

THE LUCKY HUNTER

Once there lived a lone young gerfalcon, unknown to any; he was still very young.

His mother had only just pushed him out of the nest sending him off on his first flight; but as soon as he had reached the branch of a pine near-by he felt himself completely strange to the whole world above and around him. Meanwhile the hen falcon was trying to eject her second fledgling, but this one resisted stubbornly. The father ruffled his feathers, sitting on the woven twigs at the edge of the nest, stern but indifferent. The young bird could see and hear the struggle going on between his mother and brother. He wanted to go home to the nest but held back, ruffling like his father. Because anyway the hen bird would not let him near, she would fly out and drive him further away.

He had become a stranger to her.

He sat there on the pine for half a day watching his mother fussing helplessly, and his brother, also now become a stranger. At last the father apparently got sick of it all; with a strong wing-beat he shot up so that the nest swayed, and hovered for a moment over the young bird sitting on the pine bough. He sent a keen, challenging glance up. The ease of his father's flight, its adroitness and speed amazed him—he had been quite close and now there he was, high over the pine tree, a moment, and he was disappearing beyond trees. He wanted to do the same—take off and fly, effortlessly. He tensed, drew himself together as his mother used to do before taking off—and stayed where he was, clinging to the bough; this time, there was no one to push him. Then—his claws seemed to open of themselves, he started to fall, his wings spread and he felt the support of the air.

He was flying! Flying!

He quickly became conscious of the awkwardness of undirected flight; his body suddenly became heavy. Frightened by the ground swimming before his eyes he tried to get back to the pine. There he could sit. But how? Gather up all parts of his wings, flapping and steering, stretch them along his body, make himself tense—that was what his mother had always done when she returned home from hunting with food for the fledglings and sat down on the edge of the nest of twigs, so that was what her son did. And it was quite simple and easy. Let down both feet on a twig and spread the toes, feeling the coolness of pine needles under their pads.

Oh! Everything seemed suddenly to swirl madly. Working frantically with his wings, the young gerfalcon realised that the twig had been too thin. Nobody had ever taught him to know when a branch would hold him but now something told him that a bird must choose his own rightful branch.

He let go of the unreliable support and flapped his way to a dead branch broken off close to the trunk. Through the cushions of his toes under the still soft claws he could feel the smooth hardness of the wood. It was just like the twigs of the home—no, now the alien—nest.

The stump supported the weight of his body and he calmed down. He wanted to fly after his father, but who could give him the necessary push? So the gerfalcon hesitated, at a loss what to do, although his eyes blazed with impatience.

He wanted to see his father beside him in the air, to fly with him, wing to wing. But his father—where was he now? A speck, barely visible. How could he overtake him, ignorant as he was of all the intricacies of flight? Even to push off properly from here was no trifle. Shame and despair almost sent him sliding down but—his wings seemed to open of themselves.

He was flying, flying! How simple it was! Fall and then fly up, fall and fly—up, up.

For a long time he would have to fall in order to fly.

Of course, he didn't overtake his father, and to his mother he had no wish to return.

On this first day of independent life each brief flight alternated with several hours of rest. The young gerfalcon surveyed the world from every new tree as he came to himself. There was nothing for him to fear, and in any case, fear was not included in his make-up. For the present he was not hungry, his mother had brought in a small hare with the first rays of sunrise to feed her fledglings. The victim had screamed and struggled desperately but there was no hope of getting away, the bird held it firmly in her claws; for the present she did not use her beak, the young birds had to kill the hare

themselves. And as usual, he was the first to attack the food, just as he was the first out of the nest. The other fledgling hesitated, hopped indecisively about the bottom of the nest, claws catching on the twigs, whereas he at once sank his sharp claws into the furry flesh and felt a warmth go through him, opened his beak and stopped, thrusting out his ploughshare tongue—oho, how good this meat tasted, you could swallow it down, fur and all! But the law of the falcon prescribed that he wait for his mother to release the animal—half-dead, but free. And at last his brother was there, too, jostling the baby hare.

It was important for the mother bird to let her fledglings get the feel of living meat so as to awaken their hunting instinct. Falcons know that all things that wriggle and squirm on the earth are helpless and defenceless before them, the masters of the mountains and skies. Let the young gervfalcons, too, know that it is only they who possess the strength and the power, only they.

On his first day of independent living the young bird alighted once on the top of a prickly juniper. He found it awkward and strange, the top branches pricked his tail and breast however much he tried to avoid their touch. The gervfalcon law does not allow anything alien to touch one. But what could he do? Sometimes one just has to endure.

He got his balance and ignoring the light pricking on his breast, raised his head. Again he saw his father high up; he was carrying a bird of some sort and flying towards the nest. He knew whom his father was bringing it for—that silly helpless brother.

He felt a sudden great longing for fresh meat, he even had a momentary wish to attack his father and wrest the bird from him. He stretched to his full height, summoning up his resolution. But his father was a long, long way off. And with no deliberate intent, he clashed his beak passionately, to attract attention. The father bird of course saw him sitting on the juniper but flew on unconcernedly. He wanted to fly after his father up there in the sky, to insist that it was all wrong to forget him so quickly—wrong, that bird should go to him.

Forward! Forward! Down! A push, and he did indeed go down but could not fly up again, his outspread wings caught on the juniper branches and kept breaking his fall.

So you can't fly from every place. He tried again and again until at last he gave up, folded his wings, and remained sitting with ruffled feathers in his former place.

His father had long been out of sight.

From that time on the young gervfalcon lived alone. Wherever he alighted, that was home. He selected a suitable tree, alighted on a

branch that would bear his weight, far enough from the trunk to allow free movement to his wings, and there he would spend the night, beneath its crown. When he flew from it, he forgot it at once. According to gerfalcon law only those things exist which lie within the field of vision, only those birds, beasts and trees.

At dawn the young gerfalcon awoke and shook out his feathers, letting the air wash over his body. That must be done before the morning flight.

It was cooler than usual that day; the early morning air was shivery and he shook himself noisily. One after another he settled his feathers, smoothing them down. He lifted his tail so as not to sully it, ejected the clot which had gathered during the night, and immediately was conscious of an aching hunger. His crop was empty.

Fly, fly!

By now the young gerfalcon could take flight at any moment, even if he was disturbed at dead of night. In general, it was better being in the air than on the ground where the whole weight of his body seemed to press him down to the grass. He flew for hours at a time and the farther he went, the better he liked it.

Now, for instance—he had only to remember the sweet freedom of flight and with one sweep of his wings he had thrust off from the rough branch on which he had spent the night and plunged into the morning air. He felt that wonderful sense of lightness, it sang in his throat, his feet with their sharp talons laid themselves against his body; during flight the sinews rest and the weight of the body is transferred to the breast and wings. The muscles controlling the shoulder feathers become taut knots meeting on his back, and that too is rest for a falcon.

