeared. Returning from his vacation with Andrei on the Gulf of Finland, he found a short note, misspelt and in her large, spidery handwriting, saying her nomadic family were on the move again. They were hoping to find employment in Vienna or Budapest, and she was thrilled at the prospect of seeing these cities. She loved him, Masha wrote, but they had better part forever. He should marry a solid and reliable Russian girl. What an odd remark for Masha to make.

Asaray felt a little hurt that she had taken the initiative, but also relieved. So Masha had gone abroad with her family. Very suddenly. He picked up the St. Petersburg Gazette but could not find their names there, which was surprising: all applicants for a passport were required to have their names listed in the official newspaper, to prevent them from leaving the country without paying their debts. But the mystery did not occupy him for long.

Badma still felt profoundly ashamed of having yielded to Ubashi, however often she reminded herself of the overwhelming physical imperative which had swamped her better judgement. Her life, which had originally seemed so simple and straightforward, was now in utter confusion. She had an anxious foreboding that in that distant city of St. Petersburg Asaray had changed, had become different from the man she loved. She also worried that Ubashi was brooding on revenge. He could never forgive her and Asaray for what they had done to him.

Badma's foreboding was not unfounded. Ubashi considered himself an honourable and just ruler, who seemed always to meet unfair opposition. He could not help feeling that dark forces were still at work, even with Asaray so far out of the way. Why was it that even in these times of adversity Asaray's ulus were still flourishing more than his?

When he had almost succeeded in conquering Badma, she had brutally rejected him. Her cry "Asaray!" still rang in his ears and tortured him. How could she prefer Asaray to him, even during their love-making? He wanted to take revenge on his brother. The least he could do was to make the Russians keep Asaray permanently in Russia.

In this mood of self-pity his mother Najjitana and her pseudo-shaman advisor came to him with a proposition. Kirin, a squat figure of swarthy complexion, whose small beady eyes seldom looked straight at anybody, was full of praise for the Vice-Khan:

"You have done inordinately well, oh Khan, since you took the reins of government. The people love and admire you, all the more so because you have been so successful in the face of great difficulties and in spite of the grave injustice which has been done to you."

"What do you mean, Kirin?"

The fake shaman stroked his short, shaggy beard and his eyes darted briefly in Ubashi's direction.

"I refer to the fact that your father the Khan has practically disinherited you. Instead of leaving almost all of his possessions to you, his eldest son, as he should have done, he left one half to his younger son Asaray. Since you are legitimately entitled to the full legacy, your mother and I are of the opinion that the Khan's will was deliberately misinterpreted or even faked by Asaray. Moreover, now that Asaray has been in Russia for years and cannot even exercise control over his ulus, it is high time that these ulus should pass into your rightful ownership."

Ubashi's long-subdued anger and frustration erupted:

"Asaray be damned! It was shameful, the way I was treated. Not only was Asaray given too large a share of the legacy but the most prosperous part. And I, as Khan, was left with a pitiful inheritance. I could never understand it. No doubt you are

right, Kirin. There must have been foul play, and I must recover my possessions. But tell me, is the time propitious?"

"Absolutely, that is why we have come to you. I have consulted the auguries, which say that you must act quickly and decisively lest evil spirits should intervene on Asaray's behalf."

Naijitana also encouraged him to lose no time, so he summoned his closest collaborators to plan a surprise attack.

Before Tseren-Jalla and her men knew what was happening, the Vice-Khan's troops encircled her camp and separated her by force from Asaray's ulus, where Ubashi's men took full control.

Asaray would never know he had been dispossessed, for Ubashi shrewdly saw to it that he would continue to receive in Russia the revenue that was set aside for him.

Ubashi had genuinely assumed that Asaray's people would feel honoured to serve directly under the Khan instead of under a captive of the Oross. But his action met with a storm of protests and expressions of indignation. It proved to be exceedingly unpopular with the people and the majority of the nobles, who reproached him for having acted illegally and unethically.

For Tseren-Jalla it was a terrible blow when the Vice-Khan confiscated Asaray's property, and appointed his own agents to administer the ulus. Ubashi sought to spread the rumour that Asaray was now working for the Russians against his own people, and that it was necessary to 'save' his ulus from coming under Oross domination. Few believed this, all were indignant, but no-one possessed enough power to oppose the Vice-Khan. For the majority of the Torghuts Asaray was already assuming legendary, popular status.

Life now became very difficult for Tseren-Jalla, forced to survive on the little that was left her, though she received many tokens of friendship, loyalty and support. Badma was indignant; she pleaded with Ubashi who received her ungraciously, and arrogantly refused to return Asaray's ulus, but hinted that he might do so if Badma became his wife. She was not prepared to pay such a price for something he did not even rightly own, and told him so in caustic terms.

Badma felt miserable and powerless. Perhaps Ubashi now realised that he could not win over Badma by threats, for he again started pursuing her with flattery and sweet arguments. But it only served to sicken her. When his pressures increased she began to ask herself in despair what sort of life awaited her, with her youth vanishing and her lover so far away. Would he ever come back? She could no longer remain passive and wait forever. If only she could find a way to journey to St. Petersburg and find out for herself whether he still loved her.

Once this thought had taken root, Badma started making surreptitious preparations for the long trip. Having packed only a minimum of clothes and provisions, she set off in a covered carriage with her maid-servant, Orbai, a pretty, sweet girl who had become a friend, and a faithful Dürbet servant as companion and

protector. Bartan had been in their service for many years. He was about thirty years old, well built, with kindly eyes and regular features save for a large wart on his chin. Only for her parents and for Tseren-Jalla did she leave a confidential note informing them of her plan.

The weather was fine and her two-horse team were happily trotting along. They spent several nights in post-stations which were not exactly comfortable, but she didn't mind. As long as she was on her way to Asaray nothing else mattered. Yet, during those long rides her feelings alternated between exhilaration and anxiety. She had no idea what would await her in the Russian capital. Surely Asaray would warmly welcome her? Or had he — a dreadful thought — found another sweetheart there? Was he even, perhaps, married to some Russian lady who looked the complete opposite of Badma? Whenever she was in a sombre mood, Orbai succeeded in cheering her up.

They were approaching the banks of the Don river, darkness was falling and there was no station in sight. There was, however, a tiny Cossack settlement with what seemed to be an inn. It looked rather unattractive but the horses badly needed a rest and she herself longed for a bed.

When they went in, she was frightened: two bearded men who looked like bandits sat there playing dice. The one who looked most terrifying was a huge bear of a man with a wild dark beard and hair all over his face. Badma wanted to turn back right away, but Bartan assured her he would find a cot for her and for Orbai to sleep on and that nobody would bother her. And indeed he secured a relatively quiet side-room for them where they lay down. The long trip had tired them and they fell asleep immediately.

Suddenly Badma was awakened by loud drunken shouts. She was horrified to hear Bartan's broken Russian spoken with a slurred voice. The fiend was drinking and playing dice with those unreliable Cossacks! She knew how easily a Torghut or Dürbet would succumb to alcohol and gambling. A fine companion and protector he had turned out to be!

Badma remembered vividly how, some years before, Sorhakhtani, a young Torghut girl with large eyes and long plaits, had been abducted by a Cossack horseman, and the story she told after she had come back, battered and broken. The brute had taken her to a gambling den full of drinking, smoking and gambling Cossacks. Since he had no money, she was, apart from his horse from which he would never part, his only asset.

What the young girl had to endure was frightful, a nightmare from which she never recovered. Night after night she had crouched on the floor, only getting up to fill their glasses. When her 'owner' lost his game, the winner claimed her. She was badly beaten when she resisted, and the stinking drunkard was on top of her, pumping furiously into her helpless body. One after another abused her, until she fainted and was awakened with cold water and a beating. Badma had never forgotten

how Sorhakhtani looked when she had returned home, limping, bruised and with one eye missing. Badma did not dare fall asleep again. She woke Orbai who, when she realised what was happening, opened her eyes wide with fright. They lay awake for some time, frozen with fright. What if these drunkards came for them? She felt completely exposed and feared the worst.

Then she overheard a blood-curdling dialogue which made her gasp for breath:

“You have lost again, Bartan. Have you any money left?”

“No, I’ve spent my last kopeck.”

“Well, we’ll give you one more chance. We’ll throw for your women, as is our custom.”

“No, I can’t do that, they are my mistress and her servant.”

This was met with a peal of cruel laughter.

“Are you crazy? Do you see these knives here? Either you throw as we told you, or we’ll stab you and fling you into the Don.”

A moment’s silence was followed by the clicking sound of dice on the wooden table.

“Yes, Bartan, that’s better. But look, you’ve lost again, so those tasty pieces of cake are ours now.”

In mortal fear Badma and Orbai stole across to a window which fortunately opened without difficulty, but the door was flung open and the two Cossacks came staggering towards them. The women were dragged back by rough hands and held up by the scruffs of their necks like the inconsequential animals they had so casually become.

Badma watched in horror as the big hairy Bear tore Orbai’s dress and dragged the clothes off her until she stood, naked and trembling before them.

As the Bear’s companion, who was even more drunk than his mate, released his grip to do the same to Badma, she seized her momentary opportunity and kicked him hard between his legs. As the man gasped and spluttered, Badma turned and ran for the window. She heard the Bear roaring and glanced back to see poor little Orbai, clasp the brute’s knees to prevent his pursuit of her mistress and biting into his exposed flesh. Badma saw him topple over onto Orbai who couldn’t move, but heard the poor girl cry: “Go! Save yourself!”

Her screams as the giant stirred cut Badma to the heart but she did not have a second to lose and could only hope that Bartan might come to the girl’s rescue but she recognized that was, at best, wishful thinking. As a result of the skirmish by the window and the ensuing confusion she had won precious seconds.

Fortuitously she found herself in the courtyard where her carriage stood. Quick as lightning but with trembling hands, she put the horses to their traces and set off through the dark night, on her way back to the Volga. If they pursued her on horseback, she would be lost. Her only chance of being saved lay in the fact that they were dead drunk.

Badma drove on, her eyes blinded with tears of anger and fright. She was beside herself with misery and frustration, realising she had to give up every hope of joining Asaray in Petersburg. That unspeakable Bartan, the weakling and coward! How could she have trusted him? Let him rot in hell with those 'Cossacks'. That had not been an inn at all, but a disreputable meeting-place of Cossacks-turned-bandits. In the border region there were many such roving, plundering irregulars, who did not recognize any authority, not even the official Cossack leadership.

Poor, poor Orbai, now helplessly in the power of those barbarians who were surely beating and raping her while she was heading home in her comfortable carriage. She felt profoundly guilty. Since Orbai was caught, she had been able to escape. Had she sacrificed her in order to save herself? But if she had stayed behind she would have stood no better chance against those brutes.

As she put more distance between herself and the scene of horror, the steady tinkle of the little bells on the hames made her relax somewhat. The horses were obviously still tired but she could not risk allowing them a breather and had to spur them on. As a woman all by herself, she could not stay in the post-stations, so had to spend several cold, hungry nights in her carriage, hoping and praying that she might not be attacked by highwaymen.

She wept with enormous relief as well as guilt when she finally spied the first Mongolian gers. Then she was soon home. Her parents were much relieved to see her back but when she had recovered a little, reprimanded her for attempting such a dangerous journey. They had spent sleepless nights, worried to death about her.

She could not get over her harrowing experience. All the time she saw Orbai's sweet face, heard her heart-rending scream and imagined what those cruel monsters were doing to her. However much she tried to drive out those thoughts and images, she did not succeed.

Now that her reckless attempt to reach Asaray had failed she lost all of her zest for living. Never had she felt so useless and never had life seemed so devoid of hope. She had so much wanted to talk with Asaray, to find out where they stood and whether there was still a future for them. She had wanted to tell him about the confiscation of his ulus; he had to be told, and it might even have induced him to return home sooner. None of this had she achieved, only the destruction of her friend.

XVII

Masha's sudden departure was soon forgotten. Asaray and Andrei's life in the capital, after their refreshing vacation at the seaside, resumed its normal course, except that Asaray now had no taste for the hectic night-life of his fast-drinking officer "friends". He studiously avoided the card-tables, knowing only too well how easily he could succumb to temptation. He preferred other company. With Petrúsha and Andrei he went to the theatre a good deal and it was also an exciting season of innumerable private parties and balls.

A brilliant soiree was given by Count Razumovsky in his sumptuous palace on the Fontanka. A crowd had gathered outside and high on the marble staircase the major-domo appeared and scattered copper coins over their heads. In confusion everybody hastened to pick up some money and run away with their prize, some had their hands trampled on, others had to jump aside when the coachmen of approaching vehicles, cracking their whips, forced their way through the crowd. A seemingly endless flow of carriages deposited the guests who, in the large hall, were relieved by liveried servants of their galoshes, muffs, shawls, fur hats and black topcoats, uncovering glittering evening dresses and resplendent uniforms with colourful decorations.

"Look, just like butterflies emerging from their dark cocoons!" Asaray said to Petrúsha who had come with him.

"Yes," his friend agreed, "but inside more than one of those brilliant figures you will find the blackest hearts."

They met their host at the entrance of the first drawing room. White-haired and past middle age but tall, slim and handsome, with a ruddy face and dark dreamy eyes, the former lover of the Empress Elisabeth greeted them affably but in a rather detached manner.

Asaray always experienced a sense of excitement when he entered a theatre or ballroom. At first he had been hesitant and timid on such occasions or even felt somewhat guilty when thinking of his duties back home. But his years of experience of the refined ways and temptations of St. Petersburg had changed all that, and now he would stride confidently and with an air of natural authority into any salon, revelling in his new role.

The stately rooms were aglow with the light of thousands of candles. The immense ballroom with its pale golden walls, delicately gilded woodwork, and soaring columns of gleaming white scagliola, was already filled with a dazzling array of various uniforms and gowns of vivid blues, greens or reds, as well as softer pastel shades, a profusion of scintillating diamonds and other precious stones — a richness and splendour surpassing description. When their eyes had adjusted to the scene, Asaray and Petrúsha began to discern and recognize the faces of many of the guests.

They were immediately hailed by Grigórii Orlov, who looked magnificent with the red moiré ribbon of the Order of St. Alexander Nevsky over his scarlet uniform. Making their way through the crowd to greet him they had to step carefully among the dancers. The two young men were dressed in the gala uniforms of their Guards regiments: Asaray in the sky-blue, scarlet and gold of the Horse Guards; Peter in the snow-white and red of the Chevaliers Gardes.

Orlov looked them up and down and smiled:

“You both look fine! That’s what the cavalry does for you: they know how to dress a man! You’ve heard this little rhyme, I suppose?”

With twinkling eyes he recited: Umnik v artillérii The bright boy in the artillery, Shchógol’ v kavalérii the dandy in the cavalry, Piánitsa vo flóte the drunkard in the navy, Durák v pekhóte the fool in the infantry, A shto pogázhe... and all that’s worse... To v pograníchnoi strázhe! in the border guard!

They all laughed. Asaray could not help remarking:

“There is much truth in that, particularly in the last line! I happen to know a little about those Cossack border guards in the Volga region.”

Orlov was in a jocular mood and retorted:

“Yes, you are quite right, my dear Asaray, they are not of the highest standard. But from what I have seen of you, I gather your people will not have much trouble dealing with them.”

They moved on among the many guests, exchanging a few words here and there, when they saw an excited Andréi, a feverish look in his eyes.

“I have just met the girl whom I already loved when I was a little boy!”

“You never told us about her.”

“I had almost forgotten her. She has changed so much that I did not recognize her at first. Tatiána and her mother were our neighbours when we lived on our former estate, but now they have moved to St. Petersburg. You must tell me whether she is not the most beguiling beauty at this ball! I think I’m hopelessly in love.”

There was a throng of young men evidently wanting to be introduced to this debutante. Then they saw her with her mother. A tall, very young girl of truly ravishing beauty in a stunning, low-necked ball-dress of pale-blue cashmere silk with satin flounces and applications in the same background colour, her small head held proudly, her pale skin contrasted by a mass of flaming reddish gold hair. Tatiána looked highly desirable and Asaray could feel the veins pulsing in his temples and everywhere else. When he looked into her deep-blue eyes she averted them but later, when she smiled up at him while they were dancing and he stared at her with undisguised admiration, she blushed crimson under his gaze.

He reluctantly led her back to her seat. Several young men were waiting for her, each asking for the next dance. Tatiána shook her head and proudly showed them her carnet: the next dance had been reserved for Andréi and the following three for

Asaray. A young, handsome but narrow-eyed and prematurely balding man by the name of Bogátov grew purple in the face with anger and sneered:

“Does a cowardly, backward Kalmyk in uniform stand a better chance than an honest Russian landowner?”

Asaray stepped forward and slapped the man’s face hard. The crowd around them went silent. Bogátov, held back by his friends, snarled:

“You will pay for this!”

“And you will hear from my second.”

Asaray offered his apologies to Tatiána, her mother and the host, and left immediately. He and his nation had been insulted in front of others; worse still, in front of a girl he greatly admired. He realised it was her presence which had made him feel especially hurt and angry by what that rich and pampered good-for-nothing had said.

He asked Petrúsha to get in touch with his adversary’s second and magnanimously left the choice of arms to Bogátov. It was decided that they should fight with swords and that the duel would take place the next morning before dawn. That night the tension of the coming fight, his anger, and the feelings Tatiána had aroused in him, prevented Asaray from getting much sleep. The night was dark still when Petrúsha arrived and they silently rode to the agreed isolated spot on one of the islands. When they crossed a pontoon-bridge a first ray of light appeared on the far horizon.

“This is the spot,” Petrúsha said. “The bloody bastard had better be here soon.”

“I shall be the one who makes that bastard bloody,” Asaray joked but without real mirth.

Some ten minutes later a carriage drew up with a nervous-looking Bogátov and his friend. Not a word was spoken.

Petrúsha and Bogátov’s second, a tall, bearded, sour-looking man, marked out a ten yard boundary. The duellists were standing far apart, waiting. Asaray looked away, deliberately calming his thumping heart. Then, at a signal from their seconds, they moved to their designated places and drew their swords. Asaray wondered how experienced a sword-fighter his adversary was; he must be quite good since he had chosen this weapon. The Russian attacked with a thrust at Asaray’s breast, which he parried without difficulty and followed up with some quick feints and hits. Bogátov nearly lost his balance but sidestepped and counter-attacked with a succession of fast cuts. The man was an adroit and well-trained fencer. Asaray enjoyed the fight until the moment when his adversary, nearly out of breath and with a mean grimace, spat out:

“You rotten stinking Kalmyk!”

Asaray tensed, blood rushing to his temples. Should he kill this vermin? Yes, he would! Having evaded or parried a few wild attacks from his adversary, he executed a minor feint, then gave forth a hoarse Mongol battle-cry and with a fast long lunge, thrust his sword deep into Bogátov’s chest. The man fell and Asaray withdrew his

sword. The doctor who had come with them bent over Bogátov's body, then righted himself and made the sign of the cross.

Coldly Asaray looked at the scene: in that instant he could not feel any regret at all. When he had been insulted for the second time, he [had]again felt that filthy spittle on his face, and all the suppressed grudges and hatreds of the exile against the 'master race' had broken forth within him. Now they were stilled.

Police came to his house. He was arrested and jailed, and so were Petrúsha and Bogátov's second. Never once during his confinement did he give any thought to the duel. Day and night he saw only Tatiána's lovely blushing face, her blue eyes, her neck...

As respectable members of society they were well treated but the prospect of being locked up for one or more years was horrible. However, after only one month had passed and before their case had come up in court, a general amnesty was proclaimed and all three of them were freed. They knew they had .been uncommonly lucky.

The next time he met Tatiána he knew he had fallen desperately in love. The more he saw of her the stronger this terrible love grew: it gripped him, shook his entrails, made his knees wobbly. He was now forever waiting and hoping: waiting to catch a glimpse of her while frequently finding himself passing by her house; hoping for a moment of happiness — seeing her smile or toss those fascinating waves of shimmering hair. They attended the same parties and Asaray almost felt sorry for Andrei when Tánia seemed more interested in him than in her childhood friend. He had not yet told her of his feelings but suspected she must be well aware of them.

Tatiána had from the start been intrigued and attracted by this mature young man, who had such a mysterious and exotic past, so different from all those she knew. The duel, which to her mind had really been fought for her sake, had made him a hero in her eyes. And there seemed to be an inner force in Asaray which imperceptibly drew her ever closer to him. Her mother unknowingly stimulated this process when she showed her opposition to their friendship and tried to thwart their meetings; Tatiána had a very strong will of her own.

Eléna Pávlovna noticed the change in her daughter, who now suffered spells of nervousness and anxiety alternating with moods of joyful ecstasy. Whatever she undertook to bring about a marriage with Andrei, her dearest wish, Tánia would not hear of it. When her mother realized this, she gave up her attempts. She might be as wilful and persistent as her daughter, but she was no fool, and knew when she was beaten. For there had also come a change in the attitude of Andrei's father, who had tired of Eléna Pávlovna's obtrusive and insistent efforts to arrange such a marriage, and had decided to look for another, better match for his son than this daughter of an impoverished widow. He had known her husband, Count Durassov, intimately and knew exactly how much debt he had left when he died.

Asaray now became a regular and welcome visitor at the Durassovs. But when he had not called for more than a week, Tatiána, who would lately dance around the rooms and sing and embrace her mother impetuously, sat all day in a corner looking out of the window, pale and withdrawn, refusing to eat. When her mother tried to distract her, she burst out in despair:

“Oh mama, what’s happening to me? I feel so miserable.”

“It seems to me that you’re in love, my little dove.”

“Oh no, I hate him. I hate him!”

After another week had passed in this fashion Tatiána looked quite ill.

“You seem to be very much in love, my poor darling, but you must eat and go out instead of locking yourself up. You’ll see: everything will be all right in the end.”

“Will it really? Is this love? I’m so afraid that something is terribly wrong. Oh, why does Asaray stay away? Why doesn’t he even send a message?” she sobbed.

Her mother stroked her hair and kissed her tear-stained cheeks.

“Love can be both bliss and despair, Taniúsha, but above all it has a power all its own — a force so strong that it can make you utterly miserable. But tell me now, are you absolutely certain that you love Asaray? There are so many other suitable young men here in the capital. You should be going out, making friends.”

“I won’t, mother. I love him so desperately, I don’t want to meet anyone else.”

“Has he proposed?”

“No, mama, but he does love me, I know, or... I thought I knew. I was so sure! He must have had a good reason for not telling me yet. But why has he suddenly stopped coming? What could have happened? I’m so frightened, mama, so terribly frightened!”

“You must not worry, my dearest. He will come back soon. But I do think,” she added grimly, “that the time has come for him to speak his mind.”

Asaray was in a quandary. Out of loyalty to his best friend he had at first hesitated. But there was something much more important that held him back: the burning question of whether he could ever marry a Russian girl at all. His people would not accept him if he returned with an Oross bride, even if — which he doubted — Tatiána was willing to live among the nomads of the steppe. Was he prepared then to turn his back completely and irrevocably on his old way of life, on his people and everything they stood for, and settle permanently in Russia, possibly even becoming an Orthodox Christian? If he did all that, Tánia would be his and he wanted her so desperately!

If he took this momentous step, could it really be said that he had betrayed his religion, his nation, the Mandate that the gods had given him? Or could he perhaps exercise more influence on behalf of the Torghuts if he stayed here than he could at home? No, that was a fallacy: he should not deceive himself. He reminded himself that there was also Badma and the pledge that they had given one another, but her memory had dimmed with the lack of any word from her, and in any case she must

have got married long ago. He still could not reach a decision. Yet of one thing he was sure: he ought not to see Tânia again before his mind was made up, before he was ready to propose to her and ask her mother's consent.

For more than two wretched weeks of indecision and torment he held out but his desire to see her proved too strong. Also, the alarming thought had come to him that Tatiána might not love him at all, that he had imagined it. He wanted to reassure himself. And therefore, before reaching a decision on the main problem, he went to see the Durassovs.

There was no mistaking her love, when she danced into the room, her hands held out to him, the dazzling smile on her face transforming her into a goddess of light. Her hair shone in the golden sunlight which streamed through the tall French windows and her lustrous eyes bespoke a yearning and a joy which reassured him completely.

"Oh Asaray, darling: I've been so miserable without you. What happened? I was afraid you were ill."

All his disturbing thoughts and doubts had vanished. He kissed both her hands.

"If you knew how I have suffered too. My dearest, I love you."

And when he felt her hands trembling, he added spontaneously:

"Will you marry me?"

As an answer she sprang forward, pressed her body against his and kissed him spontaneously on the lips, then coloured and turned her face away, while holding her arms around his neck.

From that day onward he came almost every day. Her mother had given her consent to their betrothal; but she did ask Asaray to attend church services with them and to take full instruction in the Orthodox religion. He had agreed without thinking. He was in a state of ecstasy, and would have accepted anything in order to be with Tatiána. That was all that counted now. He shrank away from thinking too deeply or too far ahead. The odious consequences of a 'Russian' marriage which he had imagined so vividly were now firmly banished from his mind. As to the problem of asking for his family's approval of the marriage, he kept putting it off because he feared it would be withheld. He also doubted whether they would ever receive his letter.

Asaray had never liked being called by his Russian name of Alexéi, or its affectionate diminutive Aliósha, but ever since he had declared his love for her, Tânia used both regularly, as if to emphasise the fact that he was now a part of Russia. Nor did he mind, for coming from her it sounded sublime. With Tatiána he doubly enjoyed the amusements of the St. Petersburg season. Andréi was obviously unhappy and jealous but made a brave attempt not to show Asaray his feelings, though their relationship inevitably cooled.

The two lovers were both young and hot-blooded, but however intimate they became, it was Tatiána who always drew a line. She adamantly refused to give herself

to him before their marriage, and this sometimes infuriated him: he simply could not understand it. At home these things had been extremely simple and easy, and even in Russia he had never encountered such obstacles either. When his desire reached its peak and she turned away from him, he felt as if someone had slapped him in the face. His manly pride was hurt and his love seemed all wasted.

Yet another little cloud began to darken their relationship. It irked him that she should make such claims upon his time as to cause him to invent excuses whenever he had other plans. Tânia always knew what she wanted and how to obtain it. They had their first minor row when he was invited by Orlov to join him in a hunt and he had to decline because Tânia, having made other plans, protested and kept on nagging about it until he gave in to her. More of these little rows followed, and she always managed, in her subtle, feminine way, to emerge victorious, which in turn irritated him further. But this happened only now and then, and he was too much in love to mind.

A venerable, learned priest instructed him in the Russian Orthodox religion with a view to his conversion. Asaray was genuinely interested, but found he still often interpreted things the way his beloved lama tutor had taught him.

And then the day came when Tânia had a surprise for him.

“Guess what I have here, Aliósha,” she cried, holding up her tiny, closed fist. When he failed to find the right answer, she suggested mysteriously:

“Let’s go for a walk, and I’ll show you; we don’t have to go far.”

Puzzled, he went with her. They came to a small but respectable house, only a few blocks away, and Tatiána produced a key with which she opened the front door.

“This is all ours! We are going to live here when we’re married, Aliósha darling,” she said happily and a little too decisively.

When Asaray remained speechless, she added:

“Remember my great-uncle, the one who died recently and whom I told you about? He has willed me this splendid house! It’s large enough for us and for my mother, who will live on the first floor. I’ll show you.”

They went from the hall, which was fairly small and narrow, through various rooms of unexampled horror. They were large enough but stuffy and full of atrocious furniture, monstrous artefacts and family portraits. Tatiána took him by his hand and led him from one hideous room to the next:

“Is this not enchanting? I have never owned anything before! To think that all this will be ours and that we shall live here always, forever and ever!”

She had been so excited that she had not noticed the look on his face.

“What’s the matter, Aliósha, aren’t you happy? We are going to live here together, my golden one.” She snuggled up to him. “Won’t that be wonderful? Why don’t you say something? Are you struck dumb with surprise?”

He forced a smile: “Yes, Taniúsha, and frankly, it’s not an agreeable surprise. I hope you won’t feel offended when I tell you that I had dreamed of a country house somewhere out of town — just for the two of us. All of this rather overwhelms me.”

Tatiána had never given in easily when she was set on something, he remembered.

“Oh, my dearest, you’ll soon get used to this place and you will love it. We can receive our friends here much more comfortably than in the country, don’t you agree? With my house and your money and fame we can give select dinner parties and dances, and we shall have only the best people:

Prince and Princess Torgútskii (or Dondukov) have the honour to invite...

“I just cannot wait! No, do not protest, I shall not give in this time, darling, you simply must accept this house, where we shall be so happy.”

He raised his hands in despair.

“We’ll have to think about it, Tánia dear. If we throw out all the furniture and paintings, and everything else, and if we redecorate it, it will perhaps be inhabitable, but I’m not sure.”

Tatiána pouted.

“You can’t mean that. Everything here is quite beautiful. But if there’s anything you positively dislike, we can put it in Mama’s room.”

She looked young and vulnerable, and he kissed her. At that very moment he saw a face pressed against the window, looking in. Asaray ran outside: he had recognized his orderly Arkhip but the ruffian had fled. Where before he had suspected Arkhip of spying on him, now he was certain.

When Asaray returned home, he summoned Arkhip, who bowed more deeply than ever.

“Yes, my Excellency, what are your orders, my Serene Highness?”

Asaray asked him sternly who had ordered him to spy on his master, how he dared do so, and not for the first time either. Arkhip cringed under his continued questioning but had the insolence to deny everything in his habitual, maudlin tones. Now Asaray, already in an ugly mood, took his riding whip and lashed him until he admitted his spying. But it took a much more vicious whipping before the fool, bleeding and a sorry sight, confessed that he had been paid by the ‘Secret Chancery’. His master became so enraged that he continued to lash out at him, until Arkhip sobbed:

“My Highness, please forgive me. You never punished....Masha.”

“Masha, what about Masha, you scum?”

Arkhip hesitated but finally blurted out that he had seen Masha at the accountant’s office of the political police, where she was drawing her monthly pay for her assignment: ‘the Torghut prince’.

Asaray dismissed the man, telling him never to come back. The closeness of the room oppressed him and he went for a walk along foggy streets, past dreary houses with darkened windows and sleepy doorkeepers at the gates.

Dusk was descending, the atmosphere was sultry, a flash of lightning was followed by a low rumble of thunder. He passed an open window from which issued a melancholy one-finger melody. Someone was haltingly picking out the notes of a tune on his piano, and Asaray recognized a song of hopeless love that Masha used to sing.

A carriage, its passengers invisible, came thundering over the cobble stones of the adjoining avenue and when it turned into his street, the clapping sound of the horses' hooves was muted by the wooden paving. It disappeared around a corner, and the street was once more silent and deserted.

The next day, Sunday, he sent a message to the Durassovs that he could not go to church with them, pleading a headache. Some days later, when he went to their house again, Tatiána noticed that there was a change in him, but he would not explain. Nor could he, for he was himself uncertain about his state of mind. That awful house she wanted them to inhabit, and her increasingly possessive ways suffocated him. He loved Tánia deeply, but she was too domineering and ... a part of Russia, and he now felt disgusted with this country again.

Asaray had, with a few notable exceptions, always liked the companionship of his fellow officers and his men, but even with them he was less at ease now. Some of them were splendid men, whom he admired and loved. But the world in which his best friends moved, the high society of St. Petersburg, now suddenly seemed insufferably artificial and shallow. All that most of its members cared about were honours, promotion, money, jewels and gossip. And then: why the continuous spying? What was its purpose? Was there something basically wrong with Russia? Such a wonderful country, of dazzling riches and high culture?

He reflected that Catherine's reforms, such as contained in the famous Nakaz, had come to nothing in a Russia where conservatism reigned supreme, where everything and everyone was perpetually subjected to controls and restrictions.

What about foreign policy? In that field, his friends and he had agreed, Catherine had been very successful so far: Russia was emerging as one of the decisive powers on the European scene, Poland had come under her domination, and until recently it had looked as if no-one could or would oppose her. But everyone knew that this extension of Russian power was unacceptable to Turkey and so it had come as no surprise to Asaray and his friends that the Porte had declared war on Russia in October of that year, 1768. Russia was slowly mobilizing her forces and Asaray thought he might well be sent south to participate in the war. He would be willing to go; in fact he would welcome a fight, any fight.

While Asaray sat pondering the situation and what it might mean for him personally, a visitor was announced. Gambil was out shopping and although his new Russian orderly, Luka, said the man was called Serjavin, a name which meant nothing to him, he had him shown in.

At once he was taken aback by the figure who entered the room. A tall, stern Torghut nobleman in his traditional dress: Serbejab, one of their most respected leaders. It was as if someone from the moon had descended upon him.

In his confusion Asaray started to shake hands with him, instead of clasping his visitor's left arm and greeting him with a Mendü! The Torghut leader gave him a look of barely concealed contempt.

"Has the Khan's brother become an Oross?"

He was a magnificent figure with commanding eyes set in a deeply grooved, sunburnt face; his partly shaven head was held high; a long, wide, russet bishmed of damask, tied by a black sash containing his tobacco pouch, fire flint and knife; his tall black morocco boots were shining.