He knew how to relax the various parts of his body during flight; the torso could rest when the wings worked; but on the ground his legs had to bear his whole weight.

In an instant the falcon had risen above the great dark poplar to which he had come the previous dusk to spend the night. Gaily he sent forth a twittering call and from somewhere to the side a similar call came back from behind the tree. After sweeping in a great circle over several tree-tops he moved the shoulder feathers of his right wing very slightly, altering his line of flight into a steep dive to the right.

He had eaten nothing since the previous day and his body cried out for fresh meat—let it be even a tiny piece, he needed nothing more. After that he would be able to go several days without food, but today he must eat at least a tiny piece of fresh meat. But in the forest it is difficult for a falcon to make its kill. One must have

space, freedom of movement to fall like a stone and with a sure aim, and what freedom of movement can there be among trees or tall thick grass? The forest protects its own, this he understood very well. He must seek the place where the forest gave way to rolling land with sparse vegetation, where the grass in the hollows was short and did not hamper the timid partridge, and on the plains beyond the hills, although the grass might be thicker, it was not thick enough to hide the agile quail. The young falcon had been there more than once when his hunger became unbearable, sure of catching some unwary bird.

This time too he was confident of success. He had not been living alone and self-sufficient for so very long, but he had managed with his sharp talons and hooked beak to make trial of almost all the birds and beasts which his parents had so recently brought for their fledglings in the nest of twigs. He had revelled in the fresh dark meat of ducks or pheasants, the greyish flesh of steppe pigeons and doves or the wild mountain turkey; he liked fat marmots and the nearly bloodless meat of hares.

From that great height the land looked like a huge nest, its edges coming up closer to the eye. The falcon could see the broad, and to him dark, patch of green forest, and in separate colourless lines every blade of grass, every insect. His keen eyes encircled with white could not distinguish colours but they could see the early butterflies fluttering close to the earth and a little higher up the small birds—even the flies dancing since morning over the bushes which dotted the rolling land. He must seek out a suitable prey so that he could feed for the whole day—an edible, tasty bird, and at a distance surely calculated for his swift, accurate attack. His eye had never failed him, he selected only quarry of which he was certain. Had he ever missed? Not yet. If he felt his quarry had a chance of escaping his talons he didn't waste time and effort on it. He just flew on as though he had not even considered it. But when his inner, inborn sense told him his arrow-swift stoop would pin it down and crush it he did not hesitate an instant; his whole body tensed, his shoulder-blades met, he gathered his feathers so that the ends of the longest wing-feathers lay just above the slightly raised ones at the root of the tail and the steering tail-feathers themselves, and with lightning speed stooped to his quarry. The speed of his movement produced a whistling sound from his wings and every tail-feather had its own gay note.

The young falcon flew across the forest just as the sun's first rays peeped over the hilltop. The bare slopes in the morning looked white and everything on them was clearly picked out as it would be

on snow. He did not yet know about snow but he quickly learned the lesson of white sunshine.

The first thing he noticed was a flock of wild pigeons. His own shadow had fallen on one, darkening it. The falcon adjusted his flight to keep the shadow on that pigeon. But noting the distance he knew that there would be no sense in attacking the flock; while he increased his speed for one bird the flock would change position, going ahead, and he would miss. The pigeon looked at the falcon, unalarmed—it too felt sure of its safety. He badly wanted to get that bird, but the distance was too great. Annoying!

The pigeons suddenly descended, evidently they had spotted some food; they dived so quickly that the concerted movement of their wings produced a perceptible air wave. The dark shadow of the gerfalcon passed over the surface of the grass.

The master of all that lives, the hot white sun, warmed his neck, back and wings. He never let the sun out of sight, grateful for its generous warmth. He knew that the sun warmed but did not burn. The light came from the left, right into his eye; its brightness prevented the eye seeing with its full keenness. He had to rely on the right eye. With that he could see plenty, and he didn't want to alter his line of flight.

Suddenly he saw a bird, all alone, on an uneven glade on his right, fussing about. It was rather like a hen pheasant, but that it could hardly be. What was it? He didn't know. It moved a little, here and there. All alone. Pecking at some sort of grey seeds. And it was right in the middle of the glade, if he stooped it would not have time to escape into the bushes at the edge of the glade, or take flight.

Extraordinary! Every living creature took care when feeding to have somewhere to run or crawl, some sheltered refuge handy. Didn't this careless pheasant know the rule of life? With the first glance the gerfalcon noted its mistake. He could get this one—easily. And for sure.

He had never before seen a bird just like this—similar to a hen pheasant but with a queerly short tail.

The falcon started to draw in his legs and fold his wings and when their sharp ends lay on his tail, his body tensed, its weight seemed to increase; then abruptly, swiftly, with intensifying speed he made his whistling descent on that strange foolish bird. His eyes followed every movement it made, should it try to evade him he could at once alter the line of his attack. The very fierceness of that attack was a joy; he opened his hooked beak and thrust out his ploughshare tongue, with his special falcon hiss.

How does an actual attack go? At the right moment the falcon opens the ends of its wings into a fan so that it hangs in the air for

that fraction of a second needed to pierce the head of the victim with one blow, slash it beneath the throat with the hind talon of one leg and then with the toe-talons grasp it and rise with it into the air again.

The young gerfalcon was prepared to act as a proper gerfalcon should.

Approaching the ground at an acute angle, he suddenly noticed thin lines stretching between four poles which stood in a square round the bird. He had never before seen anything like that. A net of fine threads—what was it for? These threads could never turn him aside, he could easily plunge through them, break them. But the moment he came up against them he found that although soft, they were strong, it was like meeting a taut wind. The slow-witted bird underneath clucked and pulled away, anticipating a blow from above. She tried to hop to one side but a red thread appeared from under the grey grains; one end was round the leg of the victim, the other fastened to a strong stem, and she almost pulled that stem up by the roots as she beat helplessly with her wings, struggling frantically, pulling away. And here the falcon caught her. All four talons of his left leg sank into the flesh, the hind talon of the right described a circle in the air in order to slash the victim's throat but—nothing happened.

That talon seemed to have caught on something, some obstacle. Usually he cut through living material with ease, inflicting a deep and deadly wound. But this was something else. Nothing like it had ever happened to him before. But he was not yet frightened. He prepared to fly, to get farther away from this queer place, up where it was safe, where he could see what it all meant.

The young falcon jerked but something stopped him from flying, something hampered his wings. And that strange bird like a pheasant in trying to free itself dragged him forward, lying flat, and then from two sides poles collapsed and both birds were covered in the thick soft folds of the net.

A pity he couldn't slash that stupid bird with his hind talon. All the same, he wasn't letting her go, he would hold her with one leg until he finished her off. But when they were both entangled in the net the falcon, as always in face of danger, became quiet and still. What was it, this strange thing? Had falcons ever experienced something that came down on the wings, clung to them, to the whole body—something big and alien?

He tensed, he wanted in one explosive movement to break out and soar up, but his wings seemed suddenly wooden, they did not obey him; he rose a little from the ground—testimony to his strength, but dragged with him a multitude of fine threads and even a large dry

stick. That weight was too much for him, he fell back, losing a few small feathers.

What did it all mean? What had happened to him?

He made another great effort. But the bird he held pulled away to the side and dragged him with her over the grass. It seemed to him that this stupid bird rather like a pheasant was to blame for it all. If he let her go, would that free him?

Against all his instincts he actually wanted to open his left foot, but something in him was too strong. The law of falcons forbids the release of any prey once it is grasped, even should it be torn away together with talons and foot. The gerfalcon has one law: conquer or die.

No real gerfalcon can accept defeat, only some miserable runt.

So he continued to hold his prey firmly with his left foot although the strange bird struggled and squawked desperately until its last strength was exhausted. But the young gerfalcon, having struggled in vain, quieted; the soft net held his wings helplessly outspread as though he were drying them in a gentle breeze after bathing. He could neither fold nor flap them. And did he but pull at one fine thread, caught on the middle talon of his right foot, the soft thread became a long hard stick pressing against his back so painfully that he had to slacken the talon and release the thread.

Yet—how thin and weak they had looked from the air, these threads and cords, a spider web, no more!

One thread lay across his beak. He opened his beak and tried to bite it through.

It did not part and he could not spit out that silken thread, it stayed in his beak and irritated the end of his tongue. A similar thread lay across his left eye; he blinked rapidly and suddenly felt it touch the pellicle, causing acute pain.

Again and again he struggled to free himself, until at last he lay flattened on the ground, exhausted and apathetic.

2

The forester, Konchoi, alighted from his chestnut and threw the reins carelessly over a fence post—the horse wouldn't wander off, he knew his own yard. His dog Taigan ran out to welcome the master; Konchoi fended off his exuberant greeting with a gentle movement of his foot—he did everything gently—blew his nose and rubbed his hand over his coat.

He would have to tell his old woman to feed Taigan; he would rest a little, until the heat lessened. He could visit the net in the evening.

Yes, for a whole week Konchoi had been hunting the young gerfalcon, spreading his snare on open patches in the brush-grown land, now here, now there. On Thursday his only lure, a quail, had managed to free its foot and escape. He couldn't catch a replacement at once so—a laugh, that!—he took his speckled hen. It was his wife's idea; the hen had a trick of laying away, usually in the neighbour's kitchen garden, and she wasn't much to look at, anyway, no treat to the eyes. Konchoi saw how she behaved in the snare—yes, she fussed about quite satisfactorily.

The dog followed in quiet submission. But the master went into the house without turning. Taigan was quite satisfied; if the master doesn't call you, then stay where you are. The master of the house, the master of Taigan's life was Konchoi. Wasn't Taigan fed at his order? And who was it took Taigan hunting?

The dog's heart fluttered like a sparrow's wings when he felt his master's eyes upon him. Then Taigan waited expectantly for an order. Or if the master was glad, laughing, then whatever his mood had been before, Taigan dashed forward with his whole energy, in the highest spirits, and his tail which had been sunk beneath his belly rose in a joyous curve. Rejoice with the master!

A pity, though, that this mood of gaiety came so seldom. Taigan would have given a good deal to prolong Konchoi's happy moments. But—well, look at him today, obviously not in the best of moods. Wag your tail all you would, he never even looked at you. All right, a dog could only go back again. After all, it was pleasant in the sunshine; beneath him, under his belly the ground was cool, warmed very slightly by his hide. Evidently there wasn't going to be any hunting. All right, to rest was pleasant too.

The sun, lord of all things living, bathed the world with its midday warmth; its countless rays merging into one torrent of light and heat descended from the heart of the sun on animals, large and small, on creeping amphibians and the erect, on those running, fluttering and swimming.

The sun shone on Konchoi, too, as he left the house, and on his horse which had not moved a step from the fence post over which he had tossed the reins in the morning.

It shone on the young gerfalcon still struggling weakly in the folds of the net. He lay in an unnatural position, flattened on the grass, his body tired, his wings numb. How long was he to lie like this?

That stupid bird which looked like a hen pheasant—! The piece of meat torn from her breast was not unlike pheasant, too, but sweeter and not so fat. He shouldn't have swallowed that piece!

He had managed to stuff his crop but how to free himself he didn't know; vaguely he felt that it would take some outside force to

release him. But whose, and how? He did not know. There was nothing else to worry him. He was full fed. He did not even want to look at the fresh meat which lay almost against his beak. He could go without food for three days now. There was nothing he feared. He did not know what death was. But how to wait—that he did know. So—he would go on waiting. It was no use trying to break loose, all it brought him was a sharper pain in his neck, and over his eye, and on his cheek under his eye, and something pressing down on his tail, or his shoulder paining him. So—don't struggle, don't move, and the pain will disappear somewhere.

Suddenly he heard a queer kind of noise, like nothing he had ever heard before. A kind of distinct, heavy beat—thud, thud, thud. Then quicker—thud-thud-thud-thud, coming closer. A presentiment of something—bad—went like a wave through him. He froze. He closed his right eye and concentrated on listening. The heavy thuds were coming closer. And there were other light steps he could distinguish now, light as a breeze—like a running hare which is betrayed only by the light crackle of dry grass or twigs. But the creature approaching was rattier heavy, and the twigs cracking under its feet were good-sized ones. Then the falcon heard a kind of loud whine, he opened his eye half-way and saw a large, four-legged creature rather resembling a fox, only black. And it was standing right over the net.

No—the young falcon could never conquer this. And helpless as he was, spread out on the grass in this puzzling web, it could do as it liked with him, crush him, tear him to pieces. But why had this monster come? What did this "fox" want with him?

Thud-thud-thud, nearer and nearer. The fox-like creature ran round and round the falcon whining happily. It looked as if this was where he had intended to come, straight to the net.

The thuds came quite close and the animal like a fox (only black) made sudden loud sounds at the young falcon—but they seemed to be joyful, and he didn't seem to want to touch the bird. He seemed to be making noises not for himself but for someone else. And he waved his thin twig-like tail, looking right and left.