Asaray felt painfully ashamed; he bowed and apologized. Treating his visitor with all the deference due to him, he had tea and a meal prepared as soon as Gambil was back from his errands. The Torghut servant was awed and excited by this visitor from their homeland, who kindly spoke with him for a few minutes. When Gambil was gone and they sat down to tea, Serbejab remarked:

"I am glad to see that you have not, after all, entirely forgotten our customs. You must have had a hard time in this stuffy town. Luckily I only have to stay a few days to transact some business here, but you...how many twelvemoons has it been now?"

"Nearly five, sir, and my time hangs heavy here."

It was a great pleasure to be able to speak his Torghut language again with an educated man. He knew it would be discourteous to enquire after his own relatives and friends at this stage, but the question burned on his lips.

"Has the weather been favourable of late? How are the herds? Are the people prospering?"

"We've had some bad weather, and right now there's an abundance of snow. On the whole we would not be too badly off, if the Oross were not taking away many of our best pastures."

"Taking our best pastures? How is that possible?"

Serbejab seemed surprised that Asaray did not know.

"You people in this glasshouse of a capital seem to be ignorant of what is happening elsewhere! Have you really not heard what the Oross War Collegium has prescribed? They have ordered that the best land on the right bank of the Volga is to be reserved for the settlement of Cossacks. Seven new Cossack colonies are being set up in the region of Enotaevsk and Astrakhan alone.

"On the left bank, too, the Russians are colonizing some of our land, ploughing and cultivating those beautiful pastures that have been ours for nearly two centuries. Even colonists from Germany are swarming into our territory, eating up the land as they come."

"Has no-one opposed this policy?" Asaray asked incredulously.

“Your brother Ubashi went to Astrakhan to complain to the Governor about this treatment, but not very forcefully, I’m afraid. Governor Beketov sent the Khan home with a wholly unsatisfactory answer. He even cynically suggested that the ‘Kalmyks’ should ‘re-distribute’ their pastures and give up their nomadic life for a sedentary one!”

Asaray was appalled. He knew about Catherine’s long-term policies with regard to the Kalmyks — she had, after all, told him of them herself — and he had even heard rumours that some of her plans to colonize the region were already being put into effect, but he had not believed them. Now it was clear from this first-hand account that the execution of those plans was in full swing.

They were stealing their grasslands. The Torghut herds would soon dwindle for lack of fodder. And while this was going on, what was he, Prince Asaray, doing? He was living comfortably in this ‘glasshouse’, as Serbejab had called it, in this counterfeit, make-believe world, going from ball to ball and from one dinner party to the next, bowing to and exchanging compliments with the very enemies of the Kalmyks, kissing hands, dancing with their wives and falling in love with their daughters. In short, he was becoming completely enthralled and enslaved by them as his people fell more and more under the Russian yoke.

Outside, the church bells started pealing. In his imagination their sound was now replaced by the muted tones of conch shells and trumpets, the doleful chant of monks and lamas, the erstwhile so familiar, long-drawn overtones they produced with tightened vocal chords. Here in his room sat Serbejab, one of their greatest men, and he seemed to have almost given up hope. What could one do? Asaray felt an urgent need to be with his people.

“If only I could go home and do something about it!”

There was a silence which Serbejab did not attempt to break. He was watching Asaray in a peculiar way. Eventually he said:

“There is little one can do, I’m afraid. No doubt you have heard that your mother has been in trouble?”

Asaray bent forward: “No, what is it? Is she ill?”

“Tseren-Jalla is fortunately in good health and she is a very courageous woman. But she has been living in straitened circumstances for some time now. Have you really not heard that the Khan has appropriated your ulus?”

“What?” Asaray exploded. “Stolen my property? You can’t mean it!”

When Serbejab remained silent, he added:

“How dare he? He will have to give it back, if I have to kill him for it! Even if he is the Khan, he has no right to do such a thing.”

“Well, rightly or wrongly, he has done it,” Serbejab said slowly. “And what is more, he is not likely to give back what he has taken. His mother has a bad influence on him. She told him that Donduk-Dashi Khan’s last will was misinterpreted, that he

never intended nor would lawfully have been permitted to allot one half of his estate to his younger son.”

“That’s a pack of lies!” Asaray exclaimed. “My father made that will long before he ended his worldly existence, and all of us have seen it.”

“I am sure you are right, and I told Ubashi that he acted shamefully, but he would not listen. He has always been jealous of you. And he even advanced an additional argument: you were absent and under Russian control, therefore you had forfeited any rights you might once have had as a free Torghut. Your absence has indeed been very convenient for him.”

“I see,” said Asaray. “So, in other words, I am to be punished for having been made a hostage, in order that my father, and after him Ubashi, might reign as Khan.”

There was a pause and Serbejab relit his pipe. Puffing furiously and coughing, the old man resumed:

“Asaray, although this is no excuse whatever for Ubashi’s disgraceful behaviour, you must know that there is also a very personal reason for his jealousy. He has steadfastly courted Badma for years but she has always refused to marry him.”

“She has not married at all?” Asaray asked in a whisper.

There appeared the ghost of a smile on the old man’s face.

“She has not married,” he confirmed. “And all I can say is that the sooner you return, the better.”

Asaray was deeply touched. Could Badma have waited for him, or was it only her aversion to Ubashi and her wish to be independent which had kept her from marrying? Serbejab seemed to suggest that if he stayed away much longer, she might decide to choose someone else.

He told his visitor that he had never got an answer to his letters and asked him to take one with him for Badma and his mother. In it he wrote that after the letters Tsebek-Dorji had brought and one short note he had never heard from them, that Serbejab had informed him about what was happening at home, and that he would like to return as soon as possible. He mentioned his activities as riding-master, that he had been treated fairly well but was always watched and restricted in his movements, and finally that he could not return home without official authorization, but that this had always been withheld.

It had been difficult for him to write this letter for Tania’s behaviour and Serbejab’s visit had confused him. But he could not, of course, let him go without giving him a message for his people.

When his visitor had left, he sat up throughout the long, silent night, thinking over all that he had been told and examining his inner self. When at long last the cool grey light of the winter morning filtered through his window, he saw with the utmost clarity that whatever he had done and learned in Russia, he was still a Buddhist and a nomad of the steppe, and would always remain so. Serbejab’s appearance had crystallised this and brought it home to him.

All the essential elements of his life were contained in his origins and on this foundation he had, here in Russia, merely built a ramshackle, temporary structure. All that he had acquired, he now saw, was superficial, something his heart had never really shared: only some experience, a few skills and manners plus a great many bland words and perhaps some knowledge of the Oross. Only if he returned to his original foundation would he be true to himself and his destiny. He must leave Russia and return home.

His love-making, drinking and gambling, and all that insubstantial gaiety of the Russian capital, had it not mainly been a means to hide an exile's inner unhappiness, an emigrant's nostalgia? He loved and admired the Russian people and had made many wonderful friends there, but he had remained an outsider. It frightened him now to think how he had nearly cast away his soul and had been close to becoming an imitation Russian and a fake Orthodox Christian, never quite belonging, yet part of a society which, for all its superficial civilized refinement, fed on vanity and sycophancy, whose members spied upon and denounced each other, whose rulers acted against the very principles they propounded. Cynically he noted the abyss which existed in this country, more perhaps than anywhere else, between ideology and reality, the former only serving to legitimize oppression.

Most of all, it alarmed him to think that he had been on the verge of marrying a Russian girl — which would have meant a complete break with his past. He stiffened and his eyes opened wide as he recalled Lobsang-Norbu's words, as he saw him again in his ceremonial robes, solemnly charging him with a special mandate to preserve the soul and identity of his people, and here he was, on the verge of losing his own! A fine Prince he was! How could he have forgotten the mandate the gods had given him?

Asaray was now determined to leave Russia as soon as possible, whatever obstacles might be put in his way. He was burning with the desire to act, after all these wasted years. How his escape could be managed, he had as yet no idea. But first he would have to explain his change of heart to Tatiána — no easy task. He felt guilty towards her and wanted to get it over with quickly.

When he told Tatiána about Serbejab's visit and his decision to return home, she exclaimed:

“But when will you be back? We are about to be married! You cannot possibly leave me now!”

“My dearest, I am afraid you do not understand. This is something stronger than me, more essential than my love for you. Serbejab's visit awoke me, as from a dream. I know with certainty now that I belong with my people, not here. It means we cannot marry. We have to call off the wedding. Do you understand now? I am very, very sorry, but I have no choice: I am leaving for good.”

Tánia nearly fainted and started sobbing violently:

“I knew a change had come over you ever since I showed you the house in which I wanted us to live. What has happened? Do you not love me any more?”

He was vexed that she did not even try to understand. Rather curtly he remarked that it was his duty to share the fate of his people. Tânia dried her tears and thought this over, then asked hopefully:

“Would you not be of greater assistance to them if you stayed here and mobilized whatever influence you could on their behalf?”

“No, Tânia, I would not. I have considered that myself, but it would not work. I would only be deceiving myself. There really is no other way.”

Tatiána snuggled up to him, stroked his face, then covered it with kisses and whispered:

“Oh, darling, I need you, I love you so terribly much, and you gave me your solemn promise you’d marry me!

“Tonight, my love, I’ll come to you and you will make love to me. I’m giving myself to you. Tell me you’ll stay and won’t leave me ever. I’ll sell my uncle’s house and we will live in the countryside, just the way you want it. I’ll do everything for you!”

Her cajoling roused him but he suppressed his feelings and gently pushed her away.

“No, Tânia, you are sweet, but it’s no good. I must go and I won’t come back.”

When it sank in that he meant what he said, she went off into a fit of rage. Her face distorted, she shouted:

“Oh, how I hate you. Go away then, go back to your nomads, your prairies and your tents, your stinking cows and sheep! You have broken your promise, our solemn engagement. You have never loved me. If you had, you could not do this to me. Go, go away forever.”

She pulled wildly at the blazing mass of red and gold hair, her body was shaking and the tears streamed down her flushed face. In her passionate fury she looked more desirable than ever and her violent reaction both angered and thrilled Asaray. He was torn between two conflicting emotions: slap her face and say he hated her, or take her forcibly in his arms, kiss her and stay. He did neither. With a supreme effort he excused himself and left.

Her promise to give herself to him had affected Asaray more than he had expected and for some time afterwards he felt dejected. Evidently he was more attached to her than he had admitted to himself, and he wavered in his determination. It tormented him that he could not see her any more. Often he went past her house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but always in vain.

What was he actually giving up in exchange for an uncertain future? Tânia, his many friends, a life of comfort and sophistication in this glamorous city. Whenever he was in this mood, assailed by doubts about how he would be received in the Volga steppe, St. Petersburg ceased to be such an unattractive and hostile place, but the mood never lasted long.

In his heart he knew all the time that during that sleepless night of soul-searching, when he had decided to return to his people in distress, he had chosen a course to which he was now totally committed, and that it was the right one.

XVIII

Badma could not stop blaming herself for the terrible fate which must have befallen Orbai, a fate which she herself had only just escaped with her companion's help. The poor child had not come back; if she was still alive, those monsters had doubtless taken her with them, Heaven knows where.

Disheartened, she saw time pass, each day more melancholy than the preceding one. Her chance of seeing Asaray again seemed lost forever. Instead of fervent letters telling her of his love and faithfulness, he did not even send her a sign of being still alive. It was as if he had ceased to exist.

Then Serbejab returned from St. Petersburg and said he had met Asaray! From the note which he brought they learned that he was well — and this made them feel happy — but Badma was bitterly disappointed that there was not a single word of love for her in it. Had he after all fallen in love with someone else, as she had so often feared? It looked as if he didn't expect ever to receive permission to return. Or did he not even want to? That was the worst part for her, this gnawing uncertainty.

Ubashi began courting her again most assiduously, sending her one letter after another and often presents as well, which she always returned. She was afraid of him, and terribly afraid she might still fall in love with him. It would not be the same love she had shared with Asaray but it might be love, nevertheless. Now a splendid necklace of the finest amber had arrived and she was about to return it, when her father intervened and said:

“No, Badma, you can't do that all the time, that would be discourteous. Moreover, Ubashi means well.”

After a rather heated exchange of words she had given in, with the result that Ubashi felt encouraged and redoubled his attentions. Her parents' attitude regarding her engagement to Asaray underwent a subtle change. They made remarks such as “Asaray has been gone so long now, you don't have to feel bound anymore” or “Will Asaray ever come back? I'm beginning to doubt it.”

These words caused her great pain but she was too tired and listless by now to counter them. She loved her parents who had always sympathized with her and had hoped for the return of Asaray whom they liked and admired. Her father, strongly built, resolute, with stern eyes, had a kind heart and a soft spot for her. Her mother, petite and graceful, was a sweet woman but also very practical. Whatever they were saying, Badma knew that they had the best of intentions.

The supervision of the work in her own ulus, in which Badma had lost all interest, became a heavy burden. She continued participating in horse-races and shooting contests with her friends but without much enthusiasm. She helped Tseren-Jalla perfunctorily with the school they had established together with such great hopes.

The evenings were the hardest times to get through. She had always enjoyed all kinds of needlework but now her fingers had lost their neatness. When she talked

with her parents, they mentioned Asaray less and less, and they often referred to Ubashi. He had his faults, true, but he was after all a very nice man, they impressed upon her, and he was also the Khan of the Torghuts and all the Volga Mongols. It was in the interest of their people, the Dürbets, to be on friendly terms with him and not to antagonize him. Asaray was surely not coming back. It was more than time for Badma to get married, and here was the Khan himself who had been suing for her hand for years. It was quite obvious that he loved her very much, she could not deny that, could she?

Her parents continued in their insistence but Badma let it all pass over her and hardly reacted. Ubashi often called. In the beginning she would flee when he came but her father reprimanded her:

“It is a sacred tradition of our people to receive visitors well and courteously, you know that. From now on you will be present.”

On those occasions she dressed in her least attractive clothes and hardly deigned to look at him. Her cold reception, however, only seemed to fan his ardour. In any case, after some time she had to admit that he took it all in good part, showed considerable charm and could be most entertaining. They were imperceptibly getting along much better.

Tseren-Jalla, of course, had not failed to notice Badma’s apathy and felt profound pity for her. It could well be years before Asaray returned and no healthy, normal girl could be expected to endure such a long wait. That Badma had waited so long already seemed incredible.

“You know how much I love you and that I have long ago come to consider you as a daughter. Naturally I’d regret it very much if you and Asaray were not to get married. But now you’ve waited so long and everything is still[, at best,]uncertain. Honestly, Badma, I believe you might do better to give it up. I should certainly not hold it against you if you married Ubashi who appears to love you very much. On the contrary, I’d be glad if you could lead a normal life. A girl your age should be married and have children already.”

Badma was dismayed. Asaray’s mother herself now advised her to acquiesce with Ubashi’s advances!

“Ubashi can be quite likable,” she admitted. “But he is so unstable and superstitious. And isn’t it terrible that he just confiscated Asaray’s ulus? I can’t ever forgive him that.”

“He has done that no doubt at the instigation of his mother and that unpleasant Kirin, and he may change his mind still. As to his unstable character, your presence and efforts could alter that. I think that’s what he’s hoping for. He looks to you for the balance and support he lacks.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

She had never wanted to look at the situation in this way. She could support him and help him to rule their people better and more efficiently? A challenge for her? It was true that Ubashi appeared to have changed a lot, as if she had already influenced him. Lately they had even had some long and interesting discussions, without those silly compliments or nervous behaviour. She had noticed that when he was with her, he was {more }calmer, almost contented. Was that proof that he really cared for her? She herself now found herself much less reserved towards him.

One day Ubashi came and told her he had a confession to make:

“I now regret, Badma, having confiscated Asaray’s ulus. But I have always ensured that he has never suffered or been deprived of any funds on that account. Even so that was wrong and I want to put it right. If you marry me I shall give them back immediately, or better still, we could manage them together for Asaray until he returns. You know my love and admiration for you know no bounds. As my wife you’d be a great help to me; with you I could perform my duties much better. I have a feeling that I would start a new and better life. You would make me so happy! Will you say yes?”

Badma was moved, she knew how much it must have cost him to make such a confession.

“My dear Ubashi, you know that I do not love you, but if it would really help you, I’m willing to think about your proposal. Give me time. I’m glad to hear that you think differently now about confiscating Asaray’s ulus. But why not give them back now, hand them over to Tseren-Jalla, so she can resume their management? You’ve caused her much distress.”

“I’d like to do that, but it would mean a great loss of face for me, and I can’t afford that; my prestige is already at a low ebb. But as a gesture at my marriage to you or when Asaray returns, it would be easier.”

A week later Badma had taken a decision. Though she did not love Ubashi, she liked him. Her life at present had no purpose, but helping him would make her feel useful again. Who knows, if he remained as stable he was now, she might still come to love him.

When she gave him her consent he was ecstatic. Naijitana seemed slightly less enthusiastic but hardly showed it. A great many preparations had to be made for it was going to be a grand wedding. Ubashi wanted it to take place very soon but Badma, supported by her parents, did not agree: they would need at least two or three months to make all the necessary preparations. The best tailors and seamstresses would be put to work on Badma’s trousseau; many of the materials would have to be imported. For both of them exquisite garments would be made, and the most skilful gold- and silversmiths of the Torghuts would create beautiful jewelry for them, including a precious damascened dagger for Ubashi. Horse-races, wrestling contests and other popular festivities would be organised in order to let everyone join in the merry-making in celebration of such a prestigious match.

XIX

Russia was a darkly mysterious country where no-one could travel without an official permit. If private travel in Russia was already an extremely complicated business, to go abroad seemed an impossible undertaking. Asaray knew he would have to flee in secret; but how? He would never manage on his own and therefore turned to Andrei and told him all. Andrei, who still loved Tatiána, had been painfully disappointed when she had fallen in love with Asaray but he had remained a loyal, if distant friend. He was shocked to learn that the engagement had been broken. And he was furious:

“How can you do such a contemptible thing? Go, if that is what your conscience dictates, but come back here! You have given her your word of honour and you are bound by it.”

“I feel very badly about the way I treated Tatiána. You think I acted like a cad and you are right, but I had no choice really. Can I renounce my own nation when it is in peril?”

Andrei sharply countered that he should have thought of that sooner, and they had a blazing row. Finally Andrei said that he saw no way to help Asaray. He warned him that it would be a difficult and dangerous enterprise: now that Russia was at war with Turkey, Asaray risked, if he were caught, being court-martialled for desertion from the Imperial Army and for escaping as a government’s hostage. Indeed it looked hopeless.

Then things took an unexpected turn. Asaray was summoned to an audience with the Empress. He had seen Catherine II on several occasions and sometimes she had spoken a few words to him, but he had not met her privately since that memorable day when she had spoken so openly of her policy for the Volga Torghuts. What could she want from him? If he was to be sent to the front to fight the Turks, that would, in view of his rank, hardly call for an imperial audience. Did she want the Kalmyks to fight? If so, why summon him?

Since his first audience the Empress had gained even more in stature and authority, he noticed at once. She radiated such strength of mind and body that Asaray could well believe the stories about her authoritarian behaviour and her many lovers. When he had paid his respects, Her Majesty said:

“I have asked you to come here, my dear Prince, because I want to send you with an important message to your brother the Vice-Khan. You have done an outstanding job both as riding-master and officer, for which I am most grateful to you. I fully trust you and know that you will persuade Ubashi and the other Kalmyk leaders to do what I ask of them.

“We have the highest opinion of your cavalry which fought so well in the Seven Years’ War. Now, in this war against Turkey, we again need the assistance of our Oirat-Kalmyk allies.

“Therefore I want Ubashi Khan, first, to despatch twenty thousand of his best cavalymen to join the Second Army under General Count Rumiántsev on the River Dnepr. Secondly, on the Kuban front, I want him to set his remaining Kalmyk forces, another twenty thousand at least, against the Tartars and mountain tribes in that area, who are subjects of the Ottoman Sultan.

“The forces on the Dnepr will, as I have said, be under the command of General Rumiántsev; those on the Kuban will be commanded by General de Medem, to whom I am sending the necessary instructions. Needless to say he will treat your Khan with all the respect due to the head of a nation.

“So this is the purpose of your mission. I should like you to leave here as soon as you possibly can. Have you any questions, Prince?”

Asaray felt immensely relieved to have his problem of travelling home solved in such an unforeseen way. He had more or less expected that the Empress would make a demand for Oirat-Kalmyk troops but not as many as this and not through him as intermediary! His heart leapt with joy but he hid his feelings. This seemed to be a good moment to draw the Empress’ attention to the unfortunate measures the Russian authorities had taken in regard to his people.

“I am honoured by the task with which Your Imperial Majesty has entrusted me and the confidence you have placed in me. I shall certainly use my powers of persuasion, such as they are, in the way Your Majesty suggests. But allow me at least to point out to Your Majesty that the number of troops required far exceeds any that the Kalmyks have ever been asked to contribute.

“Perhaps I may add that this request also comes at a time when my people are in dire straits as a result, mainly, of the Russian policy of colonization in the Volga region. If I could present the Torghut leaders with a brighter prospect for the near future, their assistance might be more readily forthcoming.

“We are, of course, aware that Your Majesty rules a vast empire and therefore has very great responsibilities. But however small our nation is, we have our own duties. I should be less than frank if I did not ask Your Imperial Majesty to consider whether the Kalmyks do not deserve better treatment at the hands of the Russian government.”

Having delivered this speech, when he had only been invited to ask questions, Asaray expected an imperial reprimand or, worse, a withdrawal of his travelling orders. What he had said could not have pleased the Empress but he was glad to have spoken his mind. There was a short and ominous silence, then Catherine’s answer was unexpectedly mild:

“I know about this problem, Prince, and I am glad that you have brought it up. As regards the number of troops required, I want you to explain to the Khan that in this initial stage of the war we are rather short of manpower in the south and therefore need a relatively large number of men to assist us. However, we expect to increase

our troop strength in that area fairly soon, and then many of the Torghut cavalrymen will be able to return to their home pastures.

“As to your second point, we intend, when this war is over, to re-examine our regional colonization policies in the light of the circumstances then prevailing. That is all I can promise you now and I am hoping that by that time you personally may be able to help us find a just solution. Now if you will see Counsellor Kuropatkin, he will hand you my letter to the Khan and make all the necessary arrangements. I wish you a successful journey.”

Her face wreathed in the most charming smile, she gave him her hand to kiss and withdrew.

Kuropatkin received him with great courtesy, beaming and rubbing his hands:

“This is good news for you. You have long been wanting to go home and now you can. We count on you, Prince Asaray, as a loyal friend of Russia. If you should wish to join the Torghut cavalry in the campaign, you will be granted indefinite leave from your regiment. If not, you are expected to return to St. Petersburg.”

He gave Asaray the Empress’ letter to the Khan. When they discussed his journey Asaray was surprised to find that all the necessary arrangements had already been made — an unheard of thing in Russia.

“Will you come with me, Gambil?” Asaray asked.

“Thank you so much, Your Highness, but my wife does not want to leave Russia and thanks to her I have become quite happy here. Please forgive me, Your Honour, and thank you a thousand times for all you have done for me. I shall say prayers for your safe journey.”

It was with some emotion that they took leave of one another.

At a melancholy and richly alcoholic farewell party given by Petrusha, Grisha and Andrei, no mention was made of Tatiána, except when Petrusha in an aside with Asaray said, with a wink:

“I’ve always thought it might be too much for you to embrace both Tatiána and the Russian-orthodox religion.”

Asaray set off early the next day. At that ghastly hour he was touched to find his friends there, come to say goodbye and bringing along a Russian priest to bless his travels as was the custom.

It was early winter and he was travelling by sleigh. Being in possession of the official papers of an imperial courier he would have no trouble changing horses at every post-house. The conditions for sledging were ideal most of the way. Snow had fallen and the air did not stir. The coachman kept his team of three going at a fast pace, the horses running with their necks extended and manes flying as if they, too, were excited by the fresh snow and its cool smell. The sledge slid soundlessly over the powdery surface. The stillness was almost complete, broken only by the muted clip-clop of horses’ hooves, the jingle of bells and the occasional cracking of a whip.

Nothing else, no voices, no idle talk, no lively rhetoric, even Petrusha would be struck dumb in this all-embracing, mysterious silence.

Here Russia was at its most beautiful, Asaray thought. The sight of the unending whiteness, still tinged with blue at this early hour, that enveloped the solitary troika made him inexpressibly happy. The sun had risen dimly through the early morning haze and only an hour later was shining with blinding force on the myriad silver crystals. A steady flow of steam was rising from the flanks of the dark horses. And he was on his way home!

Yet he deliberately put off any speculation on what might lie ahead of him, of how he might be received by Ubashi and how he could get back his ulus. Let it remain unknown and wrapped in mystery for the time being. Instead, a succession of images of his life in St. Petersburg, his work, his friends, and his loves passed through his mind. He knew that there was much in Russia which he would miss: the idealism, the passionate discussions, the boundless hospitality, the joyful life, the warm friendships. He would miss Andrei and Tánia the most. But that part of his life was all over now.

He had drifted through life for far too long, yielding to all the temptations which came his way. Except for two or three friends such as Andrei, the Russians had in all those years never truly accepted him as one of their own but he had come perilously close to being swallowed by their seductive qualities.

Day after long day the sledge glided over the white plains and the frozen rivers. Asaray's thoughts now turned gradually to the tasks awaiting him. At last the time had come to act and to make himself useful to his people, and the spirit of adventure seized him: he was about to enter a new phase in his life and he was in a fighting mood. If Ubashi and the other leaders agreed to contribute troops for the Russian war against Turkey, that would give them a certain amount of negotiating power. It might become a turning point in their relations with the big Bear. A turning point? Go on! The Empress' policies were hard as nails and Ubashi would, of course, be uncooperative.

The longer he was travelling and pondering the future, the more uncertain he became. He wondered what he'd find after years of absence. Time had not stood still there either. How would they look, Badma, his mother...? Suddenly he saw Badma again as he remembered her, the moment they parted. After all these years would she still be free? He hoped she hadn't changed too much and that she had remained faithful to him. But how could he demand that of her? He had very nearly married a Russian girl, the lively, spontaneous and beautiful but also superficial and selfish Tatiána. Badma was different: graceful, kind-hearted and wise, a girl of the steppe who had shared his dreams for the future of their people. That was his future now; would it be theirs too?

After a fortnight of fast travel Asaray found himself on the steppe of his youth and his excitement mounted. His festive mood was reinforced when at the next station he

obtained three beautiful light-grey mares to draw his sleigh. At last he shed the Russian uniform and donned his wide and easy native clothes. The sun was sinking below the horizon; the carriage slid over the darkening vastness of the plain with only its lanterns throwing two yellow blobs on the snow. A pale moon was reflected in the frozen Volga; in the distance the familiar towers of Sarepta came in sight.

He rounded a hill and his heart stood still: outlined against the darkened sky stood the white gers of a small nomad encampment. He heard men calling out to each other in his mother-tongue. This was not the Khan's or another Prince's camp, he soon discovered; they were 'black bone'. There were very few guards. When he addressed one of them and gave his name, the man bowed and said in respectful tones:

"We are greatly honoured, Prince Asaray. So you have at last come home! What a joyous occasion this is! I shall take you immediately to our zaisang."

A stocky man with the kindest eyes, a round, sunburnt face and a heavy moustache welcomed him with a wide smile:

"Prince Asaray, mende! What a marvellous surprise."

He was made to sit down at the place of honour by the fireside.

"You have not been forgotten here, sir. Even our children have learned at school how you saved the peace for our nation by sacrificing yourself to the Oross. Did you know there are popular songs sung about you?"

Asaray laughed. It was a wonderful feeling to be welcomed thus but did not this Torghut zaisang exaggerate a little just to please him?

"Oh come, surely most people have forgotten all about me."

While the smiling hostess made tea, her husband called their daughter, a girl of about ten with pigtails and a finely formed oval face with dark, expressive eyes, like her mother's:

"Listen, Jamtsal, this gentleman comes from afar and has never heard the song about Prince Asaray. Will you sing it for him?"

Without a moment's hesitation she began to sing in her clear girl's voice: Black horses pulled the carriage of fair Prince Asaray. The Torghuts wept when far it went to distant Oross land. Across the steppe, in summer heat, from us he went away, so that there be no war, but peace, the noble taiji Asaray. White horses will come back with him when Shakyamuni's will it be. And we will feast and welcome him, our fair Prince, Asaray taiji.

Asaray had trouble keeping the tears back when he stroked Jamtsal's hair and kissed her on the forehead:

"Will you recognize Prince Asaray when he comes?"

She gave him a roguish look and pointed at him:

"It is you! I saw the three white horses and your sleigh standing outside."

"You are a clever girl, Jamtsal. You must come with your parents to the feast we shall give when I am home."

His hosts told him that the Khan's herds were wintering farther south, in the Kuma valley, as usual in this season, and invited him to spend the night in their camp. He would sleep in a real ger again!

A sheep was slaughtered and the meat roasted on a spit. Bread and cheese were served, soured mare's milk — *suma chigen* — and *araki*. He savoured the wonderful, almost forgotten tastes and smells. The mutton and lamb roasted on charcoal were better than any Russian beef, pheasants or caviar, and foreign wines or vodka could not compare with the delicious *chigen* and *araki*. He loved the food and the cosy atmosphere of the ger. It was almost a home-coming for him. But his hosts, though kind and natural, were rather coarse and primitive too. When the husband had gnawed at a bone and then handed it to his wife to finish it, Asaray reflected that as an exile he had learned standards of behaviour and manners which were now of no use to him any more and must be abandoned.

Asaray asked them hundreds of questions about their life, and he noted with pleasure that in spite of many hardships, they were still the cheerfully industrious people he had known. His people never complained. He also realized now that these Torghuts had no idea of what Russia was like. His hosts asked the oddest questions, and he briefly explained what sort of a life he had led there; sometimes, when he did not find the right words, he had to say it in a different way before they understood.

On his way southward he passed many Torghut and Dürbet camps where he was warmly welcomed. He still felt a little awkward in the beginning, uncertain about the right expressions and the correct behaviour. The interior of the simple *kibitka*'s where he stayed, though cosy and warm, seemed small, more dirty, greasy and smelly than he remembered. He could not get used to some of the food which made his stomach turn, but there were also tasty dishes which he recognized with great pleasure. The music of his own language, the smiles and warm hospitality of his hosts, the sights and smells of horses, sheep and camels took him back to his happy youth. At one of his halting-places he obtained fine riding-horses for the onward journey; here Asaray took leave from the Russian coachman and sent him back to St. Petersburg with his sledge.

Approaching the main camp and seeing the Khan's *kibitka* with the royal standard, and the guards with their lances stuck in the ground, he became painfully aware that these were not his father's any more, but Ubashi's. Having dismounted in front of the large tent and asked a guard to announce him, he was kept waiting for an unusually long time, in sharp contrast to the friendly way in which he had been received thus far. But what else had he expected? Ubashi was hostile to him. He had dealt him a treacherous blow, and at that thought his long-smouldering anger flamed up again. Yet he resolved to approach his elder brother in a correct and friendly manner.

The Khan was visibly taken aback by his brother's sudden reappearance. Oddly, Asaray read not only bewilderment and hostility but also fear in Ubashi's eyes, who

had trouble finding the right words of greeting, as if the ghost of a long-dead enemy had risen before him.

Ubashi spoke the obligatory words of welcome with barely concealed reluctance, and Asaray, controlling his anger and resentment, answered:

“I’m happy to find you in good health, Ubashi. Naturally, you are surprised at my sudden reappearance. I so much wanted to come home, but the Oross never let me. Then I had a stroke of luck. The Russian Empress asked me to bring you an official letter in connection with the Russian-Turkish war.”

Ubashi frowned and after a short silence grimly remarked: “Why doesn’t the Tsagan Khan send that letter through her police-commissioner, the grand-pristav here? Why send you? I think that’s most irregular, very strange and suspect indeed. You’re an officer in the Oross army, I’ve been told, and therefore in their service. Do they perhaps intend to appoint you Khan in my place? Isn’t that what you’ve always been after?”

“Are you out of your mind? Who told you such nonsense? I’m not in the service of the Oross, never swore allegiance to their Empress. And I certainly do not want to take your place. All I want is to get my ulus back. But let’s not quarrel now, Ubashi, we are brothers after all. Here is the Empress’ letter. You had better read it.”

He handed Ubashi the document, which his brother read and turned over in his hands, still frowning deeply:

“So the White Khan wants us to contribute troops for her war, and she sends you with this message. Whatever you may say, I don’t trust it at all.”

Ubashi’s hand holding the letter was shaking. The man really seemed to believe what he was saying!

“As to your ulus,” Ubashi continued, “which aren’t really yours at all, you can have them back as soon as my marriage with Badma is concluded.”

Asaray was speechless at first, then asked:

“Your marriage with Badma? That can’t be true, we are officially engaged!”

“Were engaged. You’ve come too late, my dear brother. She will be my wife.” He laughed derisively.

“We shall see!” With these words Asaray abruptly departed, ignoring protocol, seething with rage and feeling sick and empty.

When Asaray went to see his mother, the first thing he noticed was the very modest ger in which she lived and the absence of all her former splendour and comfort. Tseren-Jalla threw herself into the arms of her son and hugged him, her eyes moist. Her son, her only son, had come back to her after eight long years! She could not take her eyes off him; and he kept looking at her with love and tenderness. He was overcome with emotion, fully aware now how much he had missed the warmth and care of his mother and his home. Something within him, which had hardened and frozen as a result, perhaps, of his deliberate attempts to distance

himself from home — his only means of preserving his sanity in the foreign country — this hardness now melted away.