He barked at the young gerfalcon and that barking seemed to press him closer to the ground. The dog barked by his right ear and he trembled throughout his whole body, beginning to seethe with anger.

Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud—and then it stopped.

The young gerfalcon again opened his eye a slit. A great bare face hung over him, almost from beneath a tree-top; it was not the first time in his brief life that he saw a Two-Legs creature, and this one was sitting on an enormous beast with broad nostrils and a great

head stretching forward. Both these creatures were so monstrous that his heart chilled—what if they didn't notice him, and accidentally crushed him, fastened down as he was, deprived of freedom, like some insect in comparison with them. He must fly quickly—fly! His body did everything needful, he tensed the muscles which should lift him into the air, but—those soft, fine, strong threads still held him.

It was no good. He was lost. The giants would crush him. And for the first time his burning, fluttering heart knew fear, it arose and quivered in his wide, unwinking right eye.

When Konchoi emerged from the trees he saw at once that the poles at the corners of the snare had collapsed and the net was not to be seen. Already with a foretaste of triumph he urged his chestnut to a canter; reaching the spot he quickly dismounted and threw the reins over a pine branch, that would be enough to keep the horse standing quietly while he checked his snare.

He stooped, carefully raised one end of the net lying on the grass with one hand while with the other he began gently to gather it up. "Allah is great!" It was a faint whisper. "Eh, touch wood.— Oh, my beauty, Allah must have sent you!—To be my good fortune. Swift and fierce. Now, now, my beauty, come along, don't be frightened, we're friends, friends—"

One last movement was needed to possess the falcon. Kon-choi took a deep breath. He drew back the hand he had stretched out to the bird and with the other carefully removed his lambskin cap.

The young gerfalcon in his terror huddled closer to the ground, that great earth which he did not need to fear; he could seek for help only in its grass, its soil, its scent. His right eye watched the hairless faced creature. The other two stood farther off, they were not to be feared. But this one—

First he stooped over the falcon and lowered that dreadful face; his body was covered with clothes that had a queer, sharp smell. The animal like a fox barked and whined but the man— why? why?— was very restrained and patient. Why didn't he approach quickly, why didn't he give the death blow at once? Was he afraid? Or did he want to prolong the falcon's fear?

But what was this? Something round and black appeared in the man's bare hand. The hand and this object began slowly descending, approaching him. Finally the strange thing touched his wings and tail, and ended by covering him completely.

The bright warm sun disappeared as though it had suddenly set or plunged down under the earth. The round object covering him was soft and had an unpleasant smell. Suddenly, too, there was very little air. In the falcon's little heart there was only terror. Nothing

had ever before shut off the bright sun. He had flown beneath clouds and in tall forests, he had plunged down from sheer cliffs, but always, everywhere he had felt the sun.

Free himself? Not a hope!

The lambskin cap pressed down on him still harder, forcing him first to stretch his long neck, thrust his curved beak into the ground, and gather his tail into a straight line. His feet would not at once obey. They scratched at the innocent earth resisting the man's strong hand, but then were still.

The young gerfalcon trembled at the horror which had befallen him. The strength of the man was unlimited, that hand did what it liked and he was completely helpless in its grip.

Then one edge of the big round object which covered him began to lift, letting in a weak, faint light; the falcon shuddered—the hand slowly slid in through the gap—all of it, to the wrist. The fingers stirred slowly, and with a quick movement grasped both his wings where they joined at the shoulder. Then, before he had time to feel the warmth of alien fingers, with one snatch the cap left his eyes, caught up somewhere, and he was in the light again. But his wings remained in the power of that hand, it lifted him until his right eye was looking straight into the face of the man. That face had two lively, sparkling black eyes and between them a hump—a sort of beak, thought the falcon. A warm unpleasant smell came from the half open mouth.

"Now, now, quiet, you're all right, my lovely, swift, fierce one, my bold hunter."

Konchoi started to untangle the net, trying not to break a single feather of the falcon's wings; it was a long, difficult job and as he did it he talked.

"Quiet now, quiet, there's nothing to be afraid of. We're friends, friends, you'll get used to us, my lovely, my grand bird... There, there now, I'll just get the last threads untangled, that's the way. Only a moment more, there, a little patience, not much more left now."

He spoke gently, with a soothing monotony, but the young falcon was not in the least soothed. The only thing he noticed, and with rage, was that unpleasant smell. It didn't go away when the voice stopped, it seemed to come from everything about the man—his face, his clothes and that hand gripping his back, not letting him breathe freely, and the other hand which moved about unhurriedly, withdrawing and then again appearing before the bird's eyes with a ball of light silk net in the fingers.

Patience, patience—how long could you be patient? The falcon tossed his hooked beak up and down. He sneezed, sneezed again.

The nostrils over his beak were clear but the sneeze kept rising. That irritating human smell seemed to penetrate his whole body, to fill everything round about him.

Patiently as the man tried to untangle it, that net still compressed back and wings tightly and painfully, threatening to break the feathers. It simply refused to release the bird. It seemed to like holding him, binding him. At last Konchoi took a large folding knife from the side pocket of his coat, opened it with one hand, passed it under one or two threads and the whole net slipped down onto the grass, freeing the falcon. He immediately tried to bate but that human hand did not open its strong fingers.

Oh, to fly, to fly!

The hand quickly checked the impulse, it pressed him to the human clothes and his head was once more imprisoned in darkness, the soft darkness between coat and shirt. The hand still held the wings, it evidently never tired. The legs were hanging outside and with his talons the falcon struggled to free his head but the hand, that invisible strong, clever hand, took an especially hard grip on the wings, and although those talons might have scratched the coat a little, that was all.

After a little while he felt that he was moving somewhere with the man; where—and why? He didn't know.

The tip of Konchoi's sparse goat's beard trembled constantly as again and again, aloud and in his heart, he thanked Allah for his success. And such a success!

Without hurry but without dawdling the forester set off home. With his right hand he held the young gerfalcon under his coat, with the left he held the reins, urging the horse on with his heels while his eyes, warm and a little moist, looked up into the empty vastness of the blue sky, and the tip of his scanty beard trembled a little. His right hand was numb with the responsibility. Allah forbid that anything happen on the way home, anything unexpected. This was the right way. A falcon must be kept in darkness and almost without air long before the jesses are fastened to his feet and he is settled on the leather glove. And hold only the wings. If he is tied and •deprived of any movement he may die. And if he is left with head uncovered, if he can push it out while his body is held under the coat, the first thing he sees may upset him to such a degree, fill him with such helpless terror that his heart will not take the burden and will fail him. Or even if the heart holds out, after such a fright he can never be trained. He must be brought home with eyes and ears covered. And he must not see many people at first. Because for a free bird the most dreadful thing, the most terrible creature is man.