His mother had visibly aged, but she still had a young girl's figure and her mind was as lively as ever; her smile sparkled as before and the same light shone in the tender brown eyes he knew so well.

“How is it, Mother, that you live in such a simple ger? Has this hateful Ubashi also taken your beautiful orgê from you?”

“When he confiscated your ulus I also lost many of my possessions. There was nothing I could do about it. It was terrible, Asaray, and so unnecessary. It was my sister Najitana and that evil Kirin who put him up to it. Ubashi is really to be pitied in a way, for he is completely under their influence.”

“To be pitied? It's disgraceful and I'll make him pay for this!”

“We shall see, my son. Tell me first how you have fared in Russia.”

There was so much to explain that it was hard to know where to begin. He decided to be frank about his life in Russia and not to make his behaviour look better than it had been. At times his mother looked shocked but on the whole she took everything very well. When she learned that her son had not been treated badly — as she had feared — and had been successful in his studies and his job, she was delighted. A flush of pleasure transformed her into the gay young mother he had known.

Then came the question which he was burning to ask:

“What's the matter with Badma? Is it true that she is marrying Ubashi?”

“Yes, my son, it's true,” but before she could say anything more, Asaray burst out:

“But that's awful! How in Heaven's name did that come about? I can quite understand that she couldn't wait for me all those years, even though we had promised each other, but how could she choose that hateful man, that scoundrel? The very thought makes me sick.”

“No, Asaray, you are mistaken. He's not a scoundrel.” She told him how he had improved in many ways, that Badma in her desperation had attempted to journey to St. Petersburg, how discouraged she had been when she had been forced to return, and even more when Serbejab had brought Asaray's letter which had sounded cool and unloving. Why was that? Were you uncertain about your feelings?”

He admitted this and told her about Tatiána.

“In that case you have no right to blame her. The only thing you can do is to go and see Badma. I think you should have a frank talk together. Though we have quarrelled occasionally, she really is a darling and has been a great support for me. You're not to reproach her.”

“I'll discuss it all with her. What I minded most in Russia was the nearly total lack of communication with my relatives. Our letters never reached their destination, but I got the one which Tsebek-Dorji brought, about Father's death. Can you tell me more about him? Why did he sacrifice me?”

While talking with Asaray, she had made tea. They were having all sorts of delicious bits of cheese and bread and Chinese ginger (she was poor now and might have to fast a whole week, he thought, to pay for this delicacy). The simple tent was cosier than any royal orgê could ever be. Asaray felt very comfortable despite the melancholy of the situation.

“He was a brave man and stood up against the Oross whenever the interests of the Kalmyks warranted it. Years before, when he had no children yet, he had had to promise to give up a son as hostage. Later he always succeeded in delaying the matter. But when the Empress demanded that you be handed over, our military strength was at its lowest and we were in economic difficulties. Your father hated losing you but he considered it unjust to provoke an open confrontation and risk the lives of many young Torghuts for the sake of the freedom of his own son. That was also the view of the zarga. He hoped, of course, that you would not be absent for very long.”

“If only he had explained this more fully to me, that night when they came for me! Why he did he not tell me earlier about the fate that awaited me?”

“Perhaps you should have been prepared for this but, you see, your father had always been an optimist who thought he could thwart the Russian schemes forever. Then, when there was no way out any more, he felt ashamed and too embarrassed to give you a proper, full explanation, especially when you were so brave and calm, asking only for instructions.”

“I felt hurt and betrayed at the time, but that is all over, Heaven be praised.”

She poured some more tea, adding a generous portion of roasted millet and sour cream.

Their conversation turned again to Ubashi’s expropriation of his ulus.

“He told Badma that he regrets what he has done and will give them back to you when they get married.”

“A present from him? A sop when he marries Badma? I would refuse to accept it!”

Asaray straightened his back and his chin went up the way his mother remembered it used to when he was determined about anything.

“He can’t give them away: they are my inheritance,” he added. “I shall take them back by force, if necessary. Those people are my responsibility.”

“You’re quite right, of course: they should be returned to you at once. But wait awhile before you take action. Perhaps another solution will present itself.”

The maid entered, bringing a tasty meal which they ate with relish. Tseren-Jalla poured a special brand of home-made araki which made him glow inside.

“I haven’t asked you yet how you managed to escape from Russia. What is this ‘official mission’ all about?”

When he had explained she asked anxiously:

“Will there be a military campaign then? You are not leaving us again, are you, Asaray? You have only just returned to us!”

“No, mother; not yet. I must first settle out personal affairs. Once I have done that we shall see about the rest.”

They talked on into the small hours that night and still did not cover all they wanted and needed to discuss. It was a wonderful feeling for Asaray to be back home, even in such reduced circumstances, and when he eventually slept it was so fast that he awakened completely rested at dawn.

A message arrived from Prince Tsebek-Dorji, Chairman of the Council, requesting Asaray to attend the meeting called to discuss the Empress' request for troops. The council members received him warmly and with great respect, only Ubashi greeting him coolly.

Once the Khan had reported on the Empress Catherine's message, the Chairman asked Prince Asaray whether he had anything to add. Did he, by any chance, know the strength of General Rumiantsev's forces and where they would be deployed?

“I was told in St. Petersburg,” Asaray said, “that the twenty thousand Torghut troops for Rumiantsev which they have requested would constitute about one third of that general's force. Part of them would cover the right bank of the River Dnepr and observe enemy movements in Bendery and Achakov, whilst the main Torghut force would be deployed near the Sea of Azov to guard against the Crimean Tartars, farther west, therefore, than our troops usually operate.”

After lengthy discussions it was decided that, rather than sending twenty thousand men now to Rumiantsev's army on the distant Dnepr, these troops would be used against the nearby Kuban Tartars as soon as weather conditions permitted. Tsebek-Dorji requested Asaray to convey this message to Colonel Kishenskov, the grand pristav (police commissioner) who was permanently stationed with the Torghuts.

The Russian official was less than pleased:

“This is far short of what Her Imperial Majesty has demanded. General Rumiantsev badly needs your troops, you know that. Your cavalry had fought in Russian campaigns as far distant as Finland, Livland (Livonia) and Prussia. Why is the Dnepr now too far?”

“The number of troops we contributed then was much smaller and, more importantly, you were not colonizing our territory at that time!”

“Ah, so is that the real reason?”

“Yes, it is. I would be grateful if you would let Her Majesty know about it when you forward the Khan's letter to her.”

“I do not think my government will accept any conditions to be imposed by your Khan but I shall inform her Majesty of his feelings.”

Kishenskov then asked Asaray how he personally was faring. In reply he said that his protracted absence from home had cost him dearly, for he had lost most of his possessions. He had never understood why the Russian government had always refused his requests to return home.

“But surely you must know that our government had been prepared to let you go back after your father’s death. It was Ubashi who repeatedly urged them to keep you in St. Petersburg.”

Asaray felt chilled to the bone at this appalling revelation. His own brother had done this! How could he have been so utterly despicable?

“Your absence has been very convenient for them,” Serbejab had said when he visited Asaray in the Russian capital.

Kishenskow noticed his expression.

“I know how you must feel, Prince. You have almost become one of us now. We understand and sympathize with you. Shall I ask Governor Beketov to issue an order that your property be returned to you? He has that power and I am sure he will oblige.”

Asaray gave him a wan smile:

“My dear Colonel, I am as much a Torghut now as I ever was when I first went to Russia, perhaps more so. Let us have no misunderstanding about that. You are kind but I would not want to accept any Russian interference, however well-intentioned, in a purely internal Torghut affair. I shall have to settle such matters myself.”

The last thing Asaray wanted or needed was to be under an obligation to the Russians. But he was now more than ever determined to even the score with Ubashi and regain possession of his ulus.

And Badma? Her image had faded again. But how well he remembered that night when he had ridden to her encampment, pursued by Russian horsemen, and the things she had said when they parted and she gave him the statuette of Shakyamuni. Though he did not find it easy, he decided he could not postpone their meeting any longer. He knew he looked his best in sports clothes and so selected his riding outfit with great care.

He rode to see Badma with an heavy heart. Her parents bade him a warm welcome; they were visibly pleased to find him looking fit and well. While tea was served and they exchanged civilities, he secretly hoped that Badma would not be present so he would meet her at another time and place. He was afraid that she might have changed so much or would find him so different that it would prove impossible to gather up the now very thin threads of their relationship. It would be awful if there was no feeling left between them.

When she entered she looked demure and a little shy, her eyes lowered; she might almost have been a stranger, a creature he had never known. He felt curiously bashful and distant now too, as though there was a veil between them which neither of them could penetrate. But when their eyes met briefly, almost accidentally, he was again immersed for a moment in that luminous warmth which dissolved his defences and spoke directly to the core of his being.

Dressed in a pale green silk gown and wearing only a necklace of small pearls and jade to adorn her golden beauty, she was as entrancingly beautiful as he could ever

remember. They both said very little to each other, speaking more to and through her parents, as though neither dared to risk saying the wrong thing.

Asaray did not stay long. Everything here was so different from what he had grown used to in Russia and he realised it would take him longer to readjust: he had lost his natural self-confidence amongst his own people and their rituals and customs and he felt confused. Indeed it was only the ritualistic social practices which had prevented him giving himself away more than once since his return. He had assumed it would all come back to him easily and immediately once he was home and it was a bitter lesson for him to learn that he had changed more profoundly than he had believed during his long sojourn amongst the Oross.

Above all, how should he approach an Oirat-Mongol girl whom he had not seen for years? Badma looked so very attractive yet also so distant. Whilst he had been changing, so, of course, had she, but he didn't really want to believe it. Was this to be the cruellest result of his service for his people in that alien land?

The next day he summoned up all his courage and went back, hoping to find the right words and gestures so he could do the right thing, the thing he now knew his heart desired. Badma looked surprised yet pleased when she saw him. Using all the formality he could muster he asked whether she would join him for a ride, dreading her polite refusal. Yet, after a moment's hesitation, she did not decline, nodding her assent before she went to change into riding clothes. As he watched her walk and noticed again her delicate yet natural gestures, Asaray recalled the quiet way in which she always moved, without undue haste or emphasis, creating a dreamlike atmosphere which wafted over everyone in her presence.

His past feelings had welled up again and he realised he had broken out into a cold sweat whilst he was waiting for her answer to his invitation, so desperately did he need her. However, he also realised that he must not assume that her feelings for him had been rekindled to their old strength or, indeed, at all. It was all so vexing for him yet he must restrain his anxiety.

Once out in the open and on horseback she seemed a very different girl from the one he had met with her parents the previous day. She challenged him to a race which she easily won. Although the day was chilly they were both warmly dressed and, whilst they rested their horses, they sheltered in a deserted little hut, protected against the sharpness of the wind.

"You won this race, Badma, but it was no great feat really, with you on your young thoroughbred against me and my horse, both of us old, tired and broken down."

She burst out laughing at this, her face radiant as he remembered it:

"Old, tired and broken down you're certainly not!"

Their conversation remained light and frivolous until he finally dared to ask her:

"So, is it true that you're going to marry Ubashi?"

Even in the semi-darkness in the cabin he saw her turn pale.

"Yes," she answered curtly.

Asaray sighed forlornly.

“During all the years I’ve been away I have feared that this might happen, but when Serbejab told me you had waited for me I dared to hope.... What made you change your mind, and so shortly before my return? I am not seeking to reproach you. I know I had no right to expect you to wait for my return. You must know your image had faded, Badma, but now, seeing you, having you here within reach, my love has returned on full force, more even, as though nothing has changed between us.”

Although she was visibly moved she said nothing.

“Oh, dearest Badma, I know this is unfair on you but I long to take you in my arms again, to share the intimacies which were so precious to us. Do you feel nothing for me anymore? If there is any chance, please postpone your marriage to Ubashi, I implore you. You may still change your mind; you might still return to me!”

Badma, looking very grave, did not answer immediately. At long last she spoke:

“Those years of waiting and uncertainty were very difficult, Asaray, more than you can possibly know. Now you come here, out of the distant past, declaring your love as if nothing had happened. For years I received no message from you and then, when your letter arrived, there was not a single word of love or endearment. Was it any wonder I became desperate? For all I knew and all the indications I had, your feelings for me might as well have been completely dead and you were in love with someone else.”

“I’m so sorry about that, Badma. In that letter I didn’t want to be dishonest with you. I confess that at that time I indeed believed that I loved a Russian girl; we even planned to marry. But I realised that this would be a big mistake, the biggest I could have made. She and I did not belong together and I would have had to deny myself to have stayed there with her. When I wrote the letter which Serbejab took with him I still hadn’t realised this, I was confused. Shortly afterwards I broke off my engagement to Tatiana and so I have returned here as a free man. Yet I have already lost that freedom as I am entirely in your power again.”

“If only it could be so easy, Asaray. After all the pain and heartache I have suffered during those dark and lonely years, that loveless letter seemed to be the final blow. And now, to make things worse, you blithely tell me that you not only loved an Oross girl but you planned to marry her! As if that is likely to endear you to me! Since then you’ve changed your mind again and are in love with me now. For how long this time? What do you expect me to make of such glib talk? How fickle can you be?”

“Please believe me, Badma, I love you and only you. I always have. That infatuation in Russia was never the real thing. I too was lonely and far from home. It’s completely over and done with, I promise you. Otherwise I wouldn’t have broken off the engagement and left Russia, would I?”

“How am I to know, Asaray?”

“I understand your feelings but I never claimed to be above human failings. Did you never feel tempted in all those years?”

She gave him a long, sideways glance, wondering whether to confess her own indiscretion but thought better of it. Some things remained different for men than women.

“I shall be frank with you, Asaray, as I hope you have been frank with me. Even when I consented to marry Ubashi I knew I could never love him as I had loved you. But I thought I could mean much to him, help him in many ways, and that we might get on well together, not just for my own sake but also for our peoples. I had really lost all hope of your ever coming back and you can guess the pressure I was under to marry and have children.”

“Now everything has been turned upside down again and I’m not sure about my feelings for either of you any more. Good heavens, what am I to do?”

He laid his hand on hers and, in that instant, it felt as though sparks flew between them. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, Asaray, what can we do? I just don’t know any more. Can I really trust you? Can you trust me? And how could I break with Ubashi again? Can I really do that to him?”

“My darling, I know this may seem like more empty words, but I promise you you can rely on me and trust me completely. You have no idea how wonderful it is for me to have found you again, and that you give me some hope. Yes, dearest, it won’t be easy for you to reject Ubashi, I quite understand that. I also understand that it is a complex situation and that you’ll need time to think it over but, when it comes down to it, why did you insist on such a long period between your acceptance of him and the wedding?”

“You may be right, Asaray.”

“I’m absolutely certain that you love me and not Ubashi so you can’t possibly marry him. And should he profit so from his underhandedness?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have learned that when the Oross were willing to let me return here, after our father died and all the time since, Ubashi asked them to keep me in St. Petersburg. Would you really want to marry a man who had connived to keep us apart for all these years?”

Badma gasped in shock:

“Are you certain of this?”

Asaray nodded.

“How dare he!”

When they met the next day at the same place Badma flung herself into Asaray’s arms, nearly knocking him down with her unexpected enthusiasm.

“I’ve been stupid. Of course I love only you and no-one else. I shall break with Ubashi and tell him what I think of his underhand tricks.”

After a long discussion they decided that Badma would talk it over with her parents before she approached Ubashi.

One night soon after an old friend came to see Asaray, who had known him since childhood. As a boy from one of the poorest 'black bone' families Ukhur had, when dangerously ill, been cured by the lama Lobsang Norbu and had since been one of Asaray's closest friends. The thin, eager, dark-brown face of the athletic Torghut broke into a wide smile when Asaray jumped up to receive him with open arms. Before long Ukhur came to the point:

"You shouldn't stay here, Asaray. Your ulus want you back, and the sooner the better! Ubashi has his agents there and a few troops. Also the nobles who are on your side are being watched. But I could act as your secret messenger. As a commoner my movements are considered too unimportant to notice. I could make the necessary contacts to prepare for a general uprising."

Asaray accepted this offer with alacrity, and Ukhur proved as good as his word, a reliable and invaluable ally. Through him the ground was laid for a surprise move, and when the agreed date arrived and Asaray rode into his camp, he was touched by the rousing welcome he received. Ubashi's trustees had been surrounded by Ukhur and his men. Seeing the determination of the great mass of people of Asaray's ulus, Ubashi's men realised that they were powerless and saw the futility of attempting to use force. After some minor skirmishing and a few casualties Asaray was back in charge of his people and he took great pleasure in reinstalling Tseren-jalla in her proper comfort and dignity.

This coup caused uproar in the Khan's camp. Some of Ubashi's friends and sycophants counselled him to take strong action, and Naijitana hysterically urged him to punish his treacherous brother. Ubashi, at his wits' end (not a very long journey, as someone had remarked) invited Tsebek-Dorji and the other members of the zargo to plan their strategy together.

"Asaray's behaviour proves what I have feared all along," Ubashi argued. "He wants to set himself up against me and become Khan in my place. We must deliver him an ultimatum and, if he does not surrender, crush his power. How much support do you think we could muster to bring him to his knees?"

Tsebek-Dorji, if he could not be Khan himself, had always preferred a weak Khan such as Ubashi to a strong one. A complete victory of Ubashi over Asaray, even if that were possible — which he very much doubted — would not serve that purpose. However, a prolonged antagonism between the two brothers could prove to be very useful.

"You know, Khan, Asaray is popular here. He has been acclaimed a hero. I strongly doubt that you would find a sufficient number of nobles to join you in such an expedition, the more so since most of them have always questioned your right to usurp his inheritance."

The other members of the Council echoed this note of scepticism and caution. Ubashi watched his power slipping through his fingers. Anger and fear welled up within him. He appealed to them not to let him down: if Asaray had his way, he

argued, his position as Khan would be completely undermined. But Tsebek-Dorji was not to be moved:

“Has it not occurred to you, Khan, that the Oross might come to Asaray’s assistance if you attacked him? He may already have come to terms with them secretly. After all, he is so familiar with their ways now, that they might well want to provoke such a crisis as an excuse to install him in your place. And that would be the end of you as Khan.”

Ubashi could only clench his fists in impotent fury and despair but he restrained himself and retired to his orgê without another word. He was at the end of his tether and had the strongest araki brought to him but he had no taste for it. Everyone had turned against him and the demons wanted to destroy him; there was no hope left.

All that remained for him was Badma, his only triumph over Asaray.

Though Badma had chosen Asaray, she shrank from telling Ubashi that she would not marry him. Nor were her parents pleased about this. Her mother in particular insisted that she should keep her word; it was unthinkable to rebuff the Khan so grossly and at this late stage. Badma, usually so calm and level-headed by nature, fell prey to confusing emotions.

They had long discussions at home about this delicate subject, which only served to make her more nervous. Her love for Asaray was not in doubt, but was she allowed to cherish it or should she sacrifice it for a man she did not love? It would be torture. Finally her father yielded to his daughter's feelings and offered to go and see Ubashi with her.

The moment was not propitious but for some matters no moment will ever be appropriate. Ubashi had not recovered yet from the blow that Asaray had delivered him by recapturing his ulus, when Badma and her father came to inform him that she would not marry him, but Asaray. He flew into an uncontrollable passion, pulled his hair, screamed invective and rolled his eyes in such an alarming way that his visitors feared a demon had taken possession of him. It was no use talking with him further, so they withdrew. Badma was shaken, feeling guilty at being the cause of Ubashi's misery, but her father said he had never known the Khan to be so unbalanced and violent. It was a good thing, he now thought, that his daughter was not going to be Ubashi's wife.

After the departure of his visitors Ubashi still fumed and fretted with rage and indignation. They were going too far, this was unacceptable. If Asaray thought he could get away with resisting him by force and then stealing his bride as well, he was badly mistaken. Ubashi swore he would make him pay for this. To begin with he would wreck that insane educational project of his and hold him up to ridicule, but his next step would be to hit him directly. That man must be eliminated for good!

Later Badma's father had another talk with Ubashi. He promised him to state openly that the Khan in his magnanimity had given Badma her freedom back on account of the fact that her first promise of marriage had been to Asaray. In this way the bitter pill would be sugared somewhat and Ubashi's loss of face would be transformed into a gain in prestige. However, when his visitor had left, the Khan stormed and raged again. He would never forgive the young couple.

Now Badma and Asaray met frequently. They discovered that their youthful love had survived all those years of separation and had now matured into something much more profound and stable. Asaray was enchanted to find that she — though by no means weak-willed — never even tried to impose her will on him. He in turn found it easy and natural to bend his own desire towards an unspoken, common purpose. Never had he known such harmony and peace.

How different Tatiána and others had been. With them he had nearly always experienced some sort of tension, an eagerness and urgency, as if he continuously risked missing out on something important. All the pain they had suffered in the past was gone and forgotten.

One afternoon they were resting in a hollow some distance from the camp. White clouds sailed slowly past in a pale-blue sky. It was a windless day but chilly, and they lit a fire to warm themselves. Suddenly Asaray sat up and pointed:

“Look, three wolves on their way to that herd over there!”

He whistled and called out: “Come here!”.

To Badma’s amazement they changed direction and came running towards them. It frightened her but they stopped some hundred paces away. Asaray gave them a long, searching look and said quietly:

“Now you go home.”

The three wild animals turned around and ran back the way they had come.

“I had heard you could do this but did not believe it!”

“Well, I did it neither for fun nor to impress you. One should only do it when it is necessary. They were clearly going to attack that herd. You know, I lost this ability when I was in Russia. I had no idea why. Was it the influence of the big city or the dissolute life I was leading for some time? Now, strangely, it seems to have come back.”

They sipped the tea they had brought. Badma, a slight frown on her face, asked him:

“Tell me now, assuming that you had not been sent to Russia, would you have married me, or would you really have preferred to become a lama? You were tempted, were you not? Your tutor, Lobsang-Norbu, was a remarkable man. Did he ever suggest you should become a learned monk? I have often imagined you, sitting cross-legged all day, studying the holy books and saying prayers, preparing yourself for Nirvana, and I wondered whether you would ever have looked my way.”

He smiled: “I am sure I would have looked at you more lovingly than a lama should. Don’t you know how weak I am in the face of female beauty?”

Then, gravely: “No, Lobsang-Norbu never urged me to don the yellow cloth. Before I had met you, I sometimes dreamed of emulating one of our famous prince-monks. But I do not believe I would have been suited for the contemplative life of a lama. At best I might have found a practical job as a teaching or medical lama, for instance.

“You see, Badma, I simply am not so much interested in the life hereafter as in our life here and now. Sometimes I also wonder whether it is not a rather selfish thing to do: to give oneself over to contemplation, acquire merits and prepare for a higher stage of consciousness — quite apart from the question whether man is able to do this all by himself.

“You sound heretical,” she observed. “If people do try to become better, more pure, doesn’t that have a beneficial influence on others as well?”

“Well yes, if they radiate their goodness and purity, if they let others share in it. Not if they keep to themselves as so often is the case.”

“Wouldn’t our world be a much better one,” Asaray continued, “if we were less concerned with our future happiness and concentrated our efforts more on making this life more worthwhile — ours and that of our fellow-men? It is difficult enough to live correctly, to practice compassion and selflessness. Wrapping oneself in thought about the hereafter can be an excuse for neglecting one’s duties.”

Here Badma nodded emphatically: “That’s exactly what I think and feel, only you express it much better.”

Asaray looked at her. Her bluish-black hair, shining as freshly polished blackwood, hung in a long, single braid over a lambskin coat covered with deep-blue satin. Her slow, graceful gestures, her sincerity, her eyes dark with feeling, everything about her was adorable.

* * * *

There was a huge crowd at the wedding, which was celebrated in the traditional style of the Oirat-Kalmyks. With the exception of Ubashi and his mother, who pleaded sickness, nearly everyone of some importance had come.

Asaray was more excited than he cared to admit. With his friends he carried the new, immaculately white ger in which he was to live with Badma to the ulus of the bride. There it was pitched outside the camp and consecrated by a lama with incense and prayers. While Badma’s parents served a meal to the groom’s relatives and their own, he and his friends waited in another tent for the great moment, which seemed an interminable time coming.

The vibrant belly-deep chanting of the lamas, the throbbing of their drums, and the blowing of conch shells and trumpets announced the beginning of the marriage ceremony. Now the young couple were brought together, but they were not allowed to look at each other. They knelt facing the east on a specially decorated rug outside the threshold of their new home.

The crowd applauded the groom, who looked very handsome in his traditional robe of deep russet, and Badma whose beauty was breath-taking. Her natural good looks were enhanced by the dazzling finery and jewels that a Mongolian princess has at her disposal. Her dress was made of gold brocade and sable with round flowery gold patterns on a russet background and with light blue cuffs. Her ear-rings, necklace and elaborate pendants were made of gold and silver, coral, turquoise, malachite and pearls. On her head she had a beautiful skull-cap of lilac satin with stripes of scarlet and grey silk brocade, and a large russet knot button on top; attached to her headgear were chin bands of light blue satin.

The spectators felt personally and emotionally involved since, widely known and loved, she was their ideal of a bride. They were also thrilled by the romance of the wedding of two young people who had been forcefully separated during many years and had waited for each other all that time.

Asaray and Badma linked elbows. At the touch of her arm on his, her vibrant emotion communicated itself to him so directly that for him this was the most sacred moment. When the lama-priest asked them whether they were entering into the marriage of their own free will, each answered in a clear voice:

“I am.”

The lama cautioned the groom to be tolerant and the bride to obey her husband. Thereupon an ancient custom of the cattle-raising nomads was followed. A bowl with meat broth was put in front of them and the couple were given a sheep’s shoulder-blade and leg bone to hold in their right hands. The lama continued to say prayers. Two young men came and gently pressed Asaray’s and Badma’s head to the earth three times as a symbol of their devotion to the people and the herds. Now they were married. They gave each other a look of secret understanding and love; neither of them was allowed to show emotion openly.

The groom was not permitted to lead his bride away yet. Popular custom demanded that a few hurdles be taken first. Only when they themselves and all the relatives and guests had passed around the bowl of meat broth, did Badma’s parents have the right to give her to the groom. But their attempt to do so was thwarted by a group of young maidens who came to ‘protect’ and guard the bride.

Yet another group, now of married women, appeared on the scene. It was their duty to seize Badma and wrest her from the maidens. A mock battle ensued with the bride screaming and wailing. When the wives were victorious they tied the bride’s hair into two plaits and dressed her in the clothing of a married woman. Her hair was adorned with ornaments of plaited silver and filigree with small pearls. She was given a multicoloured hat to wear, with upturned brim of black velvet and a light blue satin interior topped by a dome of brown satin, carrying a knot button and richly decorated with coral, turquoise, pearls and silver, from which two tassels of red silk fringes hung down.

That evening the ger of the young couple was moved a little farther away from the camp. Badma, once again ‘weeping’ and ‘resisting’, was led by her husband to their new dwelling. Once inside the fresh and clean-smelling ger, they flew into each other’s arms. For Asaray it was a relief that all the ceremonies, some of them quite primitive, were over now. He noticed that Badma, more Mongol than he, had been very moved by the religious ceremony, but soon they were both laughing about the mock battle:

“What an actress you are, Badma!”

“You looked a little sour when I resisted the wives...”

They knew that this marriage would be very different from the one they had planned nine years ago, before Asaray was sent to Russia. Now both of them were more aware of the world around them. Each had gained a deeper knowledge of his and her strengths and weaknesses. Each had now more to offer to the other. To Asaray it was as if he had finally become complete, as if an important part had been lacking before. They loved each other in a way they had never dreamed of. They had never felt so intensely and deliriously happy.

* * * *

All through that winter the Torghuts stayed in the Kuma valley and the northern foothills of the Caucasus, enjoying the mild climate. Surprisingly no further news had come from St. Petersburg regarding the Empress' demand for troops for her war against the Ottoman Empire. They gave it no more thought and led their carefree life. Asaray showed his wife everything he had loved and enjoyed as a boy, and he made one trip after another with her through the river valleys and into the magnificent foothills and mountains of the Caucasus.

Then spring arrived, in this region indescribably beautiful. They woke up one morning and found acres of wild flowers in all colours had emerged overnight, while in the distance tall, awesome giants stood guard over the green plains: high, purple mountains topped with silvery peaks.

"Isn't this the most beautiful country we've ever seen? The newborn lambs and foals seem to be as happy here as we are."

"Yes, it's a delightful spot," Asaray agreed.

He also felt excited. In spring everything looked new and fresh, and they were bursting with energy.

But here in the South it was soon getting too warm and the grass was drying out. The time had come to migrate back to the Volga. Early one morning, after prayers led by the Supreme Lama, the Torghuts began their trek northward.

Endless rows of men and women on horseback: the young women prettily made up; the men, with their dark-bronzed and deeply lined faces, looked strong and proud in their fur or leather coats and bonnets; others rode bare-headed with one long lock of hair hanging down from the middle of a clean-shaven pate.

The herds seemed interminable. First hordes of ponies, accompanied by the most skilful and agile of the young horsemen, who were carrying long poles with a running noose of rope at the end. Then thousands of cows and oxen, the latter loaded with tents and luggage as well as infants in their cradles and bleating new-born lambs.

These were followed by caravans of camels, more heavily laden still with gers and weighty loads of baggages, veritable ships of the undulating desert and steppe, supremely unaware, it seemed, of their staggering loads. They formed a stately procession, the Khan's camels in the lead, all of them moving with a steady, swaying rhythm through the wide open spaces. Each was covered with a blue and red deck

cloth, its gay tassel hanging down over the tail. Some carried the noble families, others their tents and household belongings. Carts containing statues of the gods and holy books were drawn by splendid, white Bukhara dromedaries. Alongside walked the camel guards holding long, multi-coloured woollen bridles.

Last of all came the countless flocks of sheep and lambs, tended by young boys and girls on ponies.

Asaray and Badma, riding up and down to see if all was well, so much enjoyed this migration, that they wanted it to last forever. For Asaray, who had been away for so long, it brought back happy memories of his childhood.

After two to three weeks of trekking, covering about twenty miles a day, they came upon a magnificent view: the immense river Echil — or Volga, as the Oross called it — and the lush green grasslands beyond. He remembered how every year it had felt like coming home and at the same time meeting the unexpected. In those harmless-looking prairies might lurk Kazaks or other mortal enemies, and one always had to be alert.

The river also fascinated him. Crafts of every shape and size were moving at different paces. He watched the large vessels with their great square sails flapping against the tall, black masts; and others being towed by their crew with measured pace along the bank. A jaunty little boat was dancing past, a lumbering barque floating slowly by.

At one of the narrowest parts of the river, near the town of Sarepta, the native Cossacks were already waiting for them. Every year around this time they enjoyed a brisk business when the Torghuts rented all available boats and barges. The crossing took three days, following a regular pattern. Only the women and small children, tents and baggage, camels and sheep were ferried across in the rented vessels. The horses and cows had to swim in close formation in order to be able to withstand the pull of the current. The men swam alongside, some letting themselves be pulled by their horse's tail. Here, as in the desert, Asaray reflected, the fate of man and horse was inextricably linked. It was a considerable distance, but in the middle of the fast-moving stream there was an island where everyone could rest.

And so for several days the great river was dotted with the heads of men and horses and with the ferry-boats, all trying to get to the opposite shore as quickly as possible.

They had sent advance parties across to scout the terrain farther east of the Volga. Once all the caravans had reached the other shore, they were regrouped and had to cross a long stretch of dry sand dunes, after which came the longed-for paradise. The light-blue skies and sweet-scented air signalled the beginning of one more enchanting season: their second spring of the year.

The unending steppe, flowering, green and fragrant, had come to life with the thousand voices of resurrection. The migratory birds were back; Asaray and Badma were betting who recognized most of them. The songs of larks and mockingbirds

filled the air with melody; herons dived for fish in the rivers, lakes and marshes, while here and there a solitary pelican looked on, patiently waiting his turn. Circling high in the air snipe were following the caravans and suddenly, giving forth their powerful jubilant trills, dropping to cover in the bushes. Marmots, awakened from their winter sleep, whistled at the passers-by, sitting erect on their burrows. The Torghuts were back in their customary grasslands of the Volga region.

* * * *

Ever since Badma had refused him and married Asaray, whom he hated and feared, Ubashi had sunk into a state of deep gloom and depression. It had lasted so long that his mother became seriously concerned and she decided to find a wife for him. Under Najitana's strong influence Ubashi finally consented to take Mandere, a pretty, good-natured girl of a noble Khoshut family, as his wife.

It was a relatively sober wedding, at Ubashi's insistence. On Mandere he could now work off some of his fears, anger and distress. She did not seem to mind and took loving care of him; in this way she often calmed him down.

* * * *

Asaray knew the Kalmyk cavalry had to be improved and reorganised. He succeeded in persuading most of the leaders, including the Khan, to cooperate in his scheme. Together with Tsebek-Dorji and some others he threw himself into this task. Some progress had been made when news arrived which lent the matter greater urgency.

An official message arrived from St. Petersburg: the Russian government insisted that the Empress' demand for troops be fully met. Colonel Kishenskov had reported Asaray's criticism of Russian colonization policy and had been authorized to give an oral assurance that after the war Russia would review her policies in this region in consultation with her Kalmyk allies. This statement favourably influenced the decision of the zarga, of which Asaray had, at Tsebek-Dorji's insistence, become a member. It was decided to comply with the Russian request. Before troops could be sent, however, a great deal of organisation and training was still required.

Prince Asaray was given the command of a crack unit of Torghut cavalry which, under the general direction of the Khan, would fight the Kuban Tartars, after which they would join General de Medem's forces in that region. The Torghut troops assigned to General Rumiántsev's Second Army on the Dnepr, likewise some twenty thousand men, were to be led by Prince Tsebek-Dorji.

The Torghuts and their Dürbet and Khoshot allies, Asaray knew, were by no means the militant and aggressive Mongols of the time of Genghis Khan. Lamaism had softened their warlike spirit greatly but they were still a formidable force when challenged, and the Kuban Tartars, like the Kazaks, were their arch-enemies; they often raided each other's camps. Somehow the men also began to understand, it seemed, that they had to steel themselves in battle if they were to withstand Russian pressures.

Towards the end of April 1769, after intensive training, twenty thousand men of the Kalmyk cavalry set off for the Dnepr. Shortly afterwards another twenty thousand cavalry under Ubashi and Asaray went on their way to the Kuban.

Before their departure Asaray inspected his troops one last time. He was seized with an ebullient surge of emotion when he rode down the lines of these magnificent horsemen, men of his own nation. In simple, homespun dress, so unlike the splendidly vainglorious Russian Guards' uniforms, these warriors were rough, tough, deadly efficient, and far more dangerous than their Russian counterparts. Being nomads, they were used to living in tents. They could pitch and strike camp with lightning swiftness. Their needs were scant: no elaborate wagon trains or supply lines for them.

On their way to the Kuban, to the west of the Kuma-river, the Kalmyks at first followed the familiar route southward, but later headed west through a region with deep valleys and ravines. In the distance the five peaks of the towering Besh Tau were partly hidden by cloud. The first claps of thunder (a dragon's voice, the Torghuts believed) were followed by ominous flashes of lightning (arrows shot by an angry god riding the dragon). They pitched camp just before the thunder-shower reached them and found themselves held captive all night within what looked like a gigantic cataract.

The next day Bambar and his men, during a difficult reconnaissance in muddy terrain, caught a Tartar deserter who yielded significant information. He revealed that six thousand best troops under Arslan Gerey and Mokrut Gerey, sultans of the Tartars of the Crimea, were camped less than a day's march away, and he gave their precise location.

Next morning the Kalmyk army continued its advance and, towards evening, contact was made with the enemy along a broad front. A council of war was held in which it was decided to launch a concentrated attack at daybreak to split the enemy by a deep thrust through his centre, after which an attempt could be made to liquidate his dispersed troops separately. During the night preparations were made very quietly and after a short rest the attack was launched at the chosen hour.

Most of the Tartars were taken by surprise but nevertheless put up a tough defence in bitter fighting. However, during the afternoon the superior fighting-power of the Torghuts forced a breakthrough. The enemy, dispersed and partly thrown into disorder, were ferociously pursued. Some even continued the pursuit by the light of an ash-grey moon which slipped now and then behind a passing cloud. When day broke, the enemy forces had been in the greater part destroyed.

After this successful campaign the Kalmyks went to join General de Medem's corps, which counted only a few thousand Russian regulars and Cossacks, at the agreed rendezvous. The Russian General opened the meeting with the Kalmyk leaders and gave them a short briefing. Then de Medem fixed his cold, blue eyes arrogantly on the Khan and the assembled Oirat-Kalmyk nobles, and to their astonishment proceeded to criticize them sharply:

"It was stupid of you and against all the rules to engage in a battle before awaiting my orders. Jointly and under my command we could have achieved far better results. As a result of your bungling, I am convinced that most of the enemy forces have escaped. Henceforth I shall tolerate no such independent actions on your part. Is that understood? Remember that you are under my command!"

The Kalmyk leaders were outraged. Asaray who knew Russian so well and acted as their spokesman, interpreted their feelings:

“You seem to forget, General, that you are addressing Ubashi, the Khan of a sovereign, allied nation, and all of its leaders. Your criticism is not only discourteous, it is also unfounded. While you and your small detachment were resting in a comfortable valley, we fought a battle in difficult terrain and fought it well. Most of the enemy forces which we faced were destroyed. I really must caution you, General, that unless you treat us differently we shall refuse to fight under your command.”

The Russian commander flew into a temper at what he called an act of appalling insubordination. Thereupon the Kalmyks left the conference without another word. One of the General’s adjutants, whom Asaray knew, later told him confidentially that the Empress herself had written to de Medem, pointing out that the Torghut troops would be led by the Head of the nation and urging him ‘to spare the Khan’s sensibilities and to refrain from giving him orders that would antagonize him and his people’. Knowing the General, an arrogant Baltic baron, the aide said he had not expected him to heed the imperial advice.

The Kalmyk leaders were very pleased with the way Asaray had handled the Russian general. Even Ubashi grudgingly praised him. Although de Medem did not offer apologies, he became more affable, and the uneasy alliance was restored.

In May and June the Kalmyk and Russian troops engaged in several battles and skirmishes against the Kuban Tartars and their Kabardian allies. These enemies fought like devils but were dealt such severe blows that many of their leaders surrendered. As a result, it appeared unnecessary to keep such a large force in the area, and the cavalry returned home to their grazing grounds.

It was agreed with General de Medem that they would again engage the Tartars in fighting in the spring of the following year.

For Asaray it was now a real homecoming. Badma, a perpetual source of joy, had a special surprise for him: she was expecting a baby. They were both very excited about the prospect. Badma looked more radiant than ever before. Asaray did not doubt it would be a boy.

His circle of Torghut friends and comrades had been enlarged by their shared dangers during the military campaign and they met regularly. The expansion of Russian power and problems such as their rights and duties in the military alliance were the most frequent topics of discussion.

* * * *

In January 1770 Badma bore a healthy son. When it was all over and everything cleared away, mother and child were resting. Only then was Asaray called in: “You have a son!”

He looked at the infant’s small, funny face with its many wrinkles and dark-brown, slightly slanted eyes, still half-closed. Asaray beamed with happiness: “Well done, Badma!”

A strong meat broth was brought in for her and she drank gratefully.

“Do you remember the wedding and the meat broth and the funny things they did?”

Her eyes looked up from her bowl, laughing:

“No, I can’t recall! When was that? Long, long ago? Did we have a wedding?”

A startlingly loud howl came from the little one which continued until Badma began feeding him. Asaray’s arms around her shoulders, they looked and looked at their contented son.

“What shall we call him?” Asaray asked.

“Let’s call him Batur — the Strong, the Brave One!” she said.

“Yes, that’s a good name for him.”

In the beginning Asaray had not quite felt at home here yet. Now that he was married and a father, he felt much closer to his people than before. When in the spring the festival of Tsagan Sar, the Buddhist New Year, was celebrated, the exchange of visits and presents, the feasting together and the long talks made Asaray certain that he truly belonged here. He had no fear of being recalled to St. Petersburg, but if a summons came, he would find ways and means to avoid it.

But sometimes he privately worried about what action the Empress Catherine might take when their row with the Russian general was reported to her, as it no doubt would be.

“Surely you sometimes think back to the time you spent in Russia?” Badma asked.

“Naturally. I haven’t completely forgotten that country or my very dear friends there. Occasionally I long to see them again.”

“If my journey to St. Petersburg had been successful, I would have met them all. Now I have a feeling that I am missing something essential, something which has been an important part of your life. You’ve told me once in such glowing terms about the Russian Easter feast. Are those feelings completely gone now?”

“No, the jubilant joy and intense happiness of Easter will, I think, stay with me forever. And perhaps I shall not be able or willing to discard entirely the Christian religion, some elements of which have become a part of me. But don’t worry, Badma, in my heart there is now less antagonism between these two different worlds. I’ve found my place here and can look at Russia from a distance.”

* * * *

Asaray and Ubashi were avoiding each other whenever possible and there had been no further confrontation. When Asaray had sharply told General de Medem off and pointed out to the Russian commander that he was dealing with the Head of a Nation, the Khan of the Kalmyks, Ubashi had been pleased. That act had slightly mitigated Ubashi’s hatred for his brother with whom, he realised, he had to go on living for Heaven knew how much longer.

Another factor which softened the Khan's temper somewhat and kept him from lunatic outbursts, was the love and gentle care he received from his sweet wife Mandere.

Shortly after Najitana had arranged this marriage, she had died of pneumonia, and even before her cremation Kirin had left without even saying goodbye to anyone. That man's disappearance had lifted a load off his shoulders, Ubashi now realised.

This was also true for Asaray who blamed much of the family's quarrels and misfortunes on this pseudo-shaman. He asked the Supreme Lama whether he knew why the man had left.

"I certainly do", answered the high priest. "As you well know, we have a number of good, honest shamans in our horde, whom we sometimes consult in the case of certain illnesses. But this man was an imposter, a complete fake. Worse than that, he influenced Najitana, as you must be aware, hoping no doubt to dominate her and Ubashi in order to become all-powerful himself. We lamas have long had our eyes on him and I had him arrested once by my lama-police, but Najitana insisted that he be released. Now that she has taken on a Buddha form — may she rest in peace — we had our way and deported Kirin to a place from where he will never return."

The Supreme Lama pushed the round prayer-wheel and sank in deep meditation.

* * * *

In May of that year the Kalmyks began to prepare for a new Kuban campaign, and in June and July, in order to protect themselves as well as to fulfil their commitments, they sent reconnaissance patrols into the Kuban. These were soon followed by larger units. Asaray was again to lead his own cavalry unit.

In one of her rare moods of melancholy Badma sang a song she had come to love during the years Asaray lived in St. Petersburg, about a hero who left on horseback and did not return to his beloved, who hopes to meet him in another world: "The straps of ancient silver, the heavy bridles of his horse did shine for one last time, one evening already far gone. It is high time for Turi to return. His silken reins fluttered in the wind, his steps then went away across the plain, white with hoar-frost, one evening already far gone. It is high time for Turi to return. The stars rise and go down, those who go away do not come back. It is high time for me to go and join you, Turi, Turi Bendi."

On the Kuban several minor battles were fought, some more successful than others. In one of them Asaray was wounded and his left arm was paralysed. But thanks to the lama-doctor's treatment Asaray quickly recovered. As soon as he could use his arm again he was back on his horse, leading his corps deep into Tartar territory, and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy whose main force, however, was kept intact as a result of their excellent tactics.

That August General de Medem, more arrogant than ever, arrived on the scene and unfolded his plans for a lengthy and ambitious campaign to extend far into the Caucasus and the Crimea. Prince Asaray acted once again as the Torghut negotiator.

“An interesting plan,” Asaray remarked. “But how many troops would you have available for that purpose?”

“A strong and efficient force of some eight to ten thousand men. You will, of course, supply the rest.”

“How many did you have in mind?”

“We expect you to contribute at least thirty thousand men, and when I say ‘expect’, you may assume that this is not a request but an Imperial command.”

Asaray conferred with Ubashi and the other leaders. They realised that not only would the Kalmyks have to bear the brunt of this risky campaign but that they would not be given anything in return. Also this stern order came at a juncture when reports about further Russian encroachment upon the Torghut steppe were being received. Obviously de Medem’s peremptory demands were unacceptable but they decided not to refuse openly at this stage. Their vague and indefinite answers infuriated the precise and pedantic commander, who threatened and insulted them.

But their spokesman calmly explained that they needed in any case to reinforce their troops and replenish their provisions; to that end, they would shortly return to their homeland. It was finally agreed that the Russian-Kalmyk talks would be resumed near the mouth of the River Podkumok, a tributary of the Kuma, at the end of October, the most suitable season for military operations in that area.

The Torghuts departed and returned to the Volga, as did their forces on the Dnepr who had distinguished themselves there. They had covered the Second Army’s left flank when General Rumiántsev inflicted two crushing defeats on the Turks and Tartars across the Dnestr. All the people were in a festive mood which was only interrupted by a dignified memorial service for the dead.

When autumn came, General de Medem appeared at the appointed time at the Podkumok, but the Kalmyks did not show up at the rendezvous; nor did they arrive later while he was waiting for them. He became enraged and reported the matter to his Commander-in-Chief.

Ubashi finally sent a message. He blamed his failure to keep the appointment on hostilities which had broken out with the neighbouring Kazaks. The Russians later learned that this was, as they had anticipated, merely a pretext.

General de Medem had clearly overplayed his hand and the Kalmyks’ rupture with him was final. There was no telling what, if any, the Russian reaction would be, but back home the nomads continued training their troops to be ready for any Russian surprise move which, however, did not come. No more was heard from General de Medem but greater perils lay in store.

Whilst in St. Petersburg Asaray had cherished the secret hope that he might one day make good use of his knowledge of Russian affairs and his contacts there to negotiate more favourable arrangements for his countrymen, including an agreed border to halt the Russian encroachment. That hope had been dashed by all that had happened since. The colonizers, despite being repulsed here and there, had returned in greater numbers and now even torched some of the grasslands.

The Cossack settlers had become more daring and impudent. In the past only makeshift Cossack cabins had appeared on the left bank of the Volga. Now the foreign intruders unloaded heaps of bricks and heavy logs with which they constructed permanent settlements, protected by soldiers with artillery and other heavy arms, as if this land belonged to them. There was no doubt that all these activities had been sanctioned by the Empress Catherine II.

The land around these settlements changed: steppe made way for wheat fields; where horses and cattle had once grazed, ploughs and granaries appeared. Torghuts who had to pass through these areas which had been theirs, were often stopped by Russian military patrols and sent back. The illegal encroachment upon their territories and all the humiliating measures accompanying it created strong and hostile feelings among the nomads.

The events of this last year, 1770, were the final elements in Asaray's growing conviction that his nation could not survive in such close proximity to Russia. The mandate to preserve the soul and identity of his people had become a weighty and urgent responsibility which he could no longer ignore or defer. The time had come for action: their only chance of survival lay in moving to where they could be free.

He discussed the matter with his friends Kirep and Asarakhu. Kirep agreed that there was no alternative but Asarakhu's initial reaction was negative:

"How do you imagine this? Our entire nation — men, women and children — and all our herds leaving this fertile land for a distant country, a much poorer one inhabited by hostile tribes? Can we risk the lives of so many people? Shouldn't we attempt to make the Oross change their mind by peaceful means?"

"Of course I'd much rather do that and perhaps we should first try that again though my expectations are not high. I doubt that we'll be able to check or alter their expansionism. In any case we must make plans for alternative solutions, even if they are far from ideal."

"If you put it that way I can go along. But where should we go?" Asaraku asked sceptically.

"It goes without saying that such a move should be carefully prepared and kept secret. I see two possibilities: First, we could push the neighbouring Kazaks of the 'Little Horde' farther east and occupy for the time being the territory where our herds

have grazed before. The land is less fertile than the Volga region but we should be free nomads instead of vassals.

“If necessary, that could be a stepping stone for a much longer trek, perhaps even for a return to our ancient homeland of Jungaria in Central Asia.”

“Yes,” Asarakhu admitted, “for such a purpose there will probably be strong popular support. The legend of that golden, promised land of Jungaria and the Altai has never lost its power or appeal.”

Asaray again stressed the need for secrecy: if the Oross discovered their plan to move out of the Russian sphere of influence, they would use force to stop them. Only a few Torghut leaders should be in the know. The shrewd Supreme Lama would undoubtedly support the plan, he said, for it would earn him the highest praise of the Dalai Lama.

“You know who will also most certainly give his support to this bold plan?” Kirep remarked. “Prince Tsebek-Dorji! He still hopes to become Khan, a wish the Russians have not fulfilled for him. He’s never forgiven them.”

“Quite,” Asaray agreed. “And he is a born intriguer. He neglects no opportunity to set Ubashi against Russia. Do you know what he did when the Khan returned from Astrakhan, where his protests had been waved aside by Governor Beketov? Tsebek-Dorji stirred up Ubashi’s anger — he told me so himself — by reporting a remark Colonel Kishenskov was alleged to have made:

‘The Vice-Khan may roar as much as he likes, he is after all only a bear on a chain.’

“Ever since, Ubashi refuses to speak to the grand-pristav.”

Asarakhu’s eyes were ablaze: “No wonder! It’s a shameful insult.”

“Yes, of course it is, but it was precisely what Tsebek wanted. It’s part of the game he’s playing. He himself has established a friendly relationship with Ubashi.”

“So it would seem best to let Tsebek-Dorji persuade the Khan to accept your plan,” Kirep suggested. “If you approached Ubashi, he would probably reject it out of hand.”

Asaray agreed and the next day he had a long confidential talk with Tsebek-Dorji.

* * * *

Ubashi was in a melancholy mood. Nothing succeeded for him. Even after he had gained a resounding victory over the Kuban Tartars, all honours were withheld from him. The Empress of Russia had not even sent him a word of thanks, nor was his name mentioned in any of the general orders. The high decoration to which he was surely entitled had not been conferred upon him either. The Russians even still called him Vice-Khan, an insult which, he was convinced, humiliated him in the eyes of his people.

A visitor was announced: Prince Tsebek-Dorji, whom he had in the past distrusted but who had of late treated him with the greatest respect. He appreciated the support of Tsebek-Dorji as a counterweight against his hated brother Asaray.

Their pipes were lit, ceremonial tea was served, and soon the visitor brought the conversation round to the disgraceful treatment the Torghuts suffered at the hands of the Oross, who inexorably continued to establish new settlements. If this development was not checked, Tsebek said, the once prosperous Torghuts and Dürbets, impoverished, weakened and subjugated to the Oross, would cease to exist as a nation.

“Yes, Tsebek, I agree with you entirely. But what can we do against them? Peaceful means will not get us anywhere with them. You know of General de Medem’s arrogant proceedings against us during the Kuban campaign while you were fighting on the Dnepr with Rumiántsev. We’ve not even had a word of thanks from the Empress for our heroic actions. No, diplomacy offers no solution; nor, alas, do we have the means to check their advance by force. Or do you think they’re so tied up in their war with Turkey that we might have a chance?”

“That’s out of the question, I’m afraid. Initially General Rumiántsev needed us badly but now he has received such reinforcements that he could, if need be, deploy strong forces against us as well. As to the regular Cossacks on the Volga and the Don, they are not a negligible force either.

“I wonder, dear Khan, whether we should not leave here and occupy the territory of the Kazaks of the ‘Little Horde’. Once there, we could make preparations for the much longer and more difficult trek to the land of our forebears. Just imagine that the Khan of the Torghuts should succeed in bringing his people back to Jungaria. The Emperor of China and the Dalai Lama would confer the highest honours upon him! Unimaginable honours and immense riches would be yours. What do you think, Ubashi Khan?”

Ubashi beamed. He had dreamed of that possibility since childhood but never believed it could ever come true. Now the clever and influential Tsebek-Dorji came with this proposal!

“I’ve thought of that myself and it greatly pleases me that you too should suggest it. Do you think the other leaders would support such a plan?”

Confidently Tsebek-Dorji answered:

“I believe the time is ripe for our departure. But the Oross must on no account get wind of it, so we must maintain the strictest secrecy. I therefore propose that at this stage you invite only the Supreme Lama, the most reverend Lobsang Gyaltsan, and myself for further consultations. Asaray and others need not know anything about this. Afterwards you could extend these secret deliberations to the whole of the zarga.”

“An excellent idea.”

As expected, the Supreme Lama was in favour of the plan and soon a meeting of the zarga was called. The majority of its members agreed to the plan but some voiced a warning. Asaray in particular urged the Council not to act precipitately. His proposal to buy the necessary arms secretly and to send scouts to reconnoitre the

route they were likely to take, was unanimously adopted. There were two men in Asaray's ulus who had lived with the Kazaks, spoke their language and could pass for them; they were sent to spy out the route through Kazak territory. Also, among the Mongol immigrants who had fled with Shereng before the Manchu-Chinese onslaught some fifteen years ago, scouts were selected who knew the long route to Jungaria and could speak some of the local dialects. They were courageous men; many dangers and hardships were in store for them but they undertook their task without demur.

Hardly had these measures been taken, when Tsebek-Dorji came to see Asaray with alarming news:

"Wild horses are running away with us, Asaray. I had another talk with Ubashi about our secret plan. Do you know what he told me? On second thought he does not agree with your proposal to avoid hasty action. The Russians would get wind of it, he said, if we waited too long. That may be his real motive for leaving soon or only a pretext, for I could see that he was extremely eager to cover himself with glory.

"Perhaps I have, when trying to persuade him, exaggerated the glory that awaits him personally in Jungaria. For what has he done? He has asked the Supreme Lama to set an early date for our departure, possibly within a fortnight! Thereupon this saintly man, equally eager and ambitious, has affirmed that a 'prophecy' will soon be forthcoming from our most revered oracle, the Dalai Lama himself."

"This is incredible!" Asaray exclaimed. "If Ubashi and the Supreme Lama are willing to leave here even before our spies have reported back, arms have been bought and other preparations have been made, they must be mad. Ubashi should know better. What does he think the Oross are? Will he close his eyes and conjure them away? I think, Tsebek, that you really must try everything to dissuade him from his insane idea. Serbejab and Bambar must also speak to him. We simply cannot let this happen."

"I have already tried, though without success. But I agree with you that we cannot give up. An early start would present the greatest, unnecessary perils and we must make him see that."

Later, Tsebek-Dorji and the others all reported that Ubashi remained adamant.

"You should have seen and heard him," Serbejab said indignantly. "You know, he honestly believes now that he will go down in history as one of the greatest Mongol Khans, and he cannot wait to prove it. If the Dalai Lama himself fixes a date, he believes it must be safe. It is very difficult to counter an argument the people will accept uncritically. I do not see how we can stop him. All we can hope is that it will take many months before the Dalai Lama's answer reaches us."

Tsebek-Dorji now seemed to have less objections against an early departure. Had his personal ambition also got the better of his common sense? The zarga, which had agreed only to the flight from Russia, but not at such short notice, was not even consulted over Ubashi's new plan. It looked as if he would get his way.

Asaray was reminded of a 'triad':

Doomed — the foal when the mare's teats are dry; Doomed — the priest who has lost his faith; Doomed — the nation whose prince is vain.

A lama-friend came to visit Asaray:

"There are priests who are now spreading the rumour that the Oross want to christianize all the Torghuts, Dürbets and Khoshuts by force. I've tried to verify this news and found that it simply isn't true. It worries me that some irresponsible lamas are stirring up the already existing animosity."

This was not all. "Have you heard, Asaray?" asked Bambar. "It is said that the Russian Court demands that hundreds of young Torghut boys be sent to St. Petersburg. Who invents such patently false stories? Our ambitious Khan perhaps?"

It was also reported that emissaries from the Supreme Lama to Tibet had been refused passage by the Russian Governor of Western Siberia. There was something sinister about this crescendo of whispered stories which were deliberately fabricated, and that they were readily believed by so many. Anti-Russian feelings, always latent, were rising high.

At the same time there was much talk about the Oirat-Kalmyks' ancient homeland of Jungaria and the lush valley of the Ili River, between the Altai and the Heavenly Mountains, whose rugged and smiling beauty had always beckoned them in their dreams. They had never ceased yearning for them and sang their legendary glory in innumerable verses. To attain the goal of living once again in the holy land of their ancestors, it was said, would be worth the greatest efforts and sacrifices. 'The centre of the world where, on the summits of the snow-capped mountains that glitter in the sun, tens of thousands of Buddhas live. If one looked in the direction of holy Tibet, six thousand golden-yellow temples stood out against black storm clouds. Surrounded by the dazzlingly white peaks, in the green valley of Shikürlük on the shores of the Bumba Sea, rose the great golden palace-ger of the sacred Lord Jangar...'

In spite of the spate of gloomy rumours and unfavourable conditions, the Torghuts generally continued to lead their calm, peaceful nomadic life without being aware of any direct danger or critical changes in their existence. As a result of the war against the Kuban Tartars they had remained this season on the Volga instead of wintering in the Kuma-valley.

Even as late as the end of December 1770 they had no inkling that within a fortnight they would rebel against Russian rule and start a terrible journey, which would last seven months, over a distance of nearly three thousand kilometers, through snow blizzards, freezing cold and burning deserts. None of them could have predicted that during this dramatic flight more than one third of their people and two thirds of the herds would perish.

* * * *

It seemed an impossible task to incite a whole nation to rise in revolt and leave the Oross-dominated Volga region without the Russians learning about it and blocking it by force. Governor Beketov in Astrakhan had indeed been told several times about those plans by one of his spies and informed the government in St. Petersburg, but Colonel Kishenskov, the man on the spot, who despised Beketov, had dismissed his warnings as unfounded. The Chancellor, Count Panin, had grown tired of Beketov's admonitions, calling them 'fatigants' — tiresome.

It was early morning on a cold winter's day when the Khan's messengers rode out in all directions on their fast, steaming horses to alarm all the princes and nobles with an urgent appeal to mobilise their troops forthwith. They themselves were to go immediately with their leading warriors to a meeting-place which should remain a secret from their men and their families. The messengers looked tense and worried as if the destiny of the nation was at stake, but refused to explain the purpose of this operation.

The Mongol war machine came into action with astonishing speed, efficiency and precision. The meeting-place was some two hundred kilometres from their camp, but in less than three days eighty thousand horsemen with their full equipment were present. Absent were those who had been held back on the Volga's right bank by drift ice — mostly Dürbets. Only the very few who had been initiated into the secret plan, knew why they were here; the others assumed a major attack by Kazaks and Bashkirs was imminent. The atmosphere was strained.

When they were all assembled, the Khan rose high in the saddle. In a voice choking with emotion, he addressed the large gathering:

“Torghut, Dürbet and Khoshut warriors, we are here to take an important decision, one on which the life of our nation will depend! We have suffered for too long already the most cruel oppression at the hands of the Oross, who are occupying our pastures and will ultimately leave us only sand and stones. Those Oross who are surrounding us with fortresses and watchtowers, have ordered us to conscript ever more soldiers for their wars. They heap the most humiliating insults upon us. They even want to force us to forswear our religion and to live in villages and towns as farmers and merchants.”

An angry growl rose from the crowd but Prince Tsebek-Dorji silenced the throng with a commanding gesture.

“Unless we are prepared,” the Khan continued, “to surrender our religion, our nomadic way of life, our customs and laws, our liberty even, I see but one solution. We must leave here, free ourselves from Oross oppression and move to a place where we shall be happy and independent men again: the land of our ancestors the glorious Oirats, the evergreen grasslands of Jungaria.”

The crowd was awe-struck and hushed, some gasped, a few shouted: “To Jungaria!”

Ubashi continued, pleased with the reaction he had evoked

“You, brave warriors of the Torghuts, Dürbets and Khoshuts, I ask you now: Will you stay here to become poor, to be crushed under Oross boots and see your children grow up as slaves? Or will you follow me?”

There was a moment of dead silence and a shudder ran through the crowd. Then a thunderous assent was voiced by this mass of men whose imagination and indignation had been aroused by the Khan’s impassioned speech:

“To Jungaria!”

Tsebek-Dorji spoke next, and it became clear that he was now wholly on the Khan’s side. Using even more inflammatory rhetoric and leading finally to a climax, he announced that the date of their departure had been set by the Dalai Lama himself!

“His Holiness,” he declared, “has pronounced a prophecy: the most propitious time for our great undertaking will be in the Year of the Tiger or the Year of the Hare.

“If we depart in the winter between these two years, we shall have the strength of the tiger and the swiftness of the hare. Our lamas have read all the signs of astrology, and on the basis of the Dalai Lama’s pronouncement have established the precise date of our departure. Free men of all the Oirat, hear what the gods have ordained:

“The date is...to-morrow!”

This speech caused an uproar, a general delirium. Asaray shivered. He thought he must be dreaming. Some of what had been said was true. Much more was totally false. Yet the words hit home. But worst of all was that date! That was shattering, disastrous news. Leaving the next day, without having made any preparations, all of their more than four hundred thousand men, women and children, with three to four times as many animals?

Clearly Ubashi and Tsebek-Dorji, once their blinding ambition had led to this insane haste, wanted to make sure, by using the Dalai Lama’s authority, that there would be no opposition. Nobody seemed to notice the inconsistency: after the Russians had supposedly cut off all communications with Tibet, the Dalai Lama had been able to send a timely ‘prophecy’ over a distance which even Jangar Khan’s magical horse could not have covered so fast.

Asaray was shaken but could not help feeling some admiration for Ubashi’s grand speech. There was extreme ambition and vanity there, but there was also sincere indignation and patriotism. Ubashi had spoken from his heart and had correctly guessed what popular opinion demanded: to leave Russia on the way to freedom. In spite of himself and all rational arguments, Asaray was somehow also borne on this wave of patriotic enthusiasm and religious fervour; he became part of the emotional crowd. Yet a part of him feared for the Durbets and Khoshuts who must be left stranded across the river and at the mercy of the Oross and their allies: these would have to include many of Badma’s kinfolk.

* * * *

Orders were issued to prepare without delay for the great trek eastward. When the leading fighting men returned to their homes, they announced to their ulus and aimak the startling news of their impending exodus. The first reaction was one of stunned perplexity and disbelief. Many of the women voiced their opposition to this sudden move in the middle of winter. Though no less brave than their men, they clung to their homes and pastures; they feared losing their children and possessions. When their leaders insisted that this was their only chance to survive, and referred to the Dalai Lama's pronouncement, the religious factor proved decisive.

There was no time for reflection anyway. The vast area east of the Volga had become a scene of feverish activity. The colossal herds of horses, camels, cattle and sheep were driven together, men, women and children packed all valuables, gold and silver ornaments, blankets, clothes made of cotton, wool and brocade, holy books and pictures, and finally all essential household goods, in wooden chests covered with leather.

Everything was loaded onto big-wheeled Tartar wagons, drawn by oxen and covered with roofs of straw and blankets; the chests were tied securely to them. Other heavy loads were hoisted onto the backs of uncomplaining camels. The work was done swiftly and neatly, for breaking camp was the regular nomads' business. Only this time it was attended by profound emotion: they were setting out for entirely unknown lands very far away; it would be a migration whose size and distance were unparalleled in history. Yet, once the decision to leave had been taken, few seemed worried and hardly anyone wondered whether their losses might not prove greater than their gains; such was their faith and confidence.

Dawn broke ice-cold on 5th of January 1771. During the night it had frozen hard and a pale, timid sun rose over a steppe white with hoar-frost. The nomads were awakened by horn-signals: the great trek was to begin! All the gers were struck and, together with the remaining household goods, loaded onto baggage-wagons and the backs of camels resigned to bearing incredibly heavy loads in addition to carrying small children and lambs in baskets on their flanks.

At intervals of half an hour batches of some twenty-thousand women and children each climbed into the big wagons and sleighs. They went on their way escorted by heavily armed horsemen. The Kalmyks were starting their historic, disastrous journey. They were heading for the open Siberian steppe, leaving behind the grasslands where their flocks had pastured for a century and a half, never to return.

X X X

And those who had been unable to cross the river were scarcely better off. Although spared the ordeal of the long trek, the Russian government took a very firm line with them, aided by the Russified Prince Alexei Dondukov who had been authorized to return and rule his ulus. They were all gradually assimilated into the Empire.

More and more of their grasslands were usurped by Russian agricultural colonists and, in the end, the 'Kalmyks' could hardly survive as nomadic herdsmen. That was especially true during the period of forced Soviet collectivization and, later, their deportation to Siberia, whence they could only return after Stalin's death.

But despite all these pressures, they did not completely abandon their lamaist faith, even when they were educated in Russian schools, where they were not allowed to use their own language but where — it must be said — they at least profited from the excellent Russian educational system. They now have their own republic — Kalmykia — again, where Kalmyks and Russians live peacefully together.

X X X

Those who were leaving Russia on that fateful day in January 1771 had no inkling of what would happen to their remaining brethren on the Volga, nor what fate held in store for them in the distant steppes of Central Asia.

The seemingly endless caravans of men, women and children, and the immense herds presented an impressive sight as their dark mass contrasted with the white plains in the sparkling sunshine. The air was cool and invigorating. In high spirits, full of hope bolstered against reason, the Torghuts were riding towards freedom. Riding up and down the flanks, the front and the rear, Asaray and his fellow-commanders felt proud of their people. He saluted Badma and her Amazons who were giving assistance wherever it was needed, and was cheerfully greeted by Batur who sat, flushed with pleasure, in a box on his camel in front of his wet-nurse.

Two days later the alarming news was received that strong Russian forces, mainly consisting of Cossacks and Bashkirs, all of them excellent horsemen, had left the distant towns of Orenburg and Orsk to block their way and drive them back. The distance was still considerable but how could these slow-moving caravans, with their herds and baggage, ever hope to stay ahead? If they were to have any chance at all, they must reach the river Ural (Iaik) in seven days and so had to make every effort to move faster. Armed horsemen urged the columns on to the breaking point.

On the fourth day the sky darkened and the wind began to howl; before long it started snowing heavily, making it impossible to see far ahead. As the snow rose ever higher, ever deeper did the wagons and herds sink into the white mass, and with every hour their advance slowed down.

“Keep moving! Hurry up! Faster, faster!” the warriors shouted continuously. Whips cracked, warning shots were fired and no pity was shown by the grim fighting men who urged on the caravans. Individual lives no longer counted; whoever could not keep up must be abandoned. There was no time to be lost, for the chances of survival of the whole nation were at stake.