Konchoi approached his house and on just this one day there was nobody to meet him. They were forgetting the customs, Allah forgive them!

So he had to alight unassisted and this was awkward, carrying the bird. It was awkward, too, fastening the horse with one hand.

Konchoi hurried to the house, but stopped on the threshold to call his wife.

"Hey there! Saikal! Come out here. Be quick!"

Carefully he brought out the gerfalcon from beneath his coat and at once covered the bird with his cap, so that it could neither see nor hear.

Old Saikal did not come out at once, and when she did appear she took fright.

"Oh—what's the matter? Has something happened? Why is your cap off?"

"Be glad, wife. But don't ask anything yet. Bring a bowl of water according to custom, to meet one who brings great success. Hurry, hurry. And let nobody leave the house, tell the children to stop at home."

"But what is it? A falcon?"

"Look at her, all curiosity.—And don't forget a pinch of ash in the water."

"Like a kid with a toy," grumbled Saikal, but she went off to do as he said, according to old custom. "You'll torment him to death and have the bird's blood on your hands."

The young gerfalcon heard all these tones of human voices, treble and bass. His round eyes had again lost the white light of the sun; but sightless, for some reason that great fear suddenly left him, although his quivering heart still beat fast.

Saikal appeared on the threshold with a white bowl; water splashed on the bottom and on its surface a pinch of ash floated.

"Give it here and go," said Konchoi. "Don't look, he mustn't be looked at. Is anybody at home?"

Saikal did not answer. Three times she described a circle with the bowl over Konchoi's hands with the cap and the bird, whispering the first words of the Koran, then brought the bowl nearer to her husband's lips. He in turn, after repeating the verses, concluded with "Suff! Suff!" Then Saikal moved a little forward and splashed the water out in a fan towards the east.

"Now we will show our dear falcon the place of honour in his house," said Konchoi and stepped quickly across the threshold.

"The old man's found himself a job," grumbled Saikal as she waited for him to return. If he met his wife coming with an empty unwashed bowl he would scold, it was a bad omen.

After a little while he came out.

Smiling, he's pleased, thought Saikal with tender indulgence. Just like a child, he is.

"A good thing the children weren't home," Konchoi turned towards the old house and Saikal noticed that he had taken a leather bag which he held under his left arm.

The old house in their yard with its flat roof, earthen floor and low ceiling was badly neglected. It was years since anybody had lived in it. There wasn't even any glass in the windows of its two rooms, it had been broken at some time and nobody had bothered to replace it. Instead, the previous year Konchoi's eldest son had fixed nets over the apertures to keep out the cats. The front room was used for old rubbish, dry food, raw leather, and salt beef for the winter, and the second room was empty. Two years previously Konchoi had kept a saker there, but since then it had been unused.

In the left-hand corner of the empty room a willow tuur, a special perch for hunting birds, was set in the earthen floor. This was the darkest corner. When the house was built the only window on that side was placed by mistake close to the door. It might have been a mistake at that time, but hunting birds must be tamed in darkness, so that dark corner came in very handy. Sitting in darkness, the bird would forget its past freedom faster.

Saikal overtook Konchoi and waited until he told her to open the door. She had some difficulty with the key and then, letting her husband precede her, she entered the front room and quickly shut the door behind her, because who could say? Suppose he accidentally released the falcon? Better be safe than sorry. How much strength had the old man still got? And he was tired, too—God forbid that it escape.

There was a stale, musty smell in the neglected room but the old people took no notice, they entered with accustomed steps. In its emptiness the shuffling of their footsteps seemed louder. The young gervalcon heard it, and the echo coming back from the walls, then he heard a kind of groaning rasp.

The couple went to the window. The old man carefully put the cap with the bird on the window-sill, dark with time and dirt, and with a nod invited his wife to come closer. Saikal pulled the leather bag from under her husband's arm and quickly unfastening the cord, drew out an awl, two old stirrup-leathers and a big needle with strong, coarse thread.

Konchoi slipped his free hand into the cap, grasped the gerfalcon at the root of the wings and carefully drew him out. The bird's eyes were met by two human faces very close, and therefore enormous. The sun was not shining but he could see around him. It was like dusk.

On his back he felt the warmth of a human hand which pressed down the upper part of his wings—now gently, now more firmly. And again he knew that this hand could crush him altogether if it wished, but it held him carefully, as though fearful of its own strength.

No, not a chance of getting free. And why, why was he suddenly turned over on his back? The young gerfalcon opened his hooked beak with the ploughshare-tipped tongue and hissed. Ah, so that was it. So that the people could get at his feet to fasten something hard on each. When they touched the foot he tried to catch their fingers with his own four toes. But the talons met, the humans would not let him scratch them. Twisting his neck, the falcon sought the light. It seemed to be coming from an oblong hole which in turn was divided into a lot of tiny squares. And outside it there was open space with warm, air, he could even see a tree and farther away there were distant, unknown mountains. And the tree-tops and the mountain sides were bright with the sun, the real sun. It wasn't evening, the sun's rays were direct.

"There you are, my bold hunter," Konchoi muttered, going back to the dark corner with his captive. "Make yourself at home. Don't be angry and don't be a stranger. Here's your place to sleep, sit here, that's right. This is your tuur. With luck I'll tame you before your first moult. Then we'll see. You do as I want, and I'll do as you want. That's the way we'll be, my sweet one. Now rest a bit. Sit, that's right, sit there."

With these words the forester knotted the leather leash running from the stirrup straps which took the place of jesses to the vertical pole of the tuur, taking care that the falcon should not get entangled in them. He tested the knot several times, checked the leash and then raised the bird by both wings and carefully sat him on the perch, making sure that he had a good grip.

Then he released him. And retreated a few paces.

"Now then, that's the way, you just settle down. You belong here now. If you're obedient things'll be better for you. But if you're stubborn and make trouble, well, then so much the worse. That's how it is, my bold hunter, my good fortune."

The young gerfalcon had to hold tightly, tightly to the perch. Once he was free, there was a strain on his shin and feet, he felt his whole weight; his position wasn't comfortable but it was natural,

especially as it could be preparation for flying. If you feel your weight then you must be free. He was free! Leap up, fly! And those creatures not far away, let them stand there, while he leaped up and soared into the sky!

A sweep of the wings, another, another and—some new, unknown but hostile force held him down on his feet, pulled him, forced him to grip the perch again. The falcon could not believe in his defeat, he flapped his wings again. He was in the air, but only for three wing-beats, he could go no farther.

He tried again.