For man and beast it was heavy going. The camels best endured the cold and hardship. Stately, their heads held high, their gaze fixed upon the far eastern horizon, they marched steadily on, without paying attention to what went on around them.

Asaray helped where he could, sometimes in his own special way as when he came across a group of herdsmen pushing and pulling a cow-camel sitting in their path, moaning and shedding tears for the loss of her young. Whatever the men tried, even holding a burning torch under her tail, she refused to get up, obviously resigned to die alongside her calf.

“What can we do without her, our most precious possession? Could you please tell her to move, Prince? You are the only one who can make her do it,” they implored him.

After some hesitation, he waved everyone aside, looked the poor animal in the eye, stroked her, and softly spoke one word only: “Come.”

She sighed and very slowly, wearily rose to her feet.

The herdsmen did a magnificent job of caring for the animals. On especially icy stretches the camel drivers sprinkled sand or ashes to make the going less slippery, but often there was not enough time. After each day camels and horses were tied in pairs, head to tail, to prevent them from kneeling down on the frozen ground while still sweating.

The Kalmyks were travelling in three huge caravans, each following its own advance guard under the command of Asaray, Bambar and Shereng. These now rode on as fast as they could in order to reach the river Ural ahead of the others. It was their task to eliminate the fortified settlements of the Iaik Cossacks. Many of these were away at their winter fishing on the shores of the Caspian Sea but there were enough in the remaining garrisons to offer strong resistance. With a detachment of

only one hundred men Asaray surrounded the fort of Kulagina, while the others went for the stronghold of Krasnoiar with hardly more men. Their enemies were tough, experienced men but they were taken completely by surprise. Before the Cossacks realized what was happening, Asaray's men advanced through the range of the fort's cannon with few casualties and after an exchange of fire were soon engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. The enemies were a match for them but the Torghuts had everything to lose if they did not get through; they threw themselves into the battle with all the desperate force they could muster. When Asaray finally proclaimed that if the Cossacks withdrew from the fort, they and their women and children would be spared, they accepted.

Krasnoiar was taken in much the same way. Both forts were burnt and thus a safe crossing over the frozen river was cleared for the approaching caravans. This victory made Asaray and his fellow commanders feel for the first time more optimistic about their chances of escaping Russian domination. Next day, after eight days of continuous forced marching, with very little sleep and short stops for eating, the Torghut caravans reached the Ural river, totally exhausted.

It remained the responsibility of Asaray, Bambar and Shereng to spearhead the advance of the main force, while Ubashi and Tsebek-Dorji covered the rear with twenty thousand armed men and the other nobles covered the flanks. The lamas and monks, with their camels and carts laden with holy objects, travelled in the centre for greater safety.

"You know, Bambar," Asaray said "I haven't yet recovered from the shock of this sudden, gigantic migration. It was, of course, Ubashi who instigated it all, with the aid of the Supreme Lama, but now it looks as if it is an Act of God, a force of nature, which no-one can resist."

"I have that feeling too. If only this mysterious force of nature which drives us on will stay with us until we reach our destination!"

"Let's hope it will. We can't go back now, we can only advance. Fate has decided and look: the whole nation is marching without a grumble, with all of its possessions, through the bleakest and wildest country we've ever seen."

* * * *

Reclining in his sleigh Ubashi tried to rest after having been in the saddle for days. His wife Mandere sat beside him, looking up at her husband with eyes full of admiration. He was tired but happy. The young Khan could still hardly believe he had pulled it off. He had been shaking with fear when he had to address the large meeting of warriors; but once he had begun to speak, it seemed as if he had gone into a trance. And they had responded! Now he felt that he was a real Khan, the undisputed leader of his nation. When Najjitana had died, Ubashi had genuinely grieved for his mother but soon he had become aware that a heavy load had been

removed from his shoulders, especially since her adviser, the frightening 'shamanist' priest Kirin, had disappeared shortly afterwards.

He was starting a new life. The Russians had slighted him and they would soon have cause to regret it! There was a strange and wonderful force in him now: he knew he was destined to become the greatest Khan of all times. Moments of weakness and doubt soon passed. It was the formerly so dominant Tsebek-Dorji more than anybody else, who by his praise had made Ubashi feel a great man and given him new confidence. Everything had gone as planned.

"We must get to Jungaria as soon as we can", he said to his wife. "Asaray thought the trek would be too long. He had an insane idea that we might stay in nearby Kazak country, even if only temporarily. That would make no sense; it is poor country. Jungaria the golden is our destination."

"It will be a very long and slow journey, with all our herds and cattle," Mandere ventured timidly, but quickly added: "You are of course absolutely right, Ubashi. Everyone admires the way you have inspired our people with new hope." He had told her about his great speech in vivid detail.

"In Jungaria I shall be a sovereign Khan and we shall have friendly neighbours. Tsebek-Dorji and the Supreme Lama have assured me that the Emperor of China and the Dalai Lama will confer the highest honours upon me if I bring the Torghuts back to the country of the Yellow Church. Over there, they say, I shall have immense authority and great wealth."

And then, he thought, I shall also be rid of Asaray. As commander of our advance guard he is in the most dangerous position; he surely will not survive this journey! Do I really want him dead? There are times when I do not hate him at all and want to be friends with him. But these awful demons always interfere. My feelings about him have always been ambivalent. Only recently I liked the way he treated General de Medem and the deference he showed me, but whenever he starts criticising me and telling me what to do, the demons return. Then I feel weak and uncertain, and get very angry with him. This cannot go on. He will have to go.

* * * *

Prince Tsebek-Dorji was equally pleased with himself. The great adventure from which he expected so much had now begun. When the plan was made he had reasoned that even if the Oross discovered the plot prematurely and if it failed, Ubashi would be dismissed and his own chances would be enhanced, for he had lent invaluable assistance to General Rumiántsev and had even won Kishenskov's confidence. But they had been successful so far and no Russian forces were in sight yet.

Once outside the jurisdiction of the Russian government which had appointed Ubashi as Vice-Khan, the latter's claim to that title would be null and void. Then his own claim could be promoted again.

He grinned as he thought how easy it had been to flatter Ubashi to make him swallow the bait. The man had even become more eager than the others to set everything in motion, making light of Asaray's warnings. Tsebek-Dorji had not minded that; he had become very keen on the project himself. The Chief Lama, of course, had been of great help; indeed, Tsebek doubted whether this sudden, massive movement of a whole nation towards an unknown destiny would ever have happened if that cunning and ambitious old priest had not claimed in a stroke of genius that the Dalai Lama in person had set the date.

But what about Ubashi's great speech and his newly won authority? The people had actually acclaimed him! Tsebek's face darkened as he thought of this. Had he inspired the uncertain Khan with too much confidence and thereby weakened his own position? To hell with Ubashi! During the long trek or later, in Jungaria, he would find an opportunity to wrest the leadership from him.

* * * *

After everyone had crossed the Ural river they allowed themselves short rests now and then but the signal for departure always sounded much too soon. It went on snowing and with each passing week the going became heavier. Many animals died of cold, exhaustion and lack of fodder; the grass was covered by so much hard frozen snow that they could not reach it. The corpses of hundreds of cows and sheep littered the route they had travelled.

The first signs of open discontent appeared when women wanted longer rests to make a fire for their freezing children and herdsmen refused to go on at a pace too fast for their animals. Only rarely were they allowed to have their way.

In St. Petersburg news of the sudden flight of the Torghuts and other Kalmyks caused bewilderment and consternation. Count Panin, the normally phlegmatic Chancellor, was badly shaken when the Empress rebuked him sharply for his failure to keep the Kalmyks within the Russian orbit.

“How on earth could you let this happen?” she upbraided him. “Not only have we, as a result of the incompetence of those responsible, lost valuable allies in the middle of our war against Turkey, but the whole south-eastern flank of our Empire is now left wide open to outside attacks from various border peoples, including the Sultan’s vassals.

“And there is another factor which should give us cause for concern. How often have I pointed out to you that the Kalmyks, being Buddhists, have in the past often been courted by the Chinese government? Since their cavalry is among the best in the world and they know conditions in our country intimately, they may well be used by China in armed hostilities between us.”

The Empress looked sternly at Panin.

“May I humbly say how deeply I regret the most unfortunate flight of the Torghut-Kalmyks, and offer my sincerest apologies for the serious mistakes made by me and by the responsible officials on the spot? None of us had expected this to happen.

“Your Majesty rightly mentioned the possible consequences of this regrettable event. But allow me to point out, Your Imperial Majesty, that at least at the present time there is little likelihood of China waging a war against us.”

“How do you know? China, of course, remains a mystery for us, but two things are certain: they have lately been expanding their empire in a westerly direction, and they are hostile to us. It would be dangerous to underestimate them. You are often, I fear, assessing the situation too much from a short-term viewpoint, Chancellor. A statesman should look further ahead.”

The normally suave and unruffled Chancellor now looked nervous and upset. He bowed deeply and remarked bitterly, “I have failed to keep the Kalmyks within our borders and to guard against dangers which I did not even foresee. I cannot but apologize and ask Your Majesty forgiveness. Your Imperial Majesty rightly pointed out that we must not underestimate the Chinese and their possible long-term designs.”

“Tell me, Panin, what about the Kalmyks who have remained in the Volga region?”

“Almost one third of the Kalmyks fortunately have stayed behind, and Colonel Alexei Dondukov’s presence there guarantees their continued loyalty.”

Panin wisely omitted the fact that these Dürbets, though some of their leaders may have been opposed to the exodus, had in fact been prevented from joining the others by drift ice on the Volga.

“What has been Prince Asaray’s role?” the Empress asked. “I liked and trusted him. Has he sided against us?”

“We do not know. It seems that General de Medem insulted Ubashi, Asaray and the other leaders, and that they have taken offense. But there may still be a chance of persuading them to return to Russia.”

“I am far from reassured by your explanations, Count. You must immediately take stern measures to prevent the remaining Torghuts and Dürbets from following the example of the rebels. Furthermore, an attempt must be made, backed by military power, to persuade or, if need be, force the fleeing Oirats to return to Russia. I shall hold you personally responsible.”

The Chancellor summoned Kuropatkin and gave him a severe dressing down. The Counsellor showed himself subdued and down-hearted but made an attempt to defend himself:

“Your Excellency, I am dismayed by what has happened and I feel personally responsible for this disaster. I imagine that you may wish to replace me by a more capable official. However, may I venture to suggest that others have also contributed to this most unfortunate affair? I hope you will agree, Your Excellency, that the policies laid down by the Collegium of Foreign Affairs under your direction have on the whole been correct. What has gone wrong, is their execution by the local authorities.

“Already one year ago we here in the capital had every reason to criticize in a memorandum Governor Beketov’s excès de zèle. You agreed that the Governor of Astrakhan was establishing too many Cossack and other settlements too soon, thereby alienating our Kalmyk allies and threatening their livelihood.

“You will also remember, Your Honour,” Kuropatkin continued, “General Rumiántsev’s report showing that General de Medem had offended the Torghut leaders in every possible way. Regretfully I must conclude that this is not the first time local agents have had their own ideas about how to execute the instructions our government sends them.”

Panin tended to agree. He shared his distaste for Beketov, who happened to be in the capital when the news of the Torghuts’ sudden departure was received and was now crowing over his foresight, the soundness of his intelligence reports and the stupidity of the responsible government officials who had refused to believe him.

So the Chancellor chose to ignore Governor Beketov entirely. He had urgent instructions sent to the Governor of Orenburg through whose territory the Torghuts were passing; the Governor was ordered to dispatch troops immediately to intercept them and make a friendly appeal to them to return. Only if they could not be persuaded, should force be considered. The general in command of the Siberian line received similar instructions. In addition, both the ‘Little’ and the ‘Middle’ Horde of the Kazaks, arch-enemies of the Kalmyks and nomads themselves, but Muslims, were to be alerted forthwith.

In this way, Russian and Cossack troops and the formidable cavalry of the Kazaks would be mobilized against the Torghuts in all the territories of Siberia and Central Asia through which they must travel. Thus, surely, they would be brought to their knees.

Out on the vast Siberian steppe, the endless caravans plodded on through the deep cold and heavy snow. Plunging and heaving, bumping and struggling wearily onward against a biting, pitiless gale, the flagging horses foundered, the heavily laden camels slipped, the cattle, weakened by the winter and the long march, could not keep pace. The people began grumbling and moaning about this seemingly hopeless enterprise and the women especially wondered aloud why they had left their Volga grazing grounds.

While the menace of advancing Russian armies still hung over them, the caravans pressed on. The nomads also had to be alert for attacks from Kazaks whose territory they were marching through. They were only too well aware that the Kazaks, who did not know where the Kalmyks were heading, would consider this massive invasion a provocation and a dangerous threat to their independence.

When they reached and crossed the River Emba which was frozen solid, the Kalmyks ushered in the Year of the Tiger with the shortest and soberest Tsagan Sar festival in living memory. The valley resounded with trumpets, cymbals and the chanting of the lamas. It comforted the people to hear these sounds again, if only for a few precious hours, to see the colourful robes of the priests, the altar and the holy images. They sank down to pray for their safe passage. The beseeching, urgent tones of their entreaties and of the familiar om-ma-ni-padme-hum rose from thousands of voices. The Torghuts also allowed themselves a little extra food above the daily ration and went on their way with added strength.

The Mugojar Hills came in sight. Here a narrow pass had to be negotiated. It seemed safe, for their scouts had not found any enemies there. Then Kirep, who had gone farther forward, came back in great haste and agitation:

“Asaray, it looks as if we are trapped! At the far end of this mountain pass a strong force of Kazaks is waiting for us, ready to block our way. What are we to do? To advance could mean wholesale suicide. Should we retreat and try another route?”

“There is no other route and it’s already too late to turn back. We must attack them before the caravans arrive!”

Bambar and Asaray threw themselves with a strong detachment of cavalry and camel-troops on the Kazaks who, after a bloody fight, began to withdraw. Their way was blocked, however, by Tsebek-Dorji and Kibten who had meanwhile made a swift flanking movement through ravines and defiles with their most seasoned veterans of the Kuban mountain-war. Attacked at the front and in the rear, the enemy had walked into an ambush which they had laid for the Torghuts. Few of them escaped unharmed.

Tsebek-Dorji had immediately given effect to Bambar’s and Asaray’s urgent appeal for help, but Ubashi had refused to put any men of his rear-guard at their disposal.

“In his grand speech,” Bambar remarked derisively, “the Khan asked us to follow him, but it now seems that he is following us!”

His remark was met with coarse laughter and jibes.

Asaray could not help admiring the bravery of the vanquished Kazaks who were, after all, defending their territory. After a short break to nurse the wounded and cremate the dead, the Oirat-Kalmyk horde drove onwards relentlessly, getting scant rest and living in constant fear of being overtaken by much faster moving, unencumbered Russian armies. The remaining cattle, hardly able to keep up the excessive pace, suffered badly from fatigue. The horses were strong and tough but the camels were the hardiest. White as marble statues, carrying unbelievably heavy loads, they followed in one another's tracks with measured tread, their heads held arrogantly high, showing sovereign disdain for their surroundings. But those camels and oxen which were harnessed to the lumbering, creaking baggage-wagons, had great difficulty in pulling them along the deeply cut wheel-tracks.

Day after arduous day it was not until late in the dark winter-night that the signal for a halt would be blown, and long before daybreak they had to break camp. In the evenings the women made a fire using the dried cow-dung that boys and girls had gathered and they melted snow for drinking-water. Whenever possible a wagon which had collapsed was broken up for fuel. Mothers wrapped tattered sheep's furs and rags closer around their crying, hungry children, and whoever had not yet, dead-tired, stretched out on the ice-cold ground, never to wake up in this life, lay down near the camp-fire.

The funereal procession continued inexorably. The once-bright red, yellow and green dresses of the exhausted Kalmyks, bleached and filthy, had lost their freshness. In worn, faded, fur-lined robes which had once been bright red and yellow, the lamas sat huddled in their saddles, sunken in gloom, continuously mumbling their prayers and laments for the dead. But the gods did not seem to hear them, the priests' prayers died away across the unrelenting steppe. Was there no end to this cursed march, to this suffering?

The nomads had been trekking for three unendurably long months, moving with desperate haste but increasingly slowed down by fatigue, when they approached a large river, the Turgai. Here bits of green began to appear in the white plains and gradually the days became more pleasant. Asaray sniffed the air: it smelled like spring! It was the end of April already, the snow was melting and there would be good pasturage. The need to feed the animals and the instinct of spring made the Torghuts decide to pitch their tents in this region.

“Good news, Badma! We shall at last get some rest, for this is a good place to stay. I'm convinced that we are now beyond the reach of Russian forces. A more permanent camp, surrounded by our armed forces and heavily guarded, will also be safer from Kazak attacks. We shall need at least a month's rest to regain enough strength for the long and strenuous journey that awaits us.”

The weary Badma was flushed with pleasure when she heard the good news, but how ill she looked! And Batur, equally emaciated, had become weak and joyless.

The camels, which had looked cowed and weary of life, were relieved of their heavy loads. They rolled in the grass and stumbled towards the river's bank where their muzzles eagerly groped in the juicy reeds. The horses, oxen and sheep lost no time in finding good grazing. Fireplaces were dug, sheep were slaughtered, and blue smoke curled again from thousands of gers. The tent city of the lamas came alive with the chiming of bells, the shrill call of trumpets and the familiar, hollow thud of drums.

Shortly after dusk had fallen, exhausted from the long march and stiff with fatigue but warm and well-fed, Asaray and his family went to bed — as indeed did everyone. Very soon the whole camp, with the exception of the ever-watchful sentinels, was sound asleep. They hardly stirred when from a distance came the long and doleful howling of a pack of wolves and from nearby the baying of their dogs.

For five delicious days the nomads rested and feasted, working the seemingly permanent aches and strains from their bones. The animals fed voraciously. Of the Cross there was no trace and the Kazaks had disappeared. Had they been weakened by the losses inflicted on them or were they on their way to join forces with the Russians or possibly with their eastern neighbours, the Kazaks of the 'Middle Horde'? No-one knew.

On the sixth day, the guards brought in a Cossack soldier who carried an ominous message:

"I have been sent to inform the Khan that a Russian officer and his small party of Cossacks are on their way to deliver into the hands of the Khan a letter from Governor Beketov."

The news caused great consternation, for it could only mean that Russian armed forces were much closer than the Torghuts had expected. When the officer, a Lieutenant Galinsky, arrived, he was immediately received by the Khan in Prince Asaray's and Tsebek-Dorji's presence. The Russian officer handed him a missive which, he said, had been forwarded through Major-General Von Traubenberg of the Siberian line.

In this letter the Governor of Astrakhan, Beketov, delivered a stern ultimatum to Ubashi to return with his people to the Volga forthwith. Those who had maltreated or killed Russian subjects would be punished by death. If, Beketov threatened, the Torghuts persisted in their flight and continued to violate solemn Russian-Kalmyk agreements, the Imperial army, together with strong allied Kazak forces, would drive them back by force and severely punish all the guilty leaders.

When the Kalmyk leaders conferred on this situation, Ubashi was worried that overwhelming Russian forces would overtake them and force them back. The others shared his concern.

Shereng said:” The Russians aren’t perhaps all that close yet. If only we could find out where they are.”

Bambar answered: “There is a way. We must torture that Lieutenant Galinsky and compel him to give us the position of the Russian main force.”

Tsebek-Dorji thought it an excellent idea but feared that too much precious time would be lost. Asaray joined him:

“Galinsky looks like a tough fellow, it might take days before we can get anything out of him.”

“So we have to give in to Beketov’s threats?” Ubashi asked.

No-one was in favour of turning back. Asaray got an idea:

“I think I can get one of those stupid Oross soldiers to his knees. Let me try.”

Asaray was extremely angry. After all those hardships they had at last found a place to rest when the damned Oross appeared. The fate of his people was at stake!

Now he could use another of the practices he had learned from his enemy. He had a pole hammered into the ground to which his prisoner was tied fast.

“How far from here are your troops?”

“Nie znaii.”

“Oh, you don’t know, eh?”

Asaray’s riding-whip hit him full in the face which started to bleed and swell.

“Answer!”

The man was whipped again but remained silent.

“Cut off his ear,” Asaray ordered the Torghut soldier who guarded the prisoner.

The Russian writhed with pain and shouted:

“A three days’ march from here,” but Asaray was convinced it wasn’t true.

“You’re lying. Now we’ll cut off your right thumb!”

That did not work either, but when a sharp knife was held close to his eye and Asaray threatened to put it out, he gave in:

“Our troops are still in Orsk, twelve days from here.”

“What is their strength?”

“I don’t know exactly, but there are some four thousand Cossacks and three regiments of Bashkirs. They are also expecting reinforcements from the Kazaks.”

Normally the Torghuts would be able to cope with such a force but with their cumbersome caravans and depleted strength they were slow and vulnerable. It would be irresponsible to stay there longer. It was therefore decided, with the greatest reluctance, to break camp again and move on. They kept Galinsky and his men with them in order to get a headstart before sending them back with a negative reply.

The blare of military trumpets mingled again with the low tones of the lamas’ bassoons and their prayers: Om mani padme hum. The nomads, somewhat rested and fed, reluctantly struck their gers, packed their belongings hastily, and set out with their herds towards the southeast.

More forced marches, more misery awaited them. The thaw was well on and the heavy mud and slush hindered their advance. Later the sun dried the tracks and fields so that they could move faster again.

Then a fearfully dry yellow desert had to be crossed. The wind raised fine sharp sand which hit them in the face. Bent forward, men and animals advanced with difficulty. Their water-supply was soon exhausted. At first the nomads still obtained some milk from their animals but after a week in the desert the animals themselves, except the camels, were nearly dying with thirst and hardly able to continue the march. Many more fell by the wayside and perished.

“Good news!”, Bambar reported jubilantly. “We have found a well! My men drank some of the water. Unlike the other wells we came across, this one is not salty. I want to make sure that the women and children get their share first. Let’s organize this properly.”

Shouts of joy went up and immediately the families formed a long line with their receptacles. But, oh horror, two of the three men who had drunk got dreadfully sick and soon died. Who had poisoned the well? Surely it must have been those despicable Kazaks. Cries went up for revenge. Desolate and in grim determination they marched on.

The poisoners were not far away. Suddenly and without any warning the Torghuts were attacked by fresh and eager Kazak horsemen; swift as lightning, they operated in small groups which fell upon them wherever their defence was weakest. The enemies were driven off only after causing considerable damage.

“I feel very bad about this,” Asaray said to Kirep. “We should have seen them in time. We must redouble our vigilance.”

His friend agreed. Kirep and he were always among the first to reconnoitre and, if possible, to attack. The gentle, young Torghut prince (Asaray — ‘the Compassionate One’, ‘He who cares’) had acquired a stern and determined look. Badma noticed that every day more savage lines were carved into the corners of Asaray’s mouth. Off he went again now, riding one of his fastest horses, who sensed his master’s grim and wild mood. When Asaray shook his head as if to cast away his unhappy thoughts they flew off like the wind to roam and spy out yet another sector of the route.

During one of those trips a Kazak on horseback approached him, waving a white flag. He let him come near and they dismounted. The man came with a proposal: his chief wished to end the bloodletting. If Asaray could be in this same spot shortly after sunset, they could meet and discuss the matter. He suggested that each of them would be accompanied by no more than three men. Asaray agreed. He did not trust the man entirely, but he was not afraid and took three of his best men with him.

What he did not know, was that Kirep, whom he told about it in confidence, became suspicious and followed Asaray at a distance with a number of his own horsemen; they lay in wait under cover.

The sun went down and it got dark quickly, but there was enough light left on the steppe to distinguish the figures of Asaray and his men. Suddenly loud battle-cries sounded, followed by rifle-shots: Asaray's little group was attacked by ten horsemen. Two of Asaray's aides had been thrown off their horses and fought for their lives. Kirep raced towards the scene, saw Asaray lying on the ground and just in time shot his attacker dead. After a short skirmish the attackers fled. Then, when they looked more closely at the man who had nearly succeeded in killing Asaray, they recognized him: he was a Torghut and a confidant of Ubashi's!

This was clearly an attempt on Asaray's life!. Kirep said indignantly:

"You must take revenge, Asaray. Ubashi must be eliminated, if only because he has murderous designs on you. Shall I lay an ambush for him and kill him? I'll do it gladly. We must stop him."

"No, Kirep. You mean well, but we mustn't do that. It is indeed an impossible situation, but after all he's my elder brother. I have come to hate him but I can't bring myself to repay a murderous assault with another murder. Yet I fear the time will come when we shall have to take action against him."

* * * *

Had the Kalmyks known what was happening on the Russian side, they could have rested much longer in the fertile valley of the Turgai, where they had been safer from Kazak attacks. It would have enhanced their chances of survival.

The Russians had made a muddle of things. The Governor of Orenburg province had, to be sure, faithfully carried out Chancellor Panin's instructions. Troops were indeed dispatched under Major-General von Traubenberg, who was to make a friendly appeal to the Torghuts to see the error of their ways and return to Russia. The two Kazak Khans, Nur Ali and Ablai, had been duly alerted.

None of these officials had, however, reckoned with the Governor of Astrakhan province, Beketov, who was still exulting over the fact that he had been right all along about the Kalmyk plans to flee. He imagined that he could handle this situation better than anybody else. It was on his personal initiative that Beketov sent his arrogant, threatening letter to Ubashi Khan. The result was that the Kazak leader Nur Ali, who had been harassing the fleeing caravans, had to wait for Von Traubenberg before he could risk a major offensive, while the Russian general — instead of making his 'friendly appeal' — was waiting in vain for the Torghut Khan's answer to Beketov's insulting missive. Von Traubenberg therefore did not leave the fortress of Orsk until 19th April and even then was in no hurry. On 6th May, when the Torghuts were already far away, he joined Nur Ali on the Turgai; six days later he gave up pursuit at the river Tersakkan on the grounds that he lacked sufficient provisions and returned to Orenburg.

* * * *

For the Oirat-Kalmyks the threat of a Russian advance was soon overshadowed by the difficulty of the onward journey, the daily need to find water and fodder and the recurring Kazak raids. It was almost impossible to protect this moving flood of over four hundred thousand men, women and children, and their multiple animals against an elusive enemy.

Asaray was indefatigable, as if all the energy pent up during his 'Russian' years of inaction was now finding an outlet. Many of the things he had learned in the Cadet Corps could be put to good use in the present circumstances, while from Bambar and Shereng he learned the finer points of nomad warfare. In the saddle for days and nights on end, he was everywhere, leading reconnaissance patrols or warding off attacks.

Nor were Asaray and his friends always on the defensive. Each time they spotted Kazak camps, they would launch surprise raids from which they often returned with horses, food and other essential provisions. These attacks were good for morale: there would be feasting and they could forget for an evening their tragic plight.

Tseren-Jalla's steadfastness and Badma's support were as invaluable to Asaray as his men's unshakable determination and bravery. On horseback Torghut and Dürbet women held their own with any men; now Badma's group of sharp-shooters were a great asset during this march. One day Asaray raced back to camp, alarmed by the news of a Kazak raid, but found that Badma and her band of Amazons had already repulsed the attackers.

About a week later Asaray rode out with most of his men, leaving behind only a small number of soldiers, to pursue a band of Kazaks while Badma's group imprudently left their camp to go after another group of enemies.

When Asaray returned and rode into his camp he was aghast at what he saw: burning gers and columns of smoke everywhere. As he approached the princely orgê he saw to his horror a scene which made his heart stand still. The dead bodies of his Torghut guards and of Kazak raiders were lying in pools of blood. His mother's orgê had been overturned, the house altar smashed to pieces. What had happened to his mother and Batur?

And then, what did he see? Badma! She came running towards him out of the smoke; she must have returned to the camp before him. Sobbing uncontrollably she brought out: "Mother... dying. We've come too late." Behind her followed their faithful wet-nurse with little Batur on her arms whom she had saved in time by fleeing with him to her own modest ger.

There she lay, dishevelled, her clothes torn off, bleeding from many wounds, that courageous, warm-hearted mother. Tseren-Jalla slowly turned her haggard, bruised face to him. It was expressionless, there was not a single tear in her eyes, only a silent horror and a pain so deep that it chilled his bone. The women had laid her on a bed and were applying ointments and bandages to her wounds. Asaray seemed suddenly to have lost his hearing and did not take in what they were saying but he saw. She

had been raped and kicked all over her body, and the monsters had sliced off her nipples with a sharp knife. And there was still life in her. A shrill buzz filled his ears and drilled into his brain.

When the wounds had been dressed, Asaray covered her poor beaten body with a sheet, fell to his knees, and looked into her eyes. Softly he swore that he would revenge her. She shook her head, but when he repeated his vow, whispered in a small, distant voice: "If you must, take care, my son." She made a tired gesture as if to bless her son and daughter, and then her soul had fled. She was no more with them.

The whole camp grieved as never before during this horrible journey. A great anger arose. How, Asaray asked himself cynically, could God be all-loving and all-powerful, as the Christians believed? If he were both, would he have let this happen? The question haunted him.

There was no need for him to ask for men; volunteers came even from the other camps to help him punish the beastly attackers. Among them was a detachment of warriors sent immediately by Ubashi, who felt as outraged as anyone else. This had not been normal nomad warfare, when men fought against men and the winner came home with his booty. This vicious, murderous raid made no sense at all. The Kazaks had hardly taken anything, only destroyed to inflict pain and to humiliate. The main victim of their cruel treatment had been the First Lady of the Torghuts, the most loved and respected of them all, whose orgê in this advance camp had stood out from the others.

Only a very short time had passed and their mounts were still steaming when the Torghuts grimly set out to pursue the raiders. The bloody tracks of enemy horses led them on their way and after a quick pursuit they swooped down on the Kazaks like a flock of hungry eagles. The fight did not last long either; all the men were killed in the fastest action Asaray had ever seen. The enemy's women and children were spared and left behind weeping and wailing.

When Asaray looked back for one last time, a tall, noble figure of a Kazak woman in a dark dress stood out against the crimsoning sky, thrusting a large dagger into her breast. He was reminded of dramatic Biblical scenes he had seen in St. Petersburg, in paintings by Dutch masters. The image of the Kazak woman stayed with him longer than the sight of all the dead men's bodies. Nor could he erase from his mind the picture of his mother's face frozen in unspeakable woe and pain.

What had they come to, he wondered, and where would it all end? From now on he and Badma would never again be absent from their encampment simultaneously and he would always have extra guards to protect Batur and his nurse.

Tseren-Jalla's body was cremated in a short but impressive ceremony led by the lamas. Now that she had been avenged Asaray felt sore and empty. The buzzing in his head had ceased at last but a deep sorrow was burning his heart. Together with

Badma he prayed to Shakyamuni that the paths of their lives might cross again. His tutor's last letter came to mind; the words could have been his mother's:

“Grieve not for me, but mourn for those who stay behind, bound by longings the fruit of which is sorrow...”

The long trek continued remorselessly. At times the Kalmyks could hardly keep moving and had to reduce their pace to a slow walk, but even then the caravans continued as best they could over the obstinate sands and bare rock, never losing hope, never giving up. This was the ancient struggle of the nomads whose primeval instincts kept them relentlessly on the move in their perennial quest for green pastures and free ranges.

But the heat and drought began to be unbearable. Every now and again dust-clouds appeared on the horizon and new bands of robbers rose from the steppe to harass them. If the Torghuts defended themselves in one place, then others unexpectedly attacked them elsewhere, killed people and cattle and stole horses and camels.

The caravans dragged themselves along with difficulty the whole long day and in the evening the long columns of dusty wagons and camels kept moving as silhouettes along the night-sky, gliding like ghosts and shadows through the moonlight. The sound of flute and strings was silenced, only the dull thud on temple-drums and the soft mutter of prayers could be heard.

In the distance, the River Sary-su loomed. New dangers lurked here, for crossing that river would mean penetrating further into Kazak territory. When night fell the caravans made a halt. Small detachments under Asaray and Bambar went forward to scout the terrain. It was dark. Bambar bore off at an angle while Asaray and his patrol of six men continued in a straight line.

“Kirep, you are our best stalker: you go first and I’ll follow.”

Not a sound was heard as they picked their way through the night. When the moon rose over the pale wilderness of glimmering sand, the men dismounted. They advanced with doubled caution until they came upon the silver ribbon of the stream, where they hid among the black tamarisks. An hour went by without sound or movement. Noiselessly they forded the river and, when clouds hid the moon, crept slowly up the sand dunes on the opposite bank. Here they waited again, well-hidden, as the moon reappeared. Then luck came their way.

“Sht..., look over there”, Kirep whispered and pointed ahead. “Will you take him?” Asaray nodded.

Silhouetted against the sky was a mounted man crossing a dune, his pony stepping silently through the moonlight. Asaray shot him noiselessly with a blunt arrow, the kind used to subdue a wild horse, then felled his pony in order to make sure that he would not get away. He was a great, burly, bearded man in a heavy sheepskin coat and wearing the fox-skin helmet-shaped cap typical of the Kazaks. He was disarmed while Kirep and two others went off to stalk his companion, who was soon found and captured. When taken across the river and subjected to lengthy, separate

interrogation, the prisoners yielded important intelligence which was corroborated by information obtained from Kazaks captured by Bambar.

As a result the general alarm was sounded. What the Torghuts had always feared, and hoped would never happen, was now a fact: the two great Kazak Khans, Nur Ali and Ablai, had joined their considerable forces at last. They were lying in wait for them across the Sary-su River. The prisoners had given detailed information about the terrain and the enemy's strength and dispositions. They represented a formidable force and a much more mobile one than the Torghuts with their enormous caravans.

Asaray conferred with his fellow commanders. In view of the extreme gravity of their situation they decided to ask the Khan and Tsebek-Dorji, who were in the rear, to join them.

"I think we should disperse in a number of separate groups," Shereng proposed, "to cross the river successively in different places farther downstream. That would give us the best chance of shaking off the Kazaks and getting through with the least damage."

Ubashi agreed to this plan but Tsebek-Dorji and Bambar thought it was too risky. Asaray also voiced objections:

"A dispersal into smaller units would weaken our forces. It would provide the much more mobile Kazak armies with a heaven-sent opportunity to chop up our groups piecemeal. No, I have a different proposal. Since there is no way of circumventing the Kazaks, let us launch a bold attack against the enemy's main force with as many troops as we can muster. I could attack their headquarters with my artillery which it will take some time to get across. We would leave behind a sufficient number of soldiers to protect the caravans and to escort them across the river when and where it will be safer". After some discussion this proposal was adopted.

First Bambar, Shereng and Asaray led three cavalry units across the river where they swarmed out in different directions in order to stage surprise attacks and create a diversion. Asaray was as anxious to move fast as the others but he was delayed somewhat by having two cannon with him for the purpose of sowing terror and panic in the enemy's ranks. This they achieved admirably. When the cannonade started the Torghut cavalry daringly charged from three directions, taking great risks against far superior forces.

Thanks to the precise intelligence which they had obtained, the centre of the Kazaks' main camp where the powerful Ablai Khan had his headquarters, was soon shrouded in smoke. Before and during this operation the main Torghut armies crossed the river and joined in the offensive.

In the meantime, the rest of their troops led by the Khan were escorting the women and children as well as the herds to the opposite bank farther downstream and marching them away from the scene of the battle. When the warriors returned from the fight and rejoined the caravans, Asaray hastened to find out how his wife

and son had fared. He was much relieved to find Badma and Batur in good form. Badma greeted him with tears of joy.

“How did you manage?” was Asaray’s first question. “Was it a safe crossing or were you attacked?”

Batur smiled at his father.

“Look at your son,” Badma answered, “and you will know that we’re all right. It was not too difficult. Our troops had to ward off some small Kazak bands who attacked us. We lost some of our animals but there were few human casualties. We were very lucky that the main battle was fought elsewhere. That was a perfect diversion. But I was terribly worried about you, Asaray. I know you always want to be in the front-line, and I was afraid you might not come back alive. How did it all go?”

“It was all right, my love. We were fortunate to have captured their scouts. The information we obtained from them saved many lives. Even so, not only a great many Kazaks were killed but we also suffered heavy losses in the bloodbath. The most grievous loss was our dear friend Kirep.”

“Kirep? Oh no! Was he killed?”

“I can still hardly believe it. Brave and always cheerful, he seemed destined to live forever, and now he’s gone. It is terrible. My heart has been hardened by our many ordeals but I must admit that when I saw him lying there and passed the many mutilated bodies of our other men, I could not contain myself and sobbed. Yet we should be grateful that our main force and the caravans got safely across. Ablai Khan may still do us harm but I do not believe he can block our advance any more.”

The Torghut wounded were treated by the lamas with medicinal herbs or with human fat cut from the dead bodies of their enemies — an ancient Mongol treatment. The dead were cremated or left to be devoured by birds of prey and desert wolves.

What counted most for the survivors was to be on the move again, going implacably forward towards the freedom and green pastures they were desperately seeking. But how tired everyone was. Often when they were resting, fresh Kazak attacks were launched against them. Nur Ali had been left behind, Ablai had been beaten off, and still the harassment continued. It was a nightmare but what else could they expect? They had after all penetrated far into Kazak territory.

In the early days of the trek there had been the shock of seeing men, women and children fall, dead or dying. Now, when many thousands had perished, death had become a familiar sight. The shock was replaced by a dull ache, an ever-present grief. Asaray feared for Badma and their little boy; whenever he could raid a Kazak camp and bring back food for his men, he would also have something for her and Batur.

But worse was yet to come. They were entering the dreaded Bed Pak Dala — the Hunger Desert. Shortly after sunrise every day the scorching, blinding light would strike them like a blow, enclosing them in its hot-iron grip. Men and animals alike were crushed by the blazing, palpable heat. When the supply of milk and water was exhausted the thirst was unbearable. Blood of their animals was all they had to drink.

Yet the Kalmyks plodded on, near-fainting, with steadily increasing despair and rapidly sinking determination, over the cruel, sun-baked sands.

Asaray, his eyes smarting and his mouth parched, felt sick at heart when he saw Badma, herself looking haggard and with deep shadows under her eyes, trying to calm down Batur. The little boy was suffering too, and cried a lot, unable to comprehend the situation. Asaray began to wonder whether any of the happy, milling throng who had set out would reach their destination alive.

The grey, murderous waste of the Hunger Desert was strewn with the bleached skeletons of man and beast who had attempted to traverse it before them. Black vultures hovered overhead: for them there was plenty of food every day. It would take a week, if not two, to cross these sands; and on the other side enemy troops, rested and well-fed, would doubtless be lying in wait for them again. Unless they found a supply of water, few would emerge from the desert alive. Had they known how terrible the trek would be, they would never have started on this long disastrous march. How could those responsible for their hurried departure, without adequate preparation, live with their guilt? Did they feel it at all?

Only the night brought some solace of coolness. At Tsebek-Dorji's initiative the leaders met to deliberate on what course they should take. Some, among them the Khan himself, seemed to have lost all hope but could not decide whether or not to continue this mad, hopeless journey.

"I really don't know what is best for us," sighed Ubashi. "We have perhaps covered three quarters of the way but this last stage may well mean our death. Does it make sense to continue further through this desert? Yet going back is at least as dangerous."

He had put into words what many were thinking.

Tsebek-Dorji spoke with determination: "I cannot deny that it is very difficult to make a decision. Whatever we do, we seem to be heading for disaster. But to take the long road back to where the hostile Oross are lying in wait for us? There can be no question of that! We simply must go on: there is no other way."

The Supreme Lama, Asaray, Bambar and some others shared Tsebek's opinion, and so it was decided. There was one small group of dissenters who had lost heart; they turned around and started the return journey to Russia, a dangerous, almost suicidal undertaking but — they hoped — less perilous than what awaited the others.

This was the hour of truth, a time of revelations that distinguished between the cowardly and the brave, the weak and the strong, the mean and the generous. In the initial stages Ubashi had been confident and in high spirits, but lately he had become apathetic and wracked with doubt. At first he had pictured this great migration as a victorious march led by a glorious leader, the Khan himself. The unexpected sufferings and setbacks had disappointed him bitterly, and because he again felt unequal to his task he had shrunk back into himself. He hardly ever offered any help or support to anyone. Some of the other, older nobles had also become despondent

or fallen ill. Tsebek-Dorji was bravely holding out but he often suffered pains; the lama doctor said he had a weakened heart.

Asaray and his friends were also nearly losing courage, yet could never give up. They felt themselves strongly bound together with their people through the shared suffering and their common goal. Moreover, Asaray exerted himself all the more strenuously for being burdened with a feeling of guilt. It was he, after all, who had taken the initiative for this unhappy venture, although it had been taken out of his hands and recklessly corrupted.

Bambar had captured two Kazaks of the 'Middle Horde' who had lost their way and he told Asaray what they had said:

"They assert that Ablai Khan, contrary to Nur Ali and his 'Little Horde' who are Russian vassals, has recognized Chinese suzerainty. I don't like this at all."

"Neither do I. If it's true — and we have no reason to doubt it — Ablai Khan must have obtained Chinese permission or even encouragement to attack us. That does not augur well. We seem to be caught between two expanding empires."

"Yes. I'm also beginning to wonder what fate awaits us when we reach Jungaria," Bambar remarked.

"What we shall most need then, if ever we get there, is rest and food. I think that, if we're given enough time, we shall be able to handle the situation there. Whatever the Chinese may have in mind, I cannot believe they will want to annihilate us."

Should not every people, Asaray wondered, have the right to independence and the management of their own affairs? Why must they continuously fight for it, why all this bloodshed and suffering?

The long trek continued, but every day the hope of surviving the ordeal diminished. There was no one who did not have many relatives and friends to mourn. Asaray's heaviest burden was the memory of the horrendous end to which his mother had come. Now he was deeply worried about Badma and Batur.

In their desperation to find wells some of the nomads started zigzagging through the parched desert but nowhere was there a drop of water or a blade of grass to be found. In their feverish light-headedness images were conjured up: memories of green pastures and clear spring water, of waving willows and juicy reeds along the Volga, of silvery fish jumping up out of the water, of milk spouting from full-uddered cows.

This frantic and exhausting search only added to their misery. The withering, remorseless blaze of the sun, the heat pulsating all about them and reflecting from the sand, deranged the minds of many who drifted into the wilderness on their own in a crazy pursuit of a *fata morgana*, never to return.

Dreadfully weakened, the Torghuts staggered at last out of the Bed Pak Dala and the adjoining Kurmanym-kum sands — and there, in the distance — they could hardly believe it — lay the shimmering blue waters of Balkhash-nôr, the famous Great Lake. The sight would have brought tears to the eyes of the hardiest men had

they been able to cry. A shudder went through the huge caravans as they redoubled their effort to cross those last miles of suffering. But their desiccated bodies and scorched lips were not to find solace yet: deadly arrows showered down upon them just before they reached the shore of their deliverance.

A strong force of hostile Buruts, fresh, lusty and spurred on by greed, fell upon them, inflicting the most horrid slaughter they had yet experienced. Their insufferable thirst and mad desire for relief lent the Torghuts the strength to shake off the enemy and push on to the lake. The fast and fierce Burut horsemen, 'flying with the clouds', pursued them to the shore; the water they drank was soon coloured with their own blood and that of their enemies.

* * * *

The Buruts had slunk back like jackals with their loot. The Torghuts had to cross another sandy stretch before they reached the River Ili. Here in the valley of the river, very near their ancient homeland, they set up their camps. This was one of the richest lands in Central Asia, with an abundant supply of water, forest shelters for the winter and fertile pastures for the summer. In the distance loomed the high snow-capped peaks of the Ala Tau, dominated by the majestic Khan Tengri, and beyond lay the holy country of Tibet. They were now only a few days' march from their ancient homelands in Jungaria and the Altai. Slowly, very slowly, the Torghuts began to recover from their ordeal.

After Asaray had noticed that Ubashi kept to himself in his kibitka, he and his closest friends decided to make an inspection tour of all the Torghut ulus. It was a devastating experience. Of the once rich and numerous Torghut herds only about one third remained, and the sight of them made their hearts bleed. Emaciated, covered with sores, tottering on weak legs still aching from the fierce exertion, the camels, horses, cows and sheep were grazing inertly, as if with great effort.

The people who had survived the long trek looked equally worn-out and pitiful. Asaray was overcome with sorrow and compassion. When he addressed them with warm, moving words in a voice trembling with emotion, their eyes began to shine. When Bambar spoke encouraging words, he got the same reaction. In their further talks with these people it became clear, however, that although everyone was happy to have reached this fertile valley, no-one was completely free of the fear of new attacks and fresh disasters. They dared look neither ahead nor behind.

Asaray and Badma were intensely grateful to have survived the ordeal with their little son. Batur had a strong constitution; their one and a half year old boy was quickly regaining weight. While the Torghuts were recovering in this green and tranquil valley, their peace was disturbed by shocking news: friendly local nomads warned the Torghuts that they were close to the Chinese frontier posts, when in fact they had not even reached their own homeland of Jungaria which lay to the west of the Chinese Empire.

“The Chinese border?” they asked incredulously.

Their visitors pointed to the nearby hills and affirmed that just beyond them, within shooting distance, the nearest Chinese border post stood. That would mean that nearly the whole of their homeland had been incorporated within the Chinese Empire! The Torghuts knew that the Manchu-Chinese had successfully fought the Jungars but it was a ghastly and totally unexpected shock to discover that the whole of Jungaria was now in their hands. However, it was a vast region. Surely there would be enough room for them? Perhaps things were not quite so bad as they looked. This hope was soon dashed when their informants disclosed that the Bogdo Khan, the Manchu Emperor of China, in order to keep a tight control over the entire newly conquered region, had established there a number of military colonies manned by tribes allied to the Manchus. Grazing grounds had also been allotted to Kazaks and other non-Mongol nomadic tribes. It looked as if their Russian nightmare — being surrounded by Cossack settlements and hostile tribes — was to start all over again here.

What should they do? Ask the Chinese permission to return to their own territories? The leaders deliberated for days. The Torghuts did not have much choice, being too weak still to fight against a powerful army. Not only had many of their people died — out of the 450,000 who had left Russia only some 300,000, or even less, had survived — they had also lost two thirds of the herds. Nor could they stay in this region, where they would soon be at the mercy of Kazaks and Buruts⁵, with whom the Chinese might join forces.

It was decided that the Khan and the princes should not commit themselves yet at this stage. Instead, Namo Kubaljur, the deputy Supreme Lama, who had lived in Tibet and China and who spoke Chinese, should go and find out on what conditions, if any, the Torghuts could return to Jungaria and the Altai. Some trusted men would escort the high priest on his delicate political mission. Tsebek-Dorji secretly hoped that his claim to be Khan would at last be recognized; he saw to it that one of his own agents would accompany the lama and tell the Chinese that his master was the real leader of the Torghuts and their legitimate Khan, whereas Ubashi had been appointed by the Russians.

General Iletu felt deeply worried and out of his depth, and this irritated him. As Manchu military governor of Ili — as the Chinese called this all-important, westernmost territory of China, with its checkered population and turbulent history of bloody massacres and intrigues — his main task was the establishment and maintenance of public order. This was a job he knew how to handle.

Now the security of the border was gravely threatened from outside by hostile forces, E-lu-te, massed in close proximity to the Chinese border posts. General Iletu urgently needed strong reinforcements and kept pressing Peking for troops. The central government was clearly also nervous about the situation but had not yet sent a single extra soldier. As a simple military man he could not understand the devious and subtle ways of the Imperial Court and the Grand Council of State, and he found it difficult to communicate with them.

To his chagrin, instead of troops, Peking had now sent him several useless high officials who would only impede him. Apparently they had the special confidence of the Dragon Throne and seemed to think the affair of the Oirat-Torghuts was within their exclusive competence.

When Ablai, the Khan of the 'Middle Horde' of the Kazaks, had addressed to him an urgent message reporting that hundreds of thousands of well-armed Eleuth (Oirat) were on their way with all their families and herds to the province of Ili, General Iletu had known that speedy action was needed to ward off the immediate danger. After all they were allies of Russia and were even reported to possess even artillery! When Ablai had asked whether he should let them through, Iletu had instructed him to protect his Kazak territories and stop their march.

He had also, of course, immediately dispatched a special 600-li⁶-a-day courier to inform the Imperial Court of these extraordinary and unexpected developments. Ever since, the government in Peking had bombarded him with questions to which he did not have answers: was there an Oirat-Torghut or Russian plot? what was their objective? were they accompanied by Russians?, etc.

Meanwhile Iletu was becoming ever more confused by this novel situation. Those Torghuts had sent as their emissary not a Prince or a military officer, but one of those sly, yellow-robed lamas, who — most suspiciously — spoke fluent Chinese. He had received him and his companions together with Shu-he-de, the best of the high officials the Emperor had delegated. When asked what the purpose of his visit was, the lama answered:

“Our people, Torghuts and Khoshuts, have made a long, exhausting trek all the way from the Echil — the Volga. I have come here to enquire on their behalf about the conditions in our homeland of Jungaria which is our destination.”

“Jungaria is part of a province of China, and without His Divine Majesty’s permission you will not be allowed to enter this province”, he had answered.

The effrontery of this Torghut, to call Jungaria his homeland!

“Will you please inform your Emperor that we are returning to the ancient land of our forebears?”

Before General Iletu could respond, Shu-he-de spoke:

“Your Reverence, as the Governor has told you, this land of your forebears, which you left hundreds of years ago, is an integral part of China and ruled by His Divine Majesty the illustrious Qianlong Emperor. If your people wish to live there again, you should, before any further plans can be discussed, present a written declaration of submission signed by the Khan and all your other leaders.”

“This is a matter about which I shall consult the Khan”, the lama Namu Kubaljur said.

“Do you represent the Khan or the Chief Lama?”, Shu-he-de asked.

“I represent my people,” was the enigmatic answer.

Before the lama left, Shu-he-de and Iletu asked him some questions about the number of their people and herds, their condition, and their relations with Russia, but the high lama replied:

“It is not for me, but for the Khan to discuss these questions with you.”

Shu-he-de then kindly remarked:

“I wish to assure you, Your Reverence, that if your people should be allowed to settle in this province, they would be absolutely free to practice their religion and need not change their customs in any way. The lamaist ‘Yellow Church’ is highly respected and protected in China. Your people would be free to make pilgrimages to Tibet which is now also a part of China.”

General Iletu nodded affirmatively.

In an aside before this interview took place, one of the nobles accompanying the lama had told Shu-he-de confidentially that the emissary did not represent the Russian-appointed Ubashi but acted on behalf of Prince Tsebek-Dorji, their real leader, who had come to submit himself and his people to the Bogdo Khan. However, Shu had seen through Tsebek-Dorji’s attempt to make a separate deal and obtain recognition as the leading Torghut prince. Therefore he had insisted on a written declaration signed by all.

General Iletu scratched his head. What was he to make of all this? What should he, as the military governor, report to the Throne? Even the Torghuts’ chain of command was unclear! He decided to leave the drafting of their joint report entirely to Shu-he-de, who was such a clever courtier and well-versed in these matters of high diplomacy.

* * * *

The Torghuts had been waiting on the border for the return of their emissary and were anxious to know the result of his talks. When the lama Namu Kubaljur came

back, he transmitted the military governor's demand for a written statement of submission to the Emperor by the Torghut Khan and all the princes.

He also reported the assurances he had been given about their freedom of religion if they were to settle in this 'Chinese' province.

It was always the same, it seemed, whether with Russia or China, their sovereigns wanted you to recognize their 'suzerainty' and to 'submit' to them. It was clear that without signing such a declaration they would have no chance of entering Jungaria, so Ubashi Khan and the princes did as required. They were in no state to contemplate anything else.

Defiantly dressed in their most magnificent robes which, having been packed in leather-covered chests, had remained in good condition during the long trek, and with a large, well-armed escort the princes and nobles, ten of them, proceeded to the border town of Ili.

XXVIII

It was the middle of July and insufferably hot in Peking.

The Son of Heaven had retired, as usual, to his summer residence in the cool hills of the north-eastern province of Jehol where he was escaping more than just the heat. Like his father and grandfather, the Qianlong Emperor had always loved gardens. In the capital he preferred the Summer Palace outside Peking, with its famous Garden of Perfect Brightness and the Garden of Prolonged Springtime, to the grand, formal palaces in the Forbidden City.

But in the summer his favourite spot was Jehol, so named — though cool itself — after the ‘Warm River’ (Ri-he) which flowed through it. He always felt happiest in his ‘Mountain Village to Escape the Heat’ (Bi-shu shan-zhuang) so close to the country where his nomadic Manchu ancestors had lived in their tents. In order to preserve their identity they had prescribed that no Chinese were allowed to settle in this entire territory of Central and Northern Manchuria.

Here, outside the Great Wall of China, he could take a more objective look, as it were, at the affairs of the Empire and rule both the interior and the outer provinces more effectively.

The Emperor delighted in spending long days in the open air, hunting on horseback with his dogs and falcons or strolling from his comfortable palace through the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees and sitting down in one of the charming pavilions to compose a poem, with his favourite concubines looking on admiringly.

He had added palaces to those built by his grandfather the Kangxi Emperor, and lakes, islands and picturesque bridges, and had amassed there the most precious works of art, books and manuscripts. Yet he was always aware of the fact that this summer residence, situated in the homeland of the Manchus, who ruled the whole of China but constituted only two percent of the population, had been built more to serve the arts of war and hunting than those of poetry and painting. His people must be strong and fit if they wished to remain in power: shooting practice with bow and arrow or with carbines, hunting and military manoeuvres were excellent exercises for that purpose.

Jehol was an enchanting place but he knew that if he gave himself over completely to his enjoyment of its natural beauties, as he was sometimes tempted to do, it could become his downfall and a disgrace to his ancestors. That was how the Ming dynasty had foundered: decadent, weak and divided, they had not been able to stand up to his forebears, that small militant people of Manchu horsemen.

The affairs of state must, of course, have his constant attention, always and everywhere, but he found that he had more time for relaxation here; there was a holiday air about this place which favourably influenced his mood.

He awoke early that morning, as was his custom, feeling refreshed. After a massage by his trusted Indian masseur and a bath, he enjoyed a frugal breakfast of tea and a steamed roll, and allowed various thoughts to pass through his head.

One of the most recent news items fascinated him. Fast couriers had brought reports of an amazing event: the sudden arrival on the Chinese border of an entire nation — the Eleuth-Torghuts, who had unexpectedly left a distant region of Russia and, with all their herds, made the unbelievably long trek back to China.

The military commanders of the border regions had reacted nervously. One and all had asked for more troops in order to ward off these people by force. They had recognized Chinese suzerainty but General Iletu feared that this might be a clever manoeuvre to hoodwink the Chinese, while Shu-he-de was altogether more sanguine.

Personally Qianlong believed the desire expressed by these Oirat leaders to submit themselves to him was probably genuine, at least in the sense that they knew there was no alternative. He did not share the fears of his military commanders. Did the air of his beloved hill resort make him careless and over-confident? Was it wishful thinking?

In the Middle Kingdom the voluntary surrender of barbarian tribes had always been considered a sure sign of the excellent rule of a Son of Heaven and his greatest glory. Therefore, the return to China of the entire nation of the Torghuts from distant Russia was an extremely important matter. It made him feel happy and proud. Coming after his subjugation of the Jungars and other Mongols whose power had at one time seriously threatened Manchu rule, this voluntary submission of the very last of the remaining Mongol tribes represented the completion and crowning of the great work started by his illustrious grandfather Kangxi. It had always been his wish to emulate that formidable man, to make his government at least as great a success.

His valet gently drew his shoes over his feet — blast! the toe from which his masseur had removed a painful corn, was still smarting — and helped him don his long purple under-gown. Over it his valet drew the magnificent robe of yellow silk with the dragon pattern; he then put on the purple silk cap with the huge imperial pearl on its crown in preparation for the meeting of the Grand Council.

Qianlong did not always relish these conferences with his high officials but had to endure. Sometimes he was inclined to think he could do everything better and faster himself, that this immense bureaucracy was a hindrance, but in every job you needed instruments. All you could do was sharpen them and make them as efficient as possible; to that end he would often let his high officials fall into disgrace when they were at the peak of their pride and career, and only promote them again when they had learnt their lesson.

When he sat down on the yellow silk cushion to receive the Grand Council, the highest organ of the state, over which he presided every morning, he was very much aware of being the Son of Heaven and all that this implied. On his conduct, on his correct behaviour and wisdom, depended the fortunes of the Empire.

The grand councillors filed in and prostrated themselves ('kowtowed') thrice, one after another. The meeting started with a discussion of a number of important internal developments, such as the unfortunate uprisings in Sichuan, that rebellious province. When the Emperor had issued his instructions, orally or by inscribing a pithy rescript with his vermilion brush on the relevant memorandum, he invited his Chief Minister to introduce the foreign policy issue which was now uppermost in Qianlong's mind: the return of the Eleuth-Torghuts to China.

The Chief Minister first briefed the members on the various reports about this extraordinary event. He then read the latest dispatch from Ili which stated that after seven days of deliberations the Torghuts had announced their desire to submit to the Emperor. But in this report Governor Iletu had also voiced his suspicion of the Torghuts' real intentions and had recommended the levy of twenty thousand soldiers from among the Khalkhas — eastern Mongols, and other tribes to serve as reinforcements in case there should be hostilities.

The Emperor then spoke:

"First of all we ought to discuss the principal question: whether or not the Torghuts are sincere."

After a short silence the Chief Minister hesitantly remarked:

"What if Ubashi, once admitted to Jungaria, should take our garrisons by force and conquer that rich province which Your Divine Majesty has only recently pacified? Of old it was said that 'to receive someone who surrenders is like receiving an enemy'. Therefore it is this insignificant official's humble opinion that great caution is required."

Another Council member said:

"This ignorant person hardly dares lay before Your Divine Majesty his fears of an even greater plot. He wonders whether the so-called 'submission' of the Torghut-Eleuth⁷ could possibly have been arranged by the O-lo-se — the treacherous Russians, in view of their designs on those provinces of the Middle Kingdom?"

Several councillors spoke in the same vein, whilst others thought these fears groundless. Finally someone pointed out that the Torghuts were rebellious subjects of the Russian Empire. Therefore, China was bound by treaty to extradite them. If she did not, an armed conflict with Russia could not be excluded.

It was pleasantly cool in the Throne room. The sunlight filtered through the paper windowpanes, pale and divested of its heating power. A light breeze blew fresh air through the artfully coloured lattice-work of split bamboo which prevented the insects buzzing outside from entering through the open doors. The lanterns of painted horn and silk suspended from the ceiling swung in the air, the Emperor noted, as slowly and gracefully as young Court maidens performing a dance. He felt contented.

There was peace and prosperity in 'All Under Heaven'. Soon the eightieth birthday of his venerated mother, the Empress Dowager, would be celebrated. To

commemorate this felicitous event he had built a large, magnificent lamaist temple on the highest hill, on Bi-shu Shan. The work on this temple, which closely resembled the famous Potala Palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, had only just finished.

The spread of Buddhism was not his highest goal but through lamaism, and with the Dalai Lama under his control, he could keep a strong hold on all those Mongol tribes who, even in the recent past, had posed threats to the Empire.

The return of the Torghuts to China coincided with his mother's very special birthday and the completion of the new Potala. Could anything be more fitting? He would receive their leaders right here, in honour of the Kangxi Emperor who had founded this hill resort with exactly such a purpose in mind: to receive the princes of those nations that recognized Chinese suzerainty. Kneeling in front of the ancestral tablet, he would dutifully report this historic event to his illustrious grandfather. He would also inscribe it in marble columns to be erected here and in the border region.

The debate in the Grand Council continued. Now at last someone made a sensible remark: if the Russians let their subjects slip away, he said, and in such great numbers, that was their own fault entirely; they could not blame it on the Chinese.

That was the Qianlong Emperor's opinion too. He deeply distrusted the Russians and suspected that in the course of their boundless expansion they would one day invade the outer provinces of the Middle Kingdom. He was prepared for this, and had instigated the necessary military precautions long ago.

The time had come to end this discussion, the Emperor decided. He spoke in firm and decided tones:

“Whatever the Torghuts' intentions, We are willing to receive them well. If they come as supplicants, We shall extend Our hand and give them assistance. If they come as enemies, We shall send Our armies against them.

“We believe that the Torghuts, reduced to misery, are throwing themselves upon Our mercy in order to obtain from Us what they could never hope to win by force. Yet, for safety's sake, We have despatched first the high official, Shu-he-de, and later Our son-in-law, Septen Baljur, to Ili province and ordered him and the other officials to construct fortifications in vital places and put the troops in readiness. This is only a precaution. The Torghuts should be given complete freedom to express their needs and their wishes.”

The Councillors bowed deeply to show their respect for the Emperor's wisdom.

In the days that followed, the officials of the border region revealed in their memorials to the Throne the pitiful state of the newly arrived Torghuts and Khoshuts, and made recommendations to meet their most urgent needs. The Emperor, who gave all these matters his personal attention, immediately ordered that two hundred thousand ounces of silver be advanced from the coffers of the province of Gansu to buy forthwith one hundred thousand horses and sheep, fodder, grain, tea, fur coats and sheepskins. In the Imperial edict the officials were however

urged not to pay more than the normal price for the animals, 'as there would be none among the cattle-dealers who would not raise their prices'. The Emperor further ordered the local tribes — Kazaks and others — to deliver another one hundred thousand animals as tribute.

Meanwhile, the Acting Governor of Gansu had examined and evaluated the contents of the storage depots in Hami. He reported that, though there were not enough fur coats, there was a large stock of felt garments, padded cotton coats, shoes, socks, and caps. He therefore asked permission to select the usable goods and give them to the Torghuts as a present from His Divine Majesty.

Across this report the Emperor wrote with his vermilion brush: "Excellent. He is giving great attention to this matter!"

In his answer Qianlong remarked that the important thing was to help the greatest possible number of people before the beginning of winter. There could therefore be no objection to giving them padded cotton garments instead of the more expensive furs. Moreover, His Majesty added, all those used or torn clothes stored in the provincial depots would never fetch a good price if sold, so one could kill two birds with one stone by giving them away as relief goods to those people who were in urgent need of protection against the cold.

There remained a crucial problem to be solved: where were the Torghuts to be settled? The Emperor conferred with his chief advisers, all of whom agreed that if these nomads were settled close to the western frontier, they could easily move across the border and establish contact with potentially hostile elements in that highly sensitive area. The Russian threat, always at the back of their minds, would become extremely dangerous if the Torghuts added their forces to those of Russia and, perhaps, the Kazaks. Nor would it be advisable to settle them near the vital post-roads to Barköl and Hami further inland.

To contain the power of this still sizeable, militant nation and to minimize the risk to the Empire, the Emperor decided that they should be scattered over various inland regions, in between loyal tribes and military agricultural colonies. In this way each group would be more or less isolated and their various leaders would find it difficult to maintain regular contact with each other. The actual allotment of their pastures was left to the discretion of Governor Iletu and other officials more familiar with local conditions.

In Ili, on the far western border of China, the Torghut leaders, who by their haughty and far from submissive manner seemed to indicate that their 'submission' should not be taken literally, were received in audience by Governor Iletu, who could scarcely hide his annoyance, and some other Manchu-Chinese officials. One of these was Shu-he-de; another Septen Baljur, a Mongolian prince who had married one of Qianlong's daughters. Both had been specially chosen by the Son of Heaven to deal with the affair. The presence of these high officials demonstrated the great importance the Emperor attached to the return of the Oirat-Torghuts.

The Khan presented gifts for the Emperor: objects made of precious stones, western clocks and a Chinese imperial seal of jade, received by his ancestors. Now General Iletu, who had looked stern and wary, smiled and the atmosphere became more relaxed. The Torghut and Khoshut guests were entertained most hospitably but when Asaray observed Governor Iletu during the lavish dinner, it was clear to him that the man remained suspicious of his guests.

The next day the high Manchu official Shu-he-de, who seemed not only far more intelligent but also less distrustful than the general, invited them to tea. A tall, straight-backed, authoritative figure, clad in a green robe with gold and purple ornaments, wearing a mandarin hat with an oval button of sapphires and peacock feathers, he left no doubt in their minds that he was a direct representative of the Bogdo Khan. But he was affable, and when his impassive face broke into a smile, he exuded an irresistible charm. Fragrant tea in a covered cup of the finest porcelain was placed in front of each. The customary polite phrases were exchanged in Mongol, a language Shu spoke fluently, albeit with an eastern accent. He soon came to the point:

"It is my great pleasure, gentlemen, to convey to you an invitation by His Divine Majesty to visit Him in his summer palace in the Northeast. After your strenuous journey and subsequent submission, the Emperor wishes you to enjoy the cool, restful atmosphere of his hill resort, where he will personally bestow on you the honours and gifts to which you are entitled."

The Oirat princes expressed their gratitude for this gracious invitation but pointed out that they must first see to the settlement of their much weakened and impoverished people and herds in the country of their ancestors.

"Well, that is one of the many things that need serious consideration. Relief goods will be arriving here soon but it has not yet been decided where you will be located since our border officials were taken completely by surprise by your sudden arrival in such great numbers. That should in my opinion be an additional reason for you to meet the Emperor now rather than much later, for you will then be able personally to lay your wishes before him."

So they decided to accept the invitation. Their caravans were now allowed to cross the border in successive groups which, however, once in China, were sent off and escorted in different directions. To their bewilderment and in spite of their protests, the various ulus were allotted pastures – temporarily, it was said – in areas which were obviously not the most fertile and were far apart. The Torghuts also noticed with dismay that the rumours of military colonies were true.

Yet, after the terrible losses they had suffered, and whilst they were in no fit state to oppose their hosts' decisions, it was a great relief to find that the Chinese authorities were making tremendous efforts to provide them with everything they needed: they promised them horses and cattle, food, tea, fodder for their herds, and winter clothes.

The Torghut princes, ten of them, now went on their way to northeast China, to the Imperial summer resort some 180 kilometres northeast of Peking. Travelling in consecutive groups with an escort of secretaries from the Grand Council and a number of soldiers, they followed initially the ancient Silk Road.

Shereng, whom the Chinese trusted least because he had fought the Chinese in the Jungar wars and killed one of their generals, had been sent off first with the Emperor's son-in-law Septen Baljur. Asaray was with the Khan and the Supreme Lama, and they were accompanied by Shu-he-de.