His longing for flight was unbearable.

To break free, break free! His own strength would take him far. And when should he fly and be free, if not in that turbulence of his own strength, his unexpended life, his hot youth? But there was this invisible, hostile power, it stubbornly pulled him down and blocked his will to be free.

He just couldn't understand it—nobody held him down, his feet pushed against the perch or the ground, nothing hampered his wings, his tail opened in a fan, every feather was his to control—and he could not fly. The young gerfalcon was in a bitter state of bewilderment. How was he to escape this mysterious, horrible, evil force? He sought it around him, that force. Aha—again, just like that net on the grass—there it was, twisted round his foot, that was what pulled him back, let him go only a permitted distance.

One metre up, to the right or to the left, those were the boundaries Konchoi had set.

"This isn't a saker," remarked Saikal after admiring for some time the falcon's spirited attempts to get free.

"It's quicker, rarer," Konchoi told his wife. "It's a gerfalcon. They call it the king of swift birds. If it's well trained, you can go after wolves with it."

"So long as you don't leave yourself without food. Those birds of yours never bring us anything."

"Did you feed the ram this morning?"

"He eats so much he's skittish, that ram of yours. He tried to butt a little girl. Our lad can feed him when he comes from work."

Suddenly it grew quite dark in the room. They turned to look at the window. Taigan was on his hind legs, blocking the light, trying to see his master and mistress.

"Will you look at that, now, the cheeky brute," cried Saikal crossly and raised her voice. "Get out of there! Off with you! Scat!"

Taigan understood that he was being sent away from the grating but he only wagged his tail and stopped where he was. If it had been the master, he'd have had to obey at once, but this was the

mistress, and Taigan had very little to do with her anyway; all she ever did was to drive him away for no special reason, just on general principles. And what bad thing had he ever done to her? "Tomorrow we'll invite all our friends. The ram's got such a fleece, time to skin him. We've fed him long enough, now he can feed us. Well, let's go."

Saikal bent down, picked up the leather bag from the earthen floor and followed her husband out.

"Six weeks ago the wool was just right, it would have made fine collars." She had to have her say. "Now it's too long."

"Never mind, you'll get a collar all right, so don't worry." Today her husband was in a rare good humour. "This can be used for a coat." Konchoi shot the thick bolt on the door of the old house and again tried the handle.

"Give me the key. And keep the children away. If they frighten the falcon all my trouble will go for nothing, and the bird'll be useless. Tell them to keep right away. Understand? This isn't a toy."

The humans had gone, leaving him alone, which astonished the young gerfalcon. Why? Didn't they want him any more? But then, why had they made such a fuss about him earlier? And why had they left him here? He was alone at last—in this place shut in on every side, wherever he looked. Alone. No aliens. But everything round about him was alien.

To fly—the feeling of it blazed up in his heart and it beat faster. Flap his wings, again, again! And then—pain in his talons striking awkwardly against the wooden perch, and then the straps bringing him forcefully down onto the floor.

Yes, there was the evil force: the straps.

He raged. Again and again he bated, careless of lost feathers. If not now, then with the next effort he would tear his fetters, break the upright of the tuur and be free!

Vain efforts. It ended with the bird lying flattened out, neck, crop, chest, down on the cold earthen floor. His hooked beak gaped as though to release the red ploughshare tongue.

But he could not stand that for long. His legs were free, and he could flap his wings all he wanted. There was plenty of air. There was space to make a start and leap up. He raised his head and tried to find the hole the air was coming through. Avian law says one must fly towards a current of fresh air.

Gradually the young gerfalcon began to feel sleepy. But he could not sleep anywhere and anyhow. Seeking a secluded spot, he moved towards the corner. He took a few steps; his long talons dug into the earth of the floor, stretching his toes to their full length so that their cushions tensed. It was as though he were about to attack an

animal. But he had to relax his whole body to rest properly, including the muscles of his toe pads. He couldn't do that on a flat floor, no, he needed a branch the proper thickness, then the talons hung relaxed, half bent. There weren't any trees or branches here. But the tuur? Its horizontal perch? The thickness was just right for his feet, the kind he looked for in the forest before settling down to roost in the shelter of a tree-top. A real branch, it was. Dry, he had felt it, warm and comfortable. True, it smelled—not of the forest, but of a stranger. It looked as though he had taken the place of another, a predecessor. Probably that other would soon come. The law of falcons does not allow one to take possession of a branch preempted by another. But that first one was late. And the young gerfalcon was suddenly so overcome with drowsiness that he hesitated no longer, he occupied the perch with no intention of vacating it. Dropping his wings, dropping his tail and relaxing all over, he shook himself noisily, replacing the stale air which gathers between the wings and body with fresh. After his air bath he twisted his neck to the right, pushed his head beneath his right wing leaving the earhole uncovered, and quickly fell asleep.

4

In the morning Konchoi sent his grandson to invite all his neighbours and friends. Already the previous evening a rumour had spread through the village that old Konchoi had caught a marvellous falcon in his net, so people guessed at once that the forester was inviting them to a feast with an oblation. The guests gradually gathered in the yard. Konchoi talked with this one and that, wanting to make sure all whom he had invited were there.

"When are you going to make a start?" Saikal said. "Any who aren't here now will come in time for the meat."

But people were still arriving, mainly the old folk; they came, looked around and settled themselves in the accepted order, facing east. Konchoi's eldest son pulled in a fat sheep and with some difficulty turned it so that its head was towards the north. Konchoi stood in front of the animal, raised his hands, palms upward, to the level of his face, then brought them together loudly so that all could hear, and spoke solemnly.

"Come, my beloved, my neighbours, let us pray." He brought his hands to his face and prayed ardently. "Oh Allah, lead me to that clear path, to a quiet and peaceful life, to the well-being of my family, to successful hunting with my gerfalcon, bless your slave,

oh Almighty!" With one movement his cupped hands rose and then moved before the faces of the guests, up and down. It was as though something momentous had been accomplished, the old men let out sighs of relief and stirred, turning their heads from side to side. Somebody pressed his hand against the back and sides of the sheep, testing its fatness.

"Oho, there's three fingers fat on the ribs."

"What did you expect?" said another slyly. "What do you think Konchoi's been trying so hard for? Maybe it's four fingers."

That sort of thing, spoken loudly, made pleasant hearing for Konchoi and he listened keenly, although he pretended to be watching whether his son, after throwing the sheep, was tying its feet properly. He was, of course. Everything was being prepared according to custom. The animal's feet were bound with a hair rope and a large bowl was placed under the head. Approach, silent master, perform the sacrifice, that the people and God may rejoice. "Bis-mil-lah rahmanii rahim." Konchoi sighed and decisively carried the knife to the sheep's throat. "In your honour, Almighty! May my quick gerfalcon become the king of falcons, and this sheep—let its spirit go to you, Almighty, its flesh to us, your slaves, and its bones to the earth. O-omin, aldo ak-barV

The sharp steel knife easily severed the artery and the blood flowed in a stream into the bowl and quickly covered the bottom. With his left hand Konchoi compressed the lips of the sheep while the right held the bloody knife by the throat; he did not cut deeper, he waited until all the crimson blood pumped by the heart came out of itself.

"Get me a log of some kind," said the forester to his son.

An errant breeze absorbed the steam from the hot blood, carried it over the yard and penetrated through chinks in the wall to the street, to the world, proclaiming that there was one living being the less on earth. None of the people gave heed to what the wind proclaimed but black Taigan, on guard by the old house and the gerfalcon, jumped up as his nostrils expanded and stretched his narrow head in the direction of this enticing smell; his empty belly ached, he longed to get his teeth now, at once, into fresh meat, to lap hot blood. He must run to the place where all that was waiting, it was lucky that he was free. The young gerfalcon sitting on the tuur also caught a whiff of fresh blood, but the law of falcons demanded that he see, not smell, his prey, see it with his own eyes and not thrust out his tongue for something he could not see beforehand.

"Put it here," Konchoi told his son when he brought a half-metre pine log. It had to be placed under the neck of the slaughtered

animal so that one could remove the skin without soiling everything round about.

Konchoi held out the knife to his son.

"Skin it carefully, if you cut the hide you'll hear about it from mother, she'll have plenty to say; work with your fist inside."

He turned to his guests.

"Good neighbours, I thank you for coming for the sacrifice, return, then, to eat the soup, shorpo, it will soon be made."

Everybody knew that the shorpo would be later; the meat had to be divided and a fire made, and some were already leaving the yard, but others who had nothing urgent to do at home still lingered, even after their host's words they were in no hurry to make for the gate.

"Yes, but when are you going to show us the gerfalcon?" suddenly asked Asanaly, reluctant to go. "What's got into you? Show us, or your oblation will not be counted as such."

"And what sort of korumdyuk is there?" (The korumdyuk is the gift brought when a new-born child is shown.)

"If it's a bird worth something there'll be a korumdyuk. I'll not be grudging. Show me, show your gerfalcon."

"Korumdyuk first, or no bird."

"So that's what you're like. Let's first see the swift hunter you've got."

Now, Konchoi had a superstition. It was bad luck to let people see a bird earlier than necessary. He had had birds that were useless as hunters. And although Asanaly hadn't an evil eye, he himself trained and flew falcons. He was a well-known falconer, in fact. They were rivals in a quiet sort of way, Asanaly and Konchoi. That Asanaly—he might very possibly go and lie about the most promising bird, say it was no good at all, to make Konchoi look small. And if the falcon really was no good he'd make a mock of it right away and Konchoi would look foolish. No, let the secret be kept for the present. And when that clever Asanaly saw that Konchoi has really got something—then let him envy!

He washed his hands in the warm water his daughter-in-law poured for him, washed them long and carefully, then dried them just as unhurriedly.

"Cut off a piece of the liver and bring it to me," Konchoi said to his son.

The bolt rasped and again the invisible force of the straps forced the gerfalcon down, on the exact spot where his talons had already torn up the earth. There was nothing he could do but wait for what might come. The door creaked open and the bird lifted his head and hiding his fear, looked at the man with the bare face. One hand,

too, was bare but the other, covered with the dried skin of some animal, held something the falcon could not see.

It was the man who had been there yesterday. He had come again. Escape? Escape! And quickly, quickly.

The young gerfalcon bated, again and again, tangled in the straps, flapping his wings desperately—and uselessly.

"Now, now, my bold bird," Konchoi displayed a piece of liver lying on his glove. He spoke loudly so that the bird should get used to the human voice. "Don't struggle so. Be sensible, love. I'm afraid you'll lose some long feathers. Eh, and see how big your crop is, looks like you stuffed yourself a bit too much with that old hen yesterday. All right. I won't feed you now. Maybe you'll come to my hand, eh? What about it? Well?"

But the falcon became frantic at the man's approach, at his outstretched hand that seemed to be covered with a cat's skin turned inside out, no talon would go through it. The young falcon gradually retreated, squinting balefully, and at last huddled in the corner behind the tuur, trembling and raging. Konchoi drew back a little. He stopped a few paces from the tuur, squatted on his heels and began calling.

"Pyo! Pyo!" he called and shook the piece of fresh liver. "Now then, show me how you can eat. Pyo! Pyo! Fresh liver, something you like. Look at it, tender, tasty. Now—pyo! Pyo! Pyo!"

The young gerfalcon thought that now the man would stretch out his bare hand and grip his wings, hold them so that he could not move them. The memory of the previous day accentuated his rising fear. Into the corner, deeper in!

But the man didn't seize him by the wings as he had before, he even went farther away. Wouldn't he touch him, then? This was unexpected. And why was he holding that meat? Queer. Where had it come from, and in such a strange form? Meat had to be killed, torn, with the fur of an animal or the feathers of a bird. But this seemed to have neither fur nor feathers. You smelt that it was meat but all the same it wasn't meat.

Huddled in the corner, poor thing, thought Konchoi. Try to approach and he'll go numb and stiff and there'll be nothing to be done with him. Well, better leave him in peace for the present.

The man disappeared, and only smells remained in the room—yesterday's unpleasant acrid smell of man, and the smell of meat that wasn't meat.

Konchoi was upset at not having tempted the falcon with the liver and made friends at the first attempt. Could Asanaly have done it? Who knew, perhaps. The forester dropped the liver beside the door to free his hands for the bolt. Taigan was somewhere about. Let him

find it. He would, Konchoi knew. Now, there was one who was trained, and well trained. Oh, he'd find it for sure.

5

Asanaly lost all peace of mind when he first heard about Konchoi's capture. Falconers are apt to be jealous folk. He's got a hard heart, he thought, no sensitive feeling. Like as not he'll turn that falcon into a fierce killer. Eh, dear, he'll spoil that falcon, maybe ruin it altogether. Of course, he's been lucky, catching a bird like that. But it has to be trained properly. A man who wants to train a gerfalcon should have a great heart. A bird's like a ling and you can't reform it. Oh, that stubborn old forester, he'll spoil the gerfalcon for sure. He isn't the man to train a falcon, not with his flinty heart and his hard dour ways. He'll make it an iron bird. They'll see what'll happen, our folks, when a cold-hearted bird flaps its wings in the sky. It will fly like a metal aircraft, and bring terror to every living thing in our Taragai mountains, in the woods and the valleys. And it will have no gallantry or success, and nobody will have joy of it. The meat was eaten and the strong soup called shorpo. Konchoi's grandson went round carrying a long-handled copper bowl in his left hand and from a pitcher in his right pouring warm water over the hands of the guests, starting at the far end of the table. The guests leisurely washed their hands over the bowl, took a towel from his shoulder to wipe them and returned it, ceremonially wishing the boy long life.