Their Manchu and Chinese escorts did everything in their power to make the journey comfortable. After three weeks of travelling they arrived in Kalgan, where Asaray had an opportunity of sending his wife an account of their journey by special courier.

* * * *

Badma was extremely busy. Ever more relief goods kept arriving and had to be distributed fairly. Some of the Chinese who had been ordered by the military governor to bring them large quantities of grain, tea and fodder, dumped the bales and boxes contemptuously at their camp, treating the Torghuts as beggars.

Ubashi's wife Mandere had, at Badma's request, taken charge of the relief action, but Badma knew quite well that the coordination of all these activities would fall mainly on her own shoulders and those of her group of women. Men and women representing the various ulus, including those encamped further away, were detailed to distribute the relief goods and food. Thus everything was measured out in the smoothest possible way, but it entailed a tremendous amount of work. The two women were happy to find that almost no-one tried to garner more than his proper share. In any case, everyone was so exhausted and destitute that anything and everything was gratefully accepted.

One day Mandere, looking flustered, came round to Badma's place:

"You know I'm not proud and don't plume myself on being the Khan's wife but what has now happened to me, Badma, has deeply angered me. A bunch of Kazaks

asked to see me and they really were the rudest men I've ever met. They invited me to come outside to look at the thousands of horses, cows and sheep they had been ordered to hand over to us. These were, of course, not their best, and one can't blame them. But the way it was done! They were slightly drunk and shouted loudly, so that everyone could hear:

'Look, old hag, here's the rubbish we've brought. Just try to get milk out of those cows. And the horses? Your good-for-nothing men won't be able to ride them!'

And they laughed, they split their sides laughing. I felt so ashamed and angry! Before I could gather together enough men to punish them for their insults, they had galloped away. How low we have fallen, to be treated as beggars in our own homeland!"

Badma comforted her:

"We'll have them yet, Mandere, when our own men are back! I'm sure we shall also get better pastures then, further away from these Kazaks."

She went with Mandere to look at the new acquisitions. Most of them were fortunately not 'rubbish' — the Manchu inspectors had seen to that — but the local Kazaks had obviously not been pleased with this extra levy.

They had not even finished inspecting and distributing the animals when long rows of ox-carts arrived loaded with sheepskins, felt garments, padded cotton coats, shoes, socks and fur hats. The Chinese who brought these goods looked sullen, but their chief was all smiles and made a short speech:

"His Divine Majesty has accepted the submission of the Torghuts and expressed His satisfaction that all the Mongol peoples have now returned to the land where the Yellow Church is protected. He has been informed that you are in grave need and distress. Therefore, in his loving-kindness, He sends you these precious goods as a token of the continuous care of the Son of Heaven for His people."

After this rather condescending address Badma looked at Mandere and gave her a wink. They had come to know each other better and got along well. Mandere spoke a few words of thanks, and when they had been given a drink the Chinese left.

"Have you had any letters from Ubashi?" Badma asked her.

"I still haven't heard from Asaray."

"No, I haven't received any message either, but it is a long journey so it may take some time before we hear from them." A week later Badma entered Mandere's khibitka, waving a letter and looking very happy:

"I've got news from Asaray! A fast, special courier brought it."

"I've also got a letter. But yours looks much longer, Ubashi's is quite short. I'll read it to you:

"The Manchus and Chinese are showing me exceptional esteem and treating me with full honours. During the whole journey we were given excellent lodgings, especially I as the Khan, and the very best food. I felt tired and despondent when we started out on this trip to Jehol, but feel much better now. We have arrived in Kalgan

whence we can send our letters by courier. In Jehol, I am told, the Emperor himself will show me his gratitude and honour me.'

"As you can see, Badma, Ubashi is well-pleased. He's a man of few words and he can be hot-tempered, but underneath he's kind and considerate. You'll remember that after the long trek I was ill for some time. What you don't know, is that he personally nursed me with the tenderest care one could wish for. Why am I telling you all this? I suppose it's because I miss him, as you are missing Asaray.

"What does Asaray write? Or would you rather not say?"

"Of course I can read you his account of their travels, though I may leave out some of the more personal bits, but I must warn you that it's a very lengthy one. Shall I?"

Mandere nodded eagerly.

"This is what he writes:

'When I started out from Ili, it was with a heavy heart, for we were leaving you behind in an uncertain situation, spread out over a large area, and in need of everything. The Chinese promised they would send a great amount of relief goods very soon, and I hope they have done so.

'During this journey we soon discovered that the Manchu and Chinese officials, although more serious and formal than our natural, happy-go-lucky Mongols, resemble us more closely in their ways and thought-processes than the Russians. They are also more adept at treating us correctly — and flattering us...

'One day Shu-he-de asked our Supreme Lama, "Will you conduct a service for us, Your Eminence?" And afterwards he told him:

"I have never witnessed such a splendid lamaist Mass! Did I tell you that the Dalai Lama has expressed a great interest in meeting Your Eminence as soon as possible? It will be a great pleasure and honour for us to make your journey to Tibet comfortable. I can assure you your entry into Lhasa will be triumphal. You will be hailed as the great spiritual leader who brought back his flock from a distant heathen country."

'This flattering statement was also, of course, an indirect reference,' Asaray added, 'to the fact that Tibet, which — as you know — had been a Mongol protectorate for long periods, now respected Chinese suzerainty. Shu-he-de's coaxing of the Supreme Lama had a subtle note of irony and condescension. Here came a passage about Ubashi's vanity which Badma left out.

'With me, it seems, this Manchu official speaks more as man to man. In our present circumstances it will be good policy for us to stress what we have in common with the Manchus to win their trust. That will, I think, be an essential condition for obtaining permission to settle in the areas of our choice. I've decided to work towards that end, especially with Shu-he-de, and I've made some progress with him. From the start I have been struck by the intelligence and authoritative manner of this high official who clearly has the Emperor's ear. His support at the Court of China could be invaluable for us.

‘I am anxious to know whether the Bogdo Khan will show his understanding for our justified wishes. We shall have to do all in our power to keep our people together and defend their freedom. You will understand how worried I am about the Chinese policy of dividing us. The honours bestowed on us and the exceptionally favourable treatment we undergo only serve to increase my suspicion. Will our people be treated as well as their princes? That remains to be seen.

‘For his part, Shu-he-de appears very much interested in my life in Russia; he questioned me about my studies at the Cadet Academy and about Russian policies with regard to other countries.

‘All along the route first-class riding horses — the famous Barköl ponies specially trained for the Imperial herds — , pleasant lodgings, and food of the kind we like most were provided for us. After months of hardship and misery, all these things, together with the wine, the araki and sweet words, generated a mood of euphoria among our group, as you will understand, although I sometimes feel guilty for not being able to share it with you.

‘For three weeks we journeyed, first through the wide steppe and sandy wastes of Central Asia, then along muddy or dusty roads, across flat plains, through crowded towns and villages, over endless stretches of painstakingly cultivated country, where peasants with wide straw hats laboured on the land. In some regions they looked healthy, in others, where there had been severe drought, the peasants were emaciated and begging for food. They live in miserable mud huts. Their plight was such, it was said, that they would sell their daughters into prostitution. One could also often see a baby lying by the roadside, dying or dead, and when we asked how this was possible, the answer came that such poor families had little use for a girl, nor would anyone take in a foundling.

‘Landscapes of dour monotony and squalid villages, where mangy dogs leapt up at our horses to be chased away with whip-lashes, alternated with lush country, green hills and age-old trees. Sometimes the road was lined with long rows of hawkers sitting under colourful sunshades and offering their wares to passers-by. Most of their customers were thin, muscular men carrying enormous loads on their backs or on poles over their shoulders. One also saw women bent under the weight of large baskets at both ends of a bamboo pole, a pig in one and a child in the other. It was said that a live pig was more highly valued than a live coolie: when an overloaded ferryboat sank, one hundred coolies were drowned but the thirty pigs on board were all saved. Life is harsh for the poor in this country, but we became impressed by the astonishing endurance and resilience of the Chinese, of which we daily saw striking examples, by their good temper, and the ease with which they could laugh away pain, suffering and inconvenience.

‘In the Chinese towns we passed through there was a liveliness and gaiety I found quite engaging, but the sheer volume of noise was astonishing. A constant roar arose from the multitude of human voices, with everyone moving in one direction or

another. It was like looking at an ant-hill, but a very noisy one. In the busy thoroughfares, innumerable booths and stalls — some clean, others stinking and fly-infested — as well as shops and eating-houses bearing red and gold signs in flowery language were offering all kinds of commodities, vegetables, fruit and meals.

‘Pedlars, their wares slung at both ends of their shoulder poles, walked at a slow pace with short rhythmical steps to keep their balance, each uttering a different cry to advertise his goods. There was the vendor of tangerines, which we ate for the first time and of which we bought a large amount, or of roast chestnuts, or the noodle pedlar, carrying his charcoal stove and clinking a spoon and bowl. There were also miserable beggars clad in rags, covered with sores, blind or one-legged, sitting by the roadside, continuously bending their bodies forward and knocking their heads on the ground, wailfully beseeching the passers-by to give them money or food.’

“Good heavens,” Mandere interrupted, “What things they see! And Ubashi confines himself to a few simple lines. Thanks to Asaray we can follow their journey as if we were travelling with them!”

“It’s not even finished, Mandere. Just listen:

“He’s a good story-teller,” Mandere said approvingly. “What a dreary existence we lead by comparison! The letter is not finished yet? I am curious to hear the rest!”

“Yes, he still goes on. Listen:

‘Eating is evidently the favourite pastime of the Chinese, as our company notice every time we walk through a town. I hardly dare write this down since you may still be short of everything. I fervently hope things are better now.

‘Throughout these Chinese towns there’s the hiss and sputter of frying from huge iron pans, the smell of meat and oil, peppers and spices, and the burning wood of crackling fires. Restaurants abound and from them issues the sound of loud laughter and singing, the clicking of chopsticks and mah-jong tablets, belches, spitting and farts. Late in the night, tailors, barbers, seal-carvers and letter-writers for the illiterate, still sit in the streets working by the light of oil-lamps.

‘Wherever I’ve been I am fascinated by the spectacle but I thank my stars for not having to live in such a beehive; such a contrast with the vast expanse and quiet of the steppe. On this trip we have seen immense riches but also great poverty, and I felt deeply distressed every time I thought about you. Have the promised relief goods arrived, I wondered. Would you and little Batur be all right? I long to take you to distant, fertile grazing grounds where we could recover from our miseries and enjoy the freedom we have yearned for.

‘Our route was punctuated with Buddhist temples, where often a halt was made to offer joss sticks or flowers and prayers.

‘We were only seldom lodged in a Chinese inn, mostly in government guest-houses, monasteries or tents specially provided for us. Before reaching a new destination, one or more yamen-runners, alert young men usually wearing a black

turban and a wide red tunic, would come to meet us and guide our group to the yamen — the office of the highest official.

‘Everywhere the Manchu officers and men stationed in the region lived with their families in a military colony, a town separated from the Chinese city and where, instead of being made to conform, they can cultivate their own customs and exercise their martial sports and discipline. The Manchus are not allowed to marry Chinese, nor are they permitted to engage in trade or manual work. They will thus remain a separate ruling class and the purpose of their military strongholds is to maintain the power of the relatively small number of Manchus over the tremendously large population of China.

‘When we were entertained by them in their own quarters, we were struck by the contrast with Chinese life, the absence of noise, food smells and busy commercial activity. Our hosts look different too: lean and tall, they are fine riders, who practise archery and love a good hunt. The Manchu women are also tall and have an elegant gait, distinct from their hobbling Chinese sisters whose feet are bound, and of whom one sees less in public.

‘Around the Ordos desert we travelled and through Chahar Mongol country. Now we have arrived in Kalgan, the great trading centre, where the caravans from Russia, Mongolia and China meet. We have been on the road for three weeks already and will have to travel for another fortnight before reaching the summer palace in Jehol.

‘I am sending you this travelogue with a special, fast courier, who is leaving here tomorrow, and I hope you will receive it in good health. I long to be with you and Batur again!’

Badma had finished reading and put the letter down.

“My goodness, that was a long letter! I am hoarse from reading it to you. Asaray describes everything so well, you see it before your eyes, as if you are there yourself.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful to hear all about their journey,” Mandere agreed. “And such vivid descriptions! I can’t help being a little envious of you, but at least we know now that our men are well, and that’s the main thing. Ubashi is not the sort who likes to wield pen and paper, I’ll have to resign myself to that.”

They went on talking for a long time about their men’s experiences. Badma dreamed sweet dreams that night but felt achingly lonely the next morning.

Having left Kalgan the Torghut princes and nobles were still travelling through the country of the Chahar-Mongols. Asaray noted that even here, well outside the Great Wall, Chinese peasants had penetrated in large numbers and were tilling the land, whereas one rarely saw a Mongol camp. Asaray often rode with Shu-he-de. This time they were far ahead of Ubashi and Tsebek-Dorji, who usually made up the rear, and were looking for a place to rest. The day was hot but the air was dry here and the ride pleasant. In the steppe sometimes a flock of graceful antelopes swept swiftly across their path and sped away.

A halt was made in a valley and they sat down to take tea. When Asaray told the Manchu official whom he had befriended, about his tight-lipped Chinese servant from whom it had been difficult to extract answers to specific questions, Shu laughed heartily:

“Even we Manchus are beginning to be influenced by the Chinese habit of expressing themselves in indirect, devious ways or avoiding answers. It can be maddening, I know but, as you pointed out before, we still have much more in common with you. So ask me any question you want, and I’ll try to be a true Manchu and answer it, if I can, in a more straightforward fashion!”

“Well, Shu Da-ren,” Asaray said, jokingly calling him by his title ‘Your Excellency’ (Da-ren), “I’ve been wondering what has happened here in these northern parts of Mongolia. Where have all the Mongols gone? Everywhere one sees Chinese peasants grow wheat where horses, camels and sheep once grazed. Apart from the occasional camp or caravans we pass now and then, I haven’t seen a single camel here. Is this what we must expect to happen in Jungaria and the Altai?”

Shu-he-de looked grave now:

“No, it is not, but you’re indeed touching upon a real problem. We sympathize with those nomads who have lost their pastures and been driven away. But we Manchus also bear a heavy responsibility towards the Chinese people under our rule. Their population has increased enormously and so has their need of food. Therefore a compromise has been struck, as you can see here. Some nomads have stayed, others have gone to try their luck elsewhere. There is, frankly, another decisive factor as well. These regions have great strategic importance for us. They are the gateway to North China and the capital Peking. It is considered safer if they’re inhabited by peaceful, hard-working Chinese peasants, who are settled and tied to their land, than by those militant, mobile nomadic tribes with whom we have waged so many wars in the past.”

“Is that the way you look at it?” Asaray remarked sharply. “You sound exactly like Catherine II, and you could not have been more explicit. Thank you anyway for being so frank. But just now you reassured me about our homeland. So tell me, why does

your golden rule not apply to my people, to the 'militant nomadic Torghuts' in Jungaria?"

"It does, but much less so. Jungaria and the whole of our western province are also of strategic importance but they are much further removed from the capital and thus need not be peopled by so many Chinese settlers. A few military colonies have sufficed to keep the peace ever since we conquered the territory."

He hesitated, then added: "Well, frankly, I should add that over there as well as here, there's always the Russian threat in the background which gives cause for concern."

A servant poured more tea, and the bamboo grove, rare in these parts, spread an agreeable coolness. The rustling of the tapering, gossamer leaves in the faint breeze had a soothing effect. Asaray knew that Shu had great experience in military matters and in China's relations with the border peoples. When he found him so open and direct, he thought he might pursue the subject a little further.

"We were told that the pastures allotted us are only temporary and that a more permanent arrangement would be worked out. I assume that this implies that we shall be united gain in our original homeland. Am I correct in thinking that this is also the Emperor's wish? We would not want to be scattered all over your western province."

"I cannot tell you, Prince Asaray, what His Divine Majesty will decide in this respect, for I don't know. What I do know, is that he attaches great importance to the voluntary return of the Torghuts to these parts, and is proud that this should happen during his reign. If your Khan — and it is he who must do it — pleads your case strongly and assures him that your intentions are entirely peaceful, that the concerns of such military commanders as Iletu are wholly unfounded, I am convinced His Majesty will seriously take into account your interests and needs, though I imagine he would not wish you to live too close to the Russian border or to the strategic post-route."

"I hope you are right! You mentioned the Russian border just now. I noticed that you have stationed strong forces at the border post near Ili. But the Russians are still far away and you have your ally Ablai Khan and his Kazaks in between."

"Ablai Khan? He was not even capable of stopping your advance. What could he do against Russian armies? In any case, he's a fickle ally at best. If the Russians should pay him more, he'd quickly side with them. No, we are very wary of the Russians and their empire which continues to expand. We must therefore make doubly sure you are on our side."

When Asaray informed Ubashi of Shu-he-de's remarks regarding their future settlement, the Khan shrugged his shoulders:

"I don't agree. From the treatment we have received so far I can only conclude that the Emperor will honour the Khan and his people, and give us the best land available. Our situation here is very different from that in Russia."

Asaray did not answer: the man was hopeless. It soon appeared, moreover, that Ubashi was not the only one to be optimistic. Some of the Torghut princes, among them that staunch warrior Tsebek-Dorji, who had visibly grown older and tired from the long trek, also did not look further than the present and were happy to enjoy the privileges their hosts bestowed on them. But other princes in their group, such as Bambar and Kibten, were no less worried than Asaray.

One could only hope, Asaray thought, that their Manchu friend would become their advocate at Court. He seemed to have great influence there in questions regarding the border regions. This belief was not shaken by what one of the Chinese secretaries of the Grand Council told him in confidential whispers:

“I’ve seen you talk regularly with Shu Da-ren. He is an interesting man, is he not? It’s a pity that his position is so insecure. In fact, he is likely to be degraded again as soon as we’re back in Jehol; but you know that, don’t you?”

From the start Asaray had disliked this sly face and the soft, hissing voice.

“What on earth do you mean? You are obviously not one of his best friends.”

“I’m only warning you that you should not stake too much on Shu-he-de. Have you really never heard about his zigzagging career? I’ll give you some facts then which speak for themselves:

“In the 19th year of Qianlong (1754), when Shu was one of the highest and most respected officials, he incurred His Majesty’s displeasure and lost his post as President of the Board of War. After three years out of office, he got it back, but within a month he was degraded for the second time and barely escaped execution. Then, during a campaign in Kashgaria, he redeemed himself and was reinstated.

“But that was not the end of Shu-he-de’s troubles. Only three years ago he was dismissed again, having made the mistake of counselling restraint against the Burmese. He was divested of all ranks and honours, and was sent to serve in an inferior post in Turkestan. From there he was despatched to meet the Torghuts at the border. He must now redeem himself again. You draw your own conclusions, Prince Asaray!”

Was this just a wicked fib? But the man could not possibly have invented all of this. Asaray could not dismiss it from his mind and decided to play straight with Shu. When he told him everything, Shu-he-de smiled sadly:

“It’s extraordinary to what extent people can be consumed with jealousy and hatred. How they enjoy the misfortune of others! That man once worked for me. He was not very competent but what was worse, I could not trust him completely. Therefore I passed him over when he was due for promotion. You see the result.

“Yet, despite all that, I can confirm all he has told you. All those things did happen. Since we are friends now, Asaray, I shall let you look into my heart. I have the greatest admiration for the Emperor and nothing can shake that. He really is one of the wisest and strongest personalities the world has ever known. But it’s also true

that I was sometimes punished too severely or even without justification. I am not the only official to have received such treatment.

“The Emperor is subject to changes of mood. He makes swift decisions. Yet I suspect that the extreme ups and downs in the careers of the highest officials are part of his shrewd policy to keep them in trim and on their toes.”

It was refreshing to meet an official with whom one could talk so freely and who appeared to hold nothing back. In return for answering a great many questions about life in Russia, Asaray learnt many things about the inner workings of the Chinese Empire. The Manchus had adopted the ancient Chinese examination system under which all those aspiring to belong to the privileged class of Mandarins had to undergo a thorough training in the Chinese classics and pass three successive levels of examinations.

Though a true Manchu, Shu-he-de admired Chinese civilization. What he abhorred was the tendency toward decadence of some Chinese literati who would spend all their days and nights sipping wine, gazing at flowers, rocks, or the moon, and writing poems. In this respect, he said, the Manchus should not follow the Chinese example; in order to protect themselves and their dominant position they must remain tough and vigorous.

“I admire you nomads,” he remarked with obvious sincerity, “who are leading a hard life. In order to survive, you need a great deal of courage, patience and abnegation. In our society we are losing this nobility of character. We have to guard against the dangerous comforts of an easy life.”

After the long but not unpleasant journey the hills of Shan-zhuang, the Emperor's hill station, at last rose before them. The numerous summer palaces and temples on their slopes shone like diamonds in a tiara. Then the Torghut princes, to their astonishment, saw in the distance what looked very much like the famous Potala, the Dalai Lama's palace in Lhasa. It could not be true. When they were able to distinguish it more clearly, it appeared to be a colossal temple, and indeed strikingly similar to the Dalai Lama's. The princes wanted to visit it immediately but were told they were not going there yet. Their escort explained that His Majesty was camping in his hunting grounds at Mulan and had expressed the desire to meet them there in an informal atmosphere.

The first rows of tents they passed were those of the guards of the Emperor's hunting camp, then came the living quarters of imperial princes and high officials, some of whom Shu-he-de pointed out to Asaray. He explained how one could tell their rank by their buttons, peacock feathers or other insignia, such as a gold dragon in a rectangular field. Now the Torghuts approached the 'inner camp', curtained off by a seven-foot-high net of heavy cordage and, within, by huge yellow hangings. A mysterious silence reigned here, and Asaray intuitively felt it was an important place. He asked Shu-he-de.

"I'll say it is! It's the 'City of the Yellow Curtains'. Behind those curtains are hidden the tents of His Divine Majesty the Emperor and his retinue."

In the vicinity there had been erected a number of Mongol khibitka's which, to the delight of the Torghut visitors were ready to provide them with everything they were used to at home. There were Mongol and Chinese servants in attendance. After a bath and rest a delicious meal was prepared by Oirat cooks brought specially from Jungaria!

When the dinner was ready to be served, there was a sudden commotion nearby. Surrounded by high officials, a lean, impressive figure in a simple grey garment with a yellow belt and a red cap approached. Asaray had no doubt that this must be the Son of Heaven, the Qianlong Emperor of China, the Bogdo Khan. Nearly six feet tall, he had an open, frank face, dark penetrating eyes under bushy eyebrows, a drooping moustache and a goatee beard.

The Torghut princes were introduced one by one and prostrated themselves touching the ground with their foreheads (the Chinese called this ke-tou, kow-tow), but the high visitor gestured that no further formalities were needed; then all sat on felt carpets, His Majesty on a silk cushion. Rice-wine and araki were offered and toasts were given. The Emperor spoke some Mongol but much of his conversation with the Khan and the other princes was through interpreters.

"You have made a very long journey, and I wish to bid you welcome here. I hope you will be comfortable in this, my favourite hunting resort, and will join me in a

hunt to-morrow. Now I have only come to meet you informally and share some of your dinner with you.”

Ubashi thanked the Emperor on behalf of all the Torghut and Khoshut princes and leading nobles for the excellent care taken of them during their journey through China. They would be delighted and regard it as a great honour, he added, to take part in the Imperial hunt the next day.

During the discussion which followed, the Emperor revealed an intimate knowledge of the history of the Torghuts. He graciously enquired how the long trek had affected them, and seemed deeply impressed by the brief but poignant account of their ordeals. Everyone was charmed by his personality and friendly attitude.

Next day the Torghut princes were invited by the Emperor to attend a short Manchu ceremony. In his presence a group of shamans prayed aloud before five pairs of white horses who stood with their heads turned toward the west:

“Oh Lord of Heaven, oh Mongol leaders, Manchu princes, we pray to you for our swift horses. Through your power may their legs lift high, their manes toss; may they swallow the winds as they race, and grow ever sleeker as they drink in the mists; may they have fodder to eat, and be healthy and strong; may they have roots to nibble, and reach a great age. Guard them from ditches, from the precipices over which they might fall; keep them far from thieves. Oh gods, guard them; oh spirits, help them!”

Afterwards the Imperial hunt was held in which all of them took part. More than a thousand Mongol drivers, who were in the Emperor’s service, encircled the hunting area, and the Minister of War acted as Master of the Hunt. There were plenty of deer, wild boar and other game. The Emperor was always the first to shoot, then followed the princes, his officials and the officers of his bodyguard.

When it was reported that a tiger had been sighted, Qianlong graciously waived his prerogative and invited Ubashi Khan to lay it down. But Ubashi involuntarily withdrew, a worried look on his face. He declined politely, saying it would be presumptuous of him to kill such a noble animal which only an Emperor had the right to claim. The Emperor shrugged his shoulders, waved the others aside and went forward alone, to the horror of his guards. He shot the large, beautifully striped prince of the jungle with his rifle and immediately gave it a coup de grâce, shooting an arrow through its heart.

Qianlong’s horsemanship was impressive and he won the princes’ admiration for his expertise as a bowman and shot. The Manchus, like the Mongols, excelled in mounted archery. Watching the Emperor, Asaray had the definite impression that this great Manchu ruler, who showed extraordinary physical vigour and did not look his sixty years, was shrewdly sizing up his Oirat guests during the hunt. Bambar noticed it too:

“Did you see, Asaray, how the Bogdo Khan seems to judge each of us and our sportsmanship? There is very little his eyes miss. Such a hunter, at his age! A pity he is Manchu: he would make an excellent Khan for us!”

The following morning trumpets sounded at dawn. Qianlong was returning to his summer palace at nearby Shan-zhuang and the Torghut princes would ride in his suite. The Son of Heaven sat in a high yellow palanquin carried by twenty-eight bearers and was surrounded by immaculately uniformed Imperial Bodyguards carrying silken pennants, their trappings jangling as they sat on their Mongolian ponies.

Some of the Bannermen had been detached to escort the Torghut guests, who, when passing through a village, saw to their amazement that curtains of blue cloth were drawn across the side-streets and that all the shops and houses were closed so that no one should see the Emperor. The road was strewn with yellow earth for the passage of the Son of Heaven.

The Torghuts were installed in the guest-palace in the greatest comfort. How different from the heavy stone and brick chambers in Russia, Asaray thought. How pleasant it was to sit in these light, airy rooms on rugs or cushions on the floor. Manchu-Chinese hospitality was overwhelming, yet refined and cleverly unobtrusive.

The Chief Eunuch of the Court provided pretty Chinese and Mongolian girls for the guests. Asaray, with his weakness for women, was briefly tempted but told himself he must not be under an obligation to his hosts and he declined. This surprised the Eunuch and led him to assume that his tastes were different; he sent him a handsome young boy, whom Asaray politely dismissed too. Then another Chinese girl was brought in, more beautiful even than the first he'd seen, and he succumbed. He expected it to be just a pleasant interlude but found to his amazement that she was an accomplished courtesan, a marvellous lover, and more, a kind of sorceress one would not soon forget.

A tailor came to take their measurements 'for Court clothes' which they were told they could not refuse. Two days later perfectly fitting robes of magnificent brocade were delivered, embroidered with white cranes and golden pheasants, to be worn at the official audience and banquet.

* * * *

Ubashi was in a state of ecstasy. Mandere was a dear, but the delights his Chinese girl had made him experience were indescribable. The way she had massaged and kneaded him, made love with him, then again massaged and spoiled him in a refined and unusual manner! His rod, big and hard again, had once more penetrated that heavenly soft aperture and she had contracted it precisely at the right moment, throwing him into raptures. He had never known such things were possible. The whole long night she had busied herself with him; she knew an endless number of tricks, each of them more blissful than the last. In the early morning he had gone to sleep and now he had woken up refreshed. In his enormous bed in this vast, airy room he lay quietly enjoying again the pleasures of the night.

It seemed to him that his life had only now begun. That magical girl, that sprite — what was her name? Mei-lan?, he wanted to take her home with him. It might not be Torghut practice to keep a concubine, but Mandere would have to accept it. After all he was the Khan, the King! He was treated and honoured as such here. Only the Bogdo Khan was higher than he, no-one else. The evil demons which had vexed him for so many years had stayed away for quite some time now. Only when he talked with Asaray did they seem to be near again and some of his old fears returned.

He wanted to take a bath, but that was out of the question. The Khan was bathed: two young women bathed him and helped him don the Court clothes which had been specially made for him. The time had come for the official ceremony and the audience. He looked admiringly at himself: this gala-dress was unbelievably beautiful and he looked very impressive. Who could doubt or question his majesty?

The first ceremony took place in a palace in the middle of the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees. With its painted and gilded pillars, and beautifully decorated lanterns, tapestries and carpets, it breathed an atmosphere of quiet dignity and harmony. Ubashi was pleased to note that there was nothing informal about this reception, which was conducted with the precision and sober pomp of a great and venerable power.

It also gave Ubashi pleasure to see that the presents which he had handed over to the Governor of Ili upon their arrival, had been set up here for the Emperor to see: objects made of precious stones, chiming clocks, porcelain, a costly gold and silver-inlaid shotgun, gold coins, and an Imperial seal which Ubashi's ancestors had received from the Ming Emperor in 1410.

The Qianlong Emperor was dressed in his ceremonial dragon robe of gleaming yellow satin lavishly decorated. Dragons were marvellously embroidered in fine gold thread on the front and back as well as on the dark blue cuffs and collar. The cosmic symbols of heaven and earth, the eight jewels and the twelve symbols of imperial sovereignty, such as sun, moon, stars, dragon, bird, axe, grain and fire, were all beautifully represented. Over this robe the Emperor was wearing a short-sleeved surcoat of dark blue silk gauze, with dragons and other symbols in gold embroidery. He wore a round hat with sable edging, its red spherical top embellished with a golden point inlaid with exceptionally large pearls.

Ubashi Khan and the other princes advanced one by one to 'kow-tow' in front of the Son of Heaven, who conferred honours and titles upon each of them. Ubashi was made dzoriktu (brave) Khan, which made him radiantly happy and thrust out his chest with pride; Tsebek Dorji and Asaray were appointed buyantu (meritorious) qin-wang (princes of the first class); Shereng and Bambar biliktu (bright) jun-wang (princes of the second class); while the others were appointed beile (prince of the third class) or given lesser ranks.

As each title was announced, the Grand Chamberlain handed out an official cap with oval buttons of ruby, red coral, sapphire or blue opal and, hanging from these

buttons, peacock feathers with one to three 'eyes', depending on the rank. The princes further received presents of great opulence, from porcelain and precious rifles to race horses of rare beauty.

After this ceremony Ubashi was told that they were to be received in audience, since His Majesty had expressed a wish to talk with them. Before they were all going in, Asaray congratulated Ubashi with the high distinction he had received, but to his annoyance had the cheek to prescribe to him what he should say to the Emperor:

"This audience, Ubashi, may be your last chance to talk seriously with the Emperor about our future fate. Tell him that after all the hardships we have endured we expect the Bogdo Khan to be generous and allot the best pastures to us. I hope you will also make clear to him that we are one nation and must not be dispersed. Being the Khan, you are the only one who can say these things with sufficient authority."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Asaray? Right after this unique ceremony you want me to bring up this practical matter? In any case, you don't have to tell me what I shall say to him, that is entirely my affair."

But Asaray was being a nuisance. He insisted:

"This practical matter is of essential importance to us, a matter of life and death. If you do not make a strong plea now, you will go down in history as a naïve weakling. You would not want that, would you?"

The remark stung Ubashi and he again felt the powerlessness that Asaray often brought about, but he did not alter his opinion.

At the audience the Emperor asked the Khan:

"What caused you to flee from Russia and make the long difficult march with all your people and herds, to return to the Middle Kingdom?"

"We were surrounded by the Russians, Your Imperial Majesty, with military settlements. We cannot live without our herds, they are our greatest riches, but more and more of our grasslands were occupied by the Oross. We also feared that we would lose our freedom of religion."

"You did well," the Emperor answered affably, "to come here. We protect the Yellow Church and you can freely profess your religion."

The Khan thanked the Emperor for the material aid he had sent to his people in distress. Qianlong expressed the hope that the Torghuts were sufficiently provided for; if not, his government would be glad to offer further assistance. Ubashi was content with this promise. What more could he want? All Asaray wanted was for him to cut a sorry figure when meeting the powerful Bogdo Khan; he was clearly jealous of him.

* * * *

Asaray was upset. Ubashi had not even mentioned the predicament the Torghuts were in. If the Khan failed to defend his nation's interests, what would the Emperor think?

When it was Asaray's turn, the Emperor remarked:

"I hear that you have lived in the Russian capital. Have you met the Empress?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty, I have met her several times."

"What kind of person is she?"

"All those who have come into contact with her, Your Majesty, will agree that she is a powerful personality, both mentally and physically. Catherine II has a strong will and great stamina. She is also an intelligent and learned woman."

The bushy imperial eyebrows were lifted slightly, and he fixed his piercing eyes on Asaray:

"Did she treat you well?"

"She did not harm me personally, apart from keeping me in her capital against my wishes. But our people were not well treated."

When questioned further, Asaray went into some detail about the Russian policy of colonization and expressed the fervent hope that his people would not encounter such obstacles in Jungaria. They had but one wish, he said: to remain united as a nation and live peacefully and undisturbed in the land of their ancestors.

After a short silence the Emperor changed the subject and asked:

"What are the Russian Empress' intentions with regard to the Ottoman Empire?"

"The Empress Catherine wants a port in the Crimea, Your Majesty, and free passage for Russian ships through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. That would greatly increase Russia's commercial potential. She hopes to obtain these advantages through a military victory in the war against Turkey."

"All that she, the supreme ruler of Russia, seems to be interested in then, is trade, commercial profits? That is what they are after also in their relations with us," the Son of Heaven remarked contemptuously.

"We have never trusted the Oross barbarians," he added bitterly. "In order to obtain commercial and other material advantages they have been greatly expanding their empire."

Qianlong seemed satisfied with Asaray's explanations. After he had exchanged some words with Tsebek-Dorji the Emperor gave a sign that the interviews were ended, whereupon the Torghut princes made ke-tou and withdrew.

The Manchu Emperor of China was a very striking man, who combined immense authority and a shrewd intelligence with charm and dignity. He had not reacted to Asaray's remarks about the wish of the Torghuts to live freely in their homeland. It remained a mystery what he would decide. Asaray thought that in his position he could hardly have said more than he had done; it was Ubashi who should have made a strong plea, but the coward had kept silent on this important issue.

The Torghut princes had withdrawn to a separate room in the palace, where refreshments were offered. Ubashi, Tsebek-Dorji and most of the others were flushed with pleasure; they appeared extremely gratified with the honours received from the Bogdo Khan.

“Look at them with their Chinese decorations, their precious stones and peacock feathers,” Bambar said sarcastically to Asaray. “Only you cannot feed sheep on feathers. Better pastures is what we need. And did you hear? Brave Khan he is now called!”

Asaray gave a bitter smile. “This Manchu Emperor is clever. He has noticed that courage is not exactly Ubashi’s greatest asset but he also knows that such a man will value that title even more than a truly brave man.”

* * * *

Ubashi had been vexed when Asaray reproached him. He seemed to forget that it was he, Ubashi Khan, who had led his people back to their homeland, nearer to the holy presence of the Dalai Lama, far from the heathens in Russia.

To hell with Asaray! This was a very special day. The Emperor had given him the highest possible honour. This very evening His Imperial Majesty would offer him a grand banquet where he could wear his new gala-dress again. And afterwards Meilan, that divine creature, would be waiting for him.

The official dinner which would last several hours, began with an extremely formal ceremony. Ubashi enjoyed such solemn occasions.

First the Imperial Cupbearer went down on his knees and all the guests followed his example. He then received the Emperor’s wine-cup from the Master of Ceremonies, walked up to the left of the Throne where he fell to his knees again and offered the wine to the Son of Heaven. While the Emperor sipped his wine, he prostrated himself, banging his head on the floor; the guests did likewise.

Hundreds of delicious titbits were served in dishes of gold and silver and delicately painted porcelain bowls. The choicest and rarest delicacies from distant parts of the far-flung Empire were seasoned in the most subtle and refined way with the ‘five flavours’ (sweet, sour, salty, spicy and bitter). Endless toasts of warm, yellow rice-wine and a stronger alcoholic beverage were drunk. It was a truly delicious meal. Long before it ended the Emperor had unobtrusively withdrawn to his quarters.

The atmosphere grew more and more informal and convivial. Anecdotes, stories and jokes were exchanged. Music was played throughout the meal by Court musicians clad in crimson. The Emperor’s best wrestlers pitted their strength and agility against Mongol champions. Chinese acrobats performed astonishing and breathtaking feats. The Manchus and Chinese were perfect hosts, expert at making their guests feel happy and grateful. Many of the Manchus spoke Mongol and there were interpreters mixed among the Chinese hosts, who seemed to enjoy themselves

as much as the others. The banquet ended abruptly, as was the custom here, with the hosts bowing their guests out.

Every day there was some entertainment for them. The next day the Torghut princes were shown the Potala temple, which they had seen from afar on the last leg of their journey to Jehol. It rose majestically on the highest hill. Its likeness with the Dalai Lama's palace in Lhasa, even seen from nearby, was striking.

Climbing the many steps from one platform to the next they admired the views of the surrounding valley and hills dotted with palaces, gardens, temples and lakes. The graceful, familiar stupas and outbuildings of the Potala in warm tones of brown-red sang de boeuf were inspected with admiration and, when the visitors reached the main temples and the sublime 'golden pavilion', they were received by the Chief Lama who conducted a service for them. The Torghuts had to remind themselves that this was a foreign country, not a home-coming.

Asaray also felt this way, but later, during an extensive walk through the grounds of the summer palace, he was less impressed by the artificial Chinese gardens, with their neatly arranged rocks, lakes and fish-ponds, marble bridges, pavilions with red columns and gold characters, a nine-storey porcelain pagoda in green, yellow and blue. There was too much of everything and it was all quite unnatural, like a heavily made-up woman.

Before the Torghuts set out on their return journey, the Prime Minister called in Ubashi and Tsebek-Dorji. He informed them that His Divine Majesty had graciously decided that their people could for the time being stay in the areas which had been allotted to them. The Emperor had, of course, also to take into account the interests of the other loyal tribes which meant that the Torghuts would be split up into a number of groups living separately: Ubashi, Asaray and some others in the Jair region, Tsebek-Dorji at Khobok-sari near the Altai Mountains, and others elsewhere. It was presented to them as a great favour and an unalterable Imperial decision.

The ten princes and nobles assembled to hear Ubashi's account of the meeting. After he had related the information the Prime Minister had given them, he added:

"So overwhelming has Chinese hospitality been that we genuinely felt that we had to accept the decision with good grace, and thank His Imperial Majesty for his extreme generosity. The slightest criticism would have seemed a violation of the rules of propriety and an act of gross ingratitude."

Asaray was shocked and trembled with anger; his friends Bambar and Kibten were equally enraged. This was official confirmation of what they had feared all along: the Torghuts were to be divided. Neither Tsebek-Dorji nor the Khan had even protested.

"I am astounded", Asaray exclaimed. "So the 'Voice of Heaven' has pronounced an 'unalterable' decision and you, Ubashi, and you too, Tsebek-Dorji, being mere earthlings, have mentally kow-towed and accepted the decision gratefully. It is unbelievable! The Chinese will now only have contempt for us and treat us as a third-rate people. Have we Oirats made the long, disastrous trek to these distant lands only

to be scattered far apart, each group imprisoned in its own narrow confines, and to see our nation destroyed?

“I propose that we jointly draw up a petition to be presented to the Emperor. Now that we are still in Jehol, our case should be brought before Qianlong in the most forceful way possible.”

Bambar and some others voiced their support for Asaray’s proposal, but Ubashi haughtily remarked that he refused to make a fool of himself. The Emperor had received the Torghuts with great courtesy and been extremely generous. It would be very rude not to accept his decision.

Asaray had expected Ubashi to react in this way but to his dismay Tsebek-Dorji was equally negative:

“The decision was presented to us as irrevocable. Therefore I do not think such a petition would serve any useful purpose. We must let the matter rest. At a later stage we can see whether there is any ground for further action.”

Asaray now pinned his last hopes on Shu-he-de but when he went to see him found that his Manchu friend had left for Peking. Disillusioned, Asaray returned to his quarters in the guest-palace where he sat down to ponder the situation.

Their departure from Jehol was imminent and even if he should get a second chance to bring the matter to the attention of the Emperor or the Chief Minister, the voice of a minority would not carry much weight. Now it really was too late.

Yet it was not in his nature ever to give up. Some of the older princes and nobles, whose health had suffered much during the long trek, would soon be replaced by younger and more vigorous men. If Ubashi refused to listen to reason, there remained only one solution, the one Asaray had refused to countenance for so long: Ubashi would have to be deposed as Khan.

It was a cold day and Asaray shivered. The large bronze charcoal-burner which stood on a pedestal in the middle of his room did not provide much warmth. The room was lovely but now it made him feel uncomfortable. On the floor with its shiny tiles glazed in blue, lay deep-piled rugs of great beauty; along the walls to which white paper was stuck of a quality that made the room very light without tiring the sight, were placed a few artistically carved, high-backed chairs made of the finest blackwood; for greater comfort there were silk cushions to sit on and two sofas spread with a tiger skin and monkey furs. In a corner stood a gleaming lacquer table. In front of him a low table of warm-glowing rosewood was placed on rose-and-blue rugs. The walls were hung with two scrolls only, one with beautiful calligraphy which he could not decipher and one representing the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. The lanterns suspended from the ceiling, like those he had seen in the palace, were of painted horn and silk. Through the windows of rice-paper and lattice the daylight was discreetly reflected.

His room had an air of quiet luxury and fine taste. But all this beauty and opulence had an adverse effect on him: it made him feel more poignantly his frustration and

impotence. He saw the anxious question in Badma's eyes about what fate awaited them. He would have to tell her that their son Batur would never know the freedom they had enjoyed, that he would grow up within strict confines, enclosed by hostile tribes, worse than in Russia, that his nation would be divided and in the end cease to exist.

There came a knock at the door. Lao Yang, with the deepest bow he had ever seen him make, announced an important visitor: Shu Da-ren (His Excellency Shu-he-de). After the usual amenities Shu came to the point:

"My dear Prince Asaray, I am extremely sorry that all the things you feared have come true. I was not here when the decision was taken, for the Emperor had sent me on an urgent mission to Peking from which I have just returned. Even if I had been there, I doubt whether I could have persuaded the Emperor to alter anything.

"In view of our friendship, I feel bound to explain to you, and that is the reason for my visit, that His Majesty has a rather low opinion of your Khan. During the informal hunt he noticed that Ubashi was vain and of weak character. This impression was confirmed and strengthened by his behaviour on more formal occasions. When he did not even mention the problem your people are confronted with — you were the only one to bring it up — the Emperor did not deem it necessary to make any concessions. He respects a brave man but has no patience with cowards. Forgive me for being so blunt but I thought you ought to know. However, please do not give up hope, Asaray. The day Ubashi resigns, there may be another chance for the Torghuts."

The news Shu brought was bad. The fate of the Torghuts seemed to be closely linked with that of Ubashi whose resignation was not seriously contemplated yet.

"I am grateful to you for telling me so frankly the cause of our misfortune, or one of its causes. You will understand that I am very bitter about the Emperor's decision. If we bow to it, our nation will be destroyed. If there are Torghut uprisings — and that may well happen — bloody massacres will result. Perhaps we do indeed need a change of leadership. Under a new Khan we could send a petition to the Emperor through the Governor of Ili, I suppose, for which we shall need your support at the Court."

"If I may give you a piece of advice, Asaray, you had better not send a request addressed to the Emperor through the intermediary of Governor Iletu. I recommend that you despatch it under separate cover to me. It is a rather unorthodox method but it will be better that way. I shall tell you a secret which you must keep under your hat: His Divine Majesty has informed me that he wants me to replace Iletu as Governor of Ili at a later date, perhaps next year."

"That is very good news, Shu-he-de, both for you and, I am sure, for us. Congratulations! I shall keep your advice in mind."

They took their leave as old friends. Asaray felt comforted by this visit. He also understood now that it was not only friendship which had moved Shu to visit him but

shrewd political calculation as well. Mongol uprisings would be most unwelcome to the future Governor of Ili province.

The Torghut leaders started the return journey wearing their much cherished buttons of precious stones and peacock feathers, with silken pennants fluttering in the air. Bambar, Asaray and some others were too proud for this display of vanity and not in the mood to honour the Chinese after the fatal decision that had been taken. Asaray preferred to wear his wide, comfortable travelling coat and felt, sable-bordered cap.

Later, Deputy Chief Minister Yu Minzhong wrote a memorandum about the visit of the Torghut princes to Jehol. They were so full of admiration and gratitude, he remarked, that 'they obeyed without a murmur everything the Emperor ordered'. They 'surrendered with pleasure in the [question of the] division of territories, how they were combined or separated...and everything else that His Majesty prescribed'. They showed 'a blind compliance with all His [i.e. the Emperor's] wishes'.

Asaray and his friends were puzzled and irritated by Tsebek-Dorji's attitude. From Ubashi they had not expected much, but Tsebek-Dorji...! That once proud and strong leader now seemed quite content with the honours the Chinese had thrown to him like bones to a dog. Was there no pride and no will left in him? On the second day of the return journey, when they happened to be riding together, Asaray burst out:

"Damn it all, Tsebek, I thought that was a shameful performance. Here you both were, giving away our people's interests with a smile and a bow. How could you do this? How are we to survive as a nation?"

Tsebek-Dorji gave him a despondent look.

"You are the strong and energetic leader now, Asaray. I'm sorry if I disappointed you. I understand your anger and concern but the man you are riding with is not the same Prince Tsebek-Dorji who was powerful and ambitious once. Now I am tired and exhausted. When we arrived at the border I still thought the Bogdo Khan might appoint me Khan. In Jehol I discussed this possibility with the Chief Minister but apparently Qianlong would not hear of it.

"However, things then turned out all right for me. You and I were the only ones to be made princes of the first class. Moreover, I was allotted excellent pastures in one of our ancient homelands, Khobok-sar near the Altai Mountains, where I shall be the sole ruler of the large northern group of Torghuts. In any case, now that we have all been divided up, Ubashi will be Khan in name only. For how long will he remain in power, I wonder?"

"But," Asaray retorted, "even if whoever is Khan will be so in name only, as you say, he will still be the centre and symbol of the nation, responsible for its unity. Don't you see that as a challenge any more, a vital task? We cannot and must not acquiesce in the division of the Torghuts."

"Well, that is an important task, of course, but after all we have been through I didn't have the courage and energy to oppose the Bogdo Khan. I'm afraid it is now beyond me to take up such a formidable challenge. And it is quite obvious that Ubashi is not the right man to keep our people together. You are the only one who could, and I should be glad to give you my support. As far as I am personally concerned, I have received all the honours I could wish for under the circumstances. I shall be happy to reign quietly and peacefully in the valleys of my Altai kingdom."

"Ubashi is going to make himself even more unpopular than he already is, when he comes home with his Chinese concubine," Asaray remarked.

"I think so too," Tsebek-Dorji agreed. "She is, of course, a most desirable creature. Even at my age, Asaray, I find it difficult to keep my eyes off her. But Ubashi's conduct is beneath contempt. He dances to her piping and so the Chinese will have him even more in their power. He should resign and you must take over."

Though also despising Ubashi for his unmanly attitude Asaray secretly envied him his lovely Chinese courtesan who seemed to give him such intense pleasure; he was certain the other princes felt the same. Tsebek had already admitted that much and Asaray had noticed how most of the others stared at her whenever they had a chance.

Support for Asaray as Khan also came spontaneously from several other leaders. Bambar said:

“What are we coming to? Our leaders have been bewitched by those sly Chinese and Manchus. The terrible events of the long migration seem to have affected some of our princes profoundly, and our nation may never be the same again. It is time that Ubashi resigns. Why do you not lead us, Asaray? My friends and I think you should. I may be a good soldier but I would not be an efficient political leader.”

“I’m not sure that I would, but thank you all the same, Bambar. Someone will have to do the job. Tsebek-Dorji does not feel equal to the task, he told me, and he also urged me to take over as Khan. If this is what all the princes and nobles want, I shall not shirk my responsibilities.”

After the return journey of several weeks they were back in the endless steppes of Central Asia, and the excitement of returning to their people mounted. This was a land of breathless horizons, of wind and sand and dense light, of boulder-strewn gullies, cliffs and deep gorges, of streams that tumbled down from the icy glaciers of the Heavenly Mountains, the Tian-shan, whose highest peaks, topped with brilliantly white snow, stood guard in the distance. Beyond them were the even higher mountains of Tibet, where ‘tens of thousands of Buddhas live’.

The princes were escorted by Chinese guides to their respective territories, which proved to be roughly the same as had been allotted ‘temporarily’ after their arrival in China. When the small oasis town of Xihu was reached, their roads parted and there were emotional farewells, none of them knowing when, if ever, they would meet again. Bambar and Kibten continued westwards, Tsebek-Dorji and Shereng travelled northwards towards the Altai region, while Ubashi and Asaray went along the same road, later to turn westwards to the rugged, wind-swept highlands of the Jair Mountains.

The hills there were covered with gravel and high tufts of ‘white grass’ and trees were scarce. Asaray turned eagerly into a neighbouring valley, to the pastures of his ulus. Suddenly he saw them, his people and herds. He reined in his horse and looked at the peaceful, familiar scene: this was his camp! Tears of pleasure and relief welled up in his eyes.

Everything looked neat and well-kept. Thousands of gers spread out along the river-bed and on the slopes, cows and sheep grazing quietly or being milked while tethered in long lines, their heads in loops secured to ropes which were pegged down. It was a wonderful feeling to return to the life of the nomads. How different it was from all the ceremonies, the pomp and riches of the Manchu-Chinese Court! What was it Shu-he-de had said? Referring to the courage and abnegation of the nomads,

he had remarked, "We are losing this nobility of character, and must guard against the dangerous comforts of an easy life."

Asaray was impatient to see Badma and Batur, and spurred on his chestnut. Shouts of joyful welcome went up when he reached the first of the gers. When he approached his own ger, there was Badma! He held her in his arms and together they went inside.

"Where is Batur?"

"He's with the other children, looking at the new-born lambs. He insisted the nurse take him there."

"So he's quite a gentleman now, peremptorily ordering people about! Has he gained weight?"

"Oh yes, and it won't be long before he starts riding. He wants to so much, and he has a very strong will."

"How are all the others?"

"Quite a few have died as a result of the terrible exertions and privations. Many people are still weak or sick, but they are recovering gradually. For all of us here the important thing is that we've survived. But tell me, Asaray, what happened when you were in China, after you wrote me that wonderfully long letter about the journey?"

"I will, but first I must report to the elders of our ulus about our journey and make a short tour of inspection."

"Fine, then I'll make preparations for a special home-coming meal. You still like roast lamb better than the usual cooked meat? And fried noodles?"

"I do! Haven't had that for a long time." When Asaray told the leading men what the Bogdo Khan had decided, they were dismayed. Not only had they hoped to establish themselves on more fertile grasslands, but they were shocked by the arbitrary division of their people. However, they told him they were far better off than in the beginning, for the Chinese had sent them food, and also clothes, horses, cows and sheep.

Asaray promised them that he would not accept the Emperor's decision as final, and would do all he could to obtain better surroundings for his people. He spoke with feeling and gave his listeners new hope.

Then he toured his camp and spoke with the men and women he met on the way. He was encouraged by their optimism and strong determination to rebuild their life. When he got home, Batur first looked away bashfully but moments later came toward him and nestled close to his father, refusing to part from him.

Badma was not discouraged by the news that Asaray brought:

"I don't know why, but I'm certain that from now on things will turn out well. We have suffered and endured so much that there's nothing now that we can't cope with. Even though the land here is not very fertile, there's a buoyant spirit in our camp, they're all full of hope and working hard." He felt better, and his mood improved still further when they ate the delicious meal which Badma had cooked for the occasion.

They had a lot to tell each other and drank more than usual, for Badma had produced not only araki but even a bottle of the very best vodka.

After the dinner Asaray told his wife about Ubashi's behaviour and his Chinese concubine.

"A concubine? And Chinese at that! He's out of his mind. Poor Mandere. She's such a good, faithful wife. We became close friends when together we arranged the distribution of the relief goods the Chinese had sent.

"It was not an easy task. There were over two hundred thousand head of cattle and horses to be distributed. And hundreds of thousands of fur-coats, padded cotton and felt coats. In addition, the Chinese sent us an immense amount of foodstuffs and even tea. Seeing what they did I cannot believe that the Chinese mean to harm us."

"I hope you are right. But even if they do not mean us harm, they will protect their own interests as they see them, even if that means dividing us."

The whole camp feasted to celebrate Asaray's return. Camp-fires were lit, the elders narrated tales from Lord Jangar's and Geser Khan's ancient epics, to which old and young listened enthralled. Afterwards the young danced and were having fun. The general merrymaking went on until late in the night. It was the language especially which made Asaray feel so happy and at home. After all his years in Russia the sounds of the verses he remembered so well from his youth, now harsh and guttural, then again soft and mellifluous, moved him deeply.

That night, after they had made love, Asaray lay thinking about Badma. She had changed his life completely, as if her love had made him a new man. Neither the brief encounter with a Chinese courtesan in Jehol, the memory of which still tingled his senses, nor even his love affairs in Russia, some of which had been less superficial, particularly with Tatiána, were to be compared with what he felt for Badma.

What made his affection for her so different from those he had experienced before? Those infatuations in Russia, he remembered, had often been accompanied by uncertainty and tension. Was that a characteristic of love, part of its passionate nature, as opposed to friendship, which was based on absolute certainty and unalterable respect? If that were so, then Badma had performed a miracle since she inspired in him both passion and friendship but without the strain and pain he had known before.

Next day a religious ceremony was held to celebrate the return of Asaray and the other nobles. The people approached the khurul with reverence, throwing their caps down with the yellow part up, joining their hands and bringing them up to their face, then falling to their knees and touching their caps with their heads. Monks stood ready with jugs from which they poured holy water, containing some saffron and sugar, into their hands. The recipients drank some and used the rest to wash their faces.

The ceremony was followed by a banquet. For a few hours those who had misgivings about the future of their people forgot those worries and enjoyed the

warm companionship of their friends. Asaray's faith in the strength and resilience of the Torghuts was renewed by all he had seen. He wondered whether he had not been too pessimistic when they were at the Chinese Court.

After a time, however, the men came to Asaray with their problems. On the hill-slopes and in the higher ranges they had come dangerously close to other tribes who had also been given the right to nomadise there; this continually gave rise to conflicts. Now, with winter setting in and the herds moving to lower grazing grounds, the Torghuts discovered that the valleys which were supposed to be theirs had in part been taken over by other nomads, even by grain-growing Turki who had been transplanted there by the Chinese government from their oases south of the Tian-shan. Often the Torghuts were left with inferior pastures.

There was growing discontent among them. They had endured so many hardships and would not stand for any more. Their anger was directed particularly against Ubashi. When the Khan had returned from Jehol wearing his Chinese insignia, he had secretly been ridiculed by the people and many jokes had circulated about him. Now they did not think him funny. It had become common knowledge that his Chinese concubine could twist him round her little finger. Mandere, of course, felt miserable. She was convinced the Chinese woman had bewitched Ubashi, who to her was like a little, innocent boy.

A message from Prince Tsebek-Dorji arrived informing Asaray that he was going straight from his 'Altai kingdom', as he called it, to participate in a meeting with the purpose of electing Asaray as Khan. In a solemn meeting of all the Torghut and Khoshut princes, to which only Ubashi and Asaray were not invited, the unanimous conclusion was reached that Asaray should become their Khan. They sent a deputation, asking him urgently not to refuse their request, and he accepted. Asaray considered it a sign from Heaven: the time had come to fulfil his mandate at last.

It was vastly different from what he had assumed and imagined during all those years in Russia. It had not been given to him to defend the Oirat-Kalmyk nation against Russia, to act as mediator and peacemaker, but it was clearly his task to preserve their identity in China and save them from annihilation. Here, ironically, where they had fled to escape Russian enslavement, now lay their greatest danger.

Prince Tsebek-Dorji convened a meeting of the zarga which officially deposed Ubashi and installed Asaray as Khan. Tsebek-Dorji resigned his post as Chairman of the Council which would henceforth be presided over, as of old, by the Khan.

Ubashi, white with rage, protested against these 'illegal' decisions and left the Council-meeting. Asaray was acclaimed with rousing cheers and a great many speeches were made. As one of the princes put it, Asaray had been one of the bravest during the long trek, he had shown his superior ability to rule his people, both white and black bone, and he was the only one who might find a diplomatic way out of their present predicament.

A fortnight before this happened Asaray had secretly sent scouts to reconnoitre the country farther south which was said to be very fertile. They now returned with even better news than Asaray had expected: there were vast areas of uninhabited, fertile land in the Heavenly Mountains, on the Yulduz Plateau, which would be ideal grazing grounds in summer. There was also enough land in the nearby lower regions for the winter.

After hearing their report Asaray took swift action. When he informed the Council of these findings, it was agreed that the new Khan would ask the Emperor to allow their transfer to the Yulduz area. He therefore drafted two letters to the Qianlong Emperor. The first one, signed by all the princes, was to inform him of Ubashi's deposition and his own appointment as Khan. In the second letter he requested permission for all those ulus which had been allotted inadequate pastures, among them Ubashi's and his own, to move to the Yulduz highlands in the Tian-shan. If this scheme were accepted, he thought, the main division would be only between these ulus in and around the Heavenly Mountains and those in the Altai area. Regular contact could still be maintained.

The new Khan sent the letters for the Emperor to his friend Shu-he-de with a covering note. Asaray was hopeful that permission would be granted, for he had followed Shu's advice and carefully selected regions which lay at some distance from the strategic points the Manchu-Chinese considered extremely sensitive. Also, the Emperor was clearly proud of the fact that the Torghuts had preferred China to Russia. Why should he antagonize them unnecessarily?

All of his subjects rejoiced when Asaray's appointment was publicly announced. When word was spread that Asaray's scouts had discovered the fertile Yulduz plateau and that the Khan was petitioning the Emperor about it, their hopes rose.

For a long time now they had been confronted with ever new adversities and still had not reached their promised land. Prosperity and even freedom of movement were denied them. Now there was hope again for all.

Yet the news of Ubashi's sudden death came as a shock to everyone. He had gone riding for the first time on the magnificent thoroughbred the Emperor had given him. When he had not returned that evening a search party was sent out but they did not find him until the early hours of the next morning. It looked as if he had briskly trotted along the edge of a deep gorge where his horse must have shied, for it had thrown Ubashi. He had fallen into the ravine and hit his head against a boulder. His mare was found much later, nervous but unhurt. Had it been an accident or had he himself sought death? Ever since he had been deposed as Khan he had lost his zest for living; even his beloved courtesan had been unable to cheer him up.

Asaray grieved for the Ubashi that he had known as a child, and for the one he had always hoped his brother would one day become, free from abnormal vanity, fears, suspicions and hatred. Now this was never to be. There remained only a sense of pity for a life wasted and a pain for chances missed. At Badma's suggestion, Asaray

invited Mandere, who had remained childless, to move her ger to their camp, which she gladly did. The Chinese concubine was sent back to Peking.

The time had come to put into practice Asaray's favourite plan: in all of the ulus he introduced a system of general education, on a voluntary basis. The new Khan also organised horse-races and people's games in which all Torghuts and Khoshuts, including those from the Altai region, were represented. He stimulated the performance of recitations of Oirat-Mongol epics and fairy-tales, and of lectures on the history and geography of the Torghuts and other nations. Some of these activities had just started when joyful news came from the Chinese capital. When writing to the Bogdo Khan, Asaray had calculated correctly: within eight months the Emperor signed an Edict in which he ordered the very changes the Torghuts had recommended! It also became officially known that General Iletu was being replaced by Shu-he-de who, Asaray was certain, must have had a hand in preparing this favourable decision.

The nomads were elated, hardly daring to believe their good fortune. They laughed and danced and sang and there was a lot of eating and drinking. Impressive religious ceremonies were held to celebrate the new Edict and give thanks. But there was no laxity as so often before. After a week of revelling all went back to work purposefully to prepare for their move to the new pastures.

The Yulduz highlands were a paradise on earth during the summer season. The scenery was dazzling. Mountains with spruce forests and snowy peaks; straight, tall pines — dark-green, cool and fragrant; the sky, the air — so pure and clear and lightly intoxicating. In the lovely, fertile alpine meadows, horses and cattle thrived and multiplied. Never had they looked so splendidly healthy and strong, and never had there been such an abundance of rich milk, cream and cheese. The Torghuts felt absolutely free here, in their old homeland, since there were no other tribes and no garrisons, and the Bogdo Khan was very, very far away.

Autumn came. Time for the nomads to descend to the lowlands, an ideal place for wintering, where the famous horses they bred would fetch a good price in the market of Karashar. Little Batur was to travel on camelback as his father had done when he was very young. He wanted to ride a horse but his mother told him he would have to wait a while still. He would soon be big enough to have his own pony, she said, and added, to his excitement, that he would then also have a little brother who would ride a camel.

Quietly all the preparations were made for this seasonal migration..

Asaray awoke early. The day had not dawned yet and he lay thinking. He had started a new life. It was a strange thought that, but for some 'coincidences'(had they really been coincidences?), he would not be here now, would not be Khan, not even a Torghut and Buddhist, and would not have this wife and son. Serbejab's unexpected visit in St. Petersburg and his own troubles with Tatiána had opened his eyes, had

prevented him from converting to an alien religion, from becoming a Russian prince, a Torgutskii or Dondukov.

He would never have become totally Russian, of course, yet even now something of their mentality and of the Christian faith still lived within him. It would be his personal problem — and it might be difficult — to find a way to reconcile all this with their national belief, with Lamaism.

Prince Asaray, Khan of the Torghuts, stretched and got up without making a sound. He tip-toed to the door and stood outside. The morning dawned gloriously. His guards, their lances stuck in the ground, were making a fire for their morning tea. His flag, the Khan's standard, and his prayer-flag fluttered in the light breeze. His horse was saddled. How he enjoyed this new existence: the action, the responsibilities, the power to do something useful and constructive. He would soon ride out to inspect the herds, listen to complaints and suggestions, sit in judgement and solve conflicts. He would do this every day and for years to come, as his father had done, if the gods willed it, until his own son would take over his tasks. But on this day his thoughts were not confined to his practical tasks for he kept thinking about the past and the future.

One part of his mandate had been fulfilled, Asaray thought: he had created conditions which offered his people a better chance to safeguard their own way of life. The nation was still partly divided. They must keep alive their sense of unity and the hope of being re-united one day. Asaray vowed he would do everything to be a true Khan, more than a symbol. He would defend Torghut interests whenever and wherever necessary.

Late in the afternoon he returned to his camp. Everywhere were the familiar gers, the smells, the faces of his people. Here they would henceforth freely roam. They would spend the summers on this lovely plateau and the winters in the lush valley. At long last the Torghuts had returned to the country of their forebears. Beyond these Heavenly Mountains rose the even higher peaks of holy Tibet in all their majesty.

It was a tranquil evening. Asaray stood in front of his royal orgê and looked out over the immensity of their world, theirs alone, the distant snowy peaks turning pink, then a blackish blue. A late herdsman returned with his flock, the bells jingling in the clear mountain air.

The camp fell silent; the lamps went out one by one, as on that evening in the steppe, when the guests were leaving and he had stood with his father in front of their tent. The moon rose high, outlining the black contours of the mountains against a pale sky.

Badma joined him and he laid his arm around her shoulders. He felt light-headed — all tension and anxiety gone. Their love was natural and strong and without constraint, like the elements surrounding them. He knew it was above and beyond time, that it would endure forever.

The thought came to him that he had achieved what his father had always yearned for:

There was no lord over him.

Postscript

This novel, it must be stressed, is a work of fiction. The reader has therefore been spared the usual pedantic or otherwise annoying footnotes to the text. Yet he may well want to know in how far it is based on historical facts. It seems only fair to give him at least a general idea.

When, many years ago, I studied the dramatic history of the Torghuts, an Oirat-Mongolian people which in the early seventeenth century migrated from Central Asia to the Volga, whence it returned to the Chinese border in 1771, I had some Chinese sources at my disposal, but very few Russian ones.

Much later, I discovered in the Russian literature about the Torghuts ('Kalmyks') that Asaray, the second son of their Khan, had been taken to Russia as a hostage. This fascinated me. How would a young, Oriental prince, brought up as a Buddhist, react to such a totally different culture as that of Russia and to the pomp and splendour of St. Petersburg under Catherine the Great?

A friend of mine, Princess Nirgidma of the Torghuts, whom I knew in Peking, told me that according to an oral tradition in her family — they unfortunately had no written records — Asaray had played an important role during his people's exodus from Russia and after their arrival in China. This 'traditional' Asaray has become the principal character of my novel.

It is therefore a fictional story within a framework which is largely historical. For the Russian period of the Torghuts I have consulted a great number of Russian books; for a description of the long trek to China which has not been seriously documented, I have mainly had to make use of my imagination and that of other novelists; and for the Torghuts' reception in China I have translated some relevant passages from the official Chinese annals (the Da Qing Shi-lu).

Footnotes

1) These western Mongols, called Oirat or, in the West, Kalmyks, were composed of Torghuts, Dürbets and Khoshuts. Since a large majority of them were Torghuts, this name is mostly used here as a synecdoche.

2) The ulus is the largest administrative unit of people and herds; it is ruled by a prince (taiji) and divided into a number of aimak which are administered by lower gentry (zaisang).

- 3) the Buddha, the Dharma — doctrine, and the Sangha — community of saints
- 4) The Kazaks are nomads speaking a Turkic language. In order not to confuse them with Cossacks (kazaki in Russian), they are called Kirgis-Kaisak in Russian literature. However, they are not Kirgiz.
- 5) Another name for Kara-Kirgiz, a Turkic ethnic group
- 6) One li is about $\frac{2}{3}$ km. These special couriers, constantly relieved by other riders with fresh horses, travelling day and night, covered about 400 km. in 24 hours.
- 7) E-lu-te: Chinese for Oirat (Western Mongols, 'Kalmyks')