Only relatives and old friends were seated at the table, people who knew each other well, but Konchoi's family served them with all due ceremony and with evident satisfaction.

Having eaten, the guests sat in dignified silence, as though doubtful who should begin a conversation, and what about, although everybody knew that since the feast was to celebrate catching a gerfalcon, there could be no other subject of talk. The forester had done well by them, now it was for them to bring joy to his heart with pleasant words.

"We-ell, Konchoi, so you have caught a gerfalcon," a white-bearded elder sitting in the place of honour began. "A holy bird it is. It is said: A good beginning makes a good ending. You know yourself what a gerfalcon is. M'yes, today you have your good beginning, a herald of happiness. You and your family are destined to live in good fortune for many long years, until your hair is white. For this is no small thing, no. God has looked on you with favour. And has given you a sign. That is an excellent thing, remember it."

"May your words come true," answered Konchoi with dignity.

"Now all depends on you, Konchoi," said Asanaly. "A falcon needs much, oh how much. If you are his friend he will give you renewed youth with his hunting. You know the saying: it is pleasanter to fly a falcon than to wait for what he brings. But you—you think more of the booty, instead of what the bird becomes, ill-tempered or good."

That sort of thing would have been better left unsaid, especially after the feast to which they'd been treated, and fearing a quarrel the old men hastened to interrupt.

"That's no sort of talk, Asanaly, and anyhow Konchoi does not need your advice, he's not a child."

"Let be, Asanaly, let be."

"He who could catch it, can train it. You aren't the only falconer, so stop it!"

Asanaly smiled, washing his hands unhurriedly, and as he wiped them on the already wet towel he said to the boy, "Grow big, and become a good man."

"Oh, ugh," The eldest man rose slowly with the aid of one hand. "We thank you, Konchoi, for your goodness. You fed the sheep well. May your house always be filled.—Well, old men, let us go, enough talking. Come with me, those who live at the upper end of the village."

All those sitting near him rose too. They moved with staid dignity, observing the long-established order, making way for those who were older so as not to hinder them putting on their galoshes.

Asanaly stopped by Konchoi.

"Sell me your gergefalcon."

Men who were already by the door stopped and pricked their ears.

"Are you serious?" asked Konchoi. "When I tell you the conditions you'll likely refuse."

"I'll agree to anything. What do you want? Well?"

"You won't back out?"

"No."

"All right. I have one condition. If you agree then I'll let you have it and we'll settle the price."

"Don't you know me by this time? Why do you doubt me? Speak, what is it?"

"Leave the gergefalcon with me until I've trained him. You know yourself there's a meaning to this bird; it's a gergefalcon, you heard what they just said? God would not forgive me.—I'll train him and then he'll be yours, you can take him."

"Eh no, I won't have that."

"Then I'm sorry, but there's nothing to talk about."

"If only you don't make him ill-tempered, stir up the wild-ness in him." With those words Asanaly followed the others out.

6

The young gerfalcon felt a raging hunger. The creature with the bare face and bare hands had come to him several more times and shown him meat—no, not meat, probably a bird, which he felt squeamish about even looking at. But that desire to fill his crop with fresh, real meat didn't go. It gnawed at him and gave his eyes a special glow even though the sun had still not yet shone in that dark room, even in daytime it was in semi-darkness.

Memory is the sense that everything one does, and even doing nothing—all takes place in time. The gerfalcon felt the passage of time through the coming and going of the man. He came and the gerfalcon began to rage; he went and that brought ease. And it was with the alternation of these states that the gerfalcon filled his memory.

Konchoi tried to be persistent but not insistent, to show his attention in such a way that the bird would remember him. Three or four times a day he showed himself, so as to make himself an accustomed sight.

Now and then the falcon's gnawing hunger alternated with a longing for free flight, for hovering and swooping in the sky. Oh, to fly, fly forever! He tried, just in case. Bated, and again he was on the floor scratching the earth with his talons, pulled by the strap.

Once he lowered his head to touch the leather strap with his curved beak. He pulled it. He felt the firmness of the leather. Then he began tearing at it in good earnest and swallowing the scraps torn off without a second thought. The well-stitched leather resisted him. He was stubborn but it was more so. In his fury he scratched the scaly skin of his foot and then pecked it. Pain shot through his leg, he raised it and the strap hung loosely. Again he attacked the strap with very serious intent. The fragments of skin from an animal long dead he ate and enjoyed. He bit through one strap, worried at the edges and freed one foot; the stirrup strap lay on the ground by the tuur like a slain enemy. The gerfalcon stopped and looked victoriously up at the window opening, where his animal guard moved about. He distracted the falcon's attention from the second strap and he forgot why he had torn the first. According to gerfalcon custom, after every job one must set oneself to rights, shake from one's feathers any crumbs or grains of dust which may have adhered. So the young gerfalcon lightly spread wings and tail, fluffed up his feathers, then shook himself noisily, creating a breeze

which made a spider, spinning its web in that dark corner, scuttle for safety behind a hump in the wall.

The gerfalcon's whole body ached and cried out for food. He bated. Oh, to rise in the air and fly, fly! The strap still on his left leg tipped him sideways and landed him back on the floor. But the right leg was free! Push off, rise, fly!

No good, every time it ended with a painful, humiliating fall until his strength was exhausted.

Konchoi arrived, again carrying a piece of meat on his glove. He saw that the bird had lost weight. Would he go back into his corner again when he saw the falconer? Look—no, today he didn't retreat, he didn't hide behind the tuur, he stopped where he was, turned himself sideways, watched with a widely opened eye, and waited. With his accustomed step, slowly, quietly, Konchoi this time got almost up to the falcon. And it was all right, he sat there on the damp floor, quietly, only the pellicle over his eyes kept opening and shutting. Cautiously but confidently Konchoi stretched out his right hand with the piece of meat on the glove. He held it under the curve of the falcon's beak and let him smell it, calling, "Pyo! Pyo! Pyo!" The bird got the smell, saw the meat on the leather glove, and suddenly lunged forward with his whole body to snatch at it with his beak.

The falconer allowed him to peck it a couple of times, then with an unnoticed downwards movement of his left hand slipped the meat from the right and concealed it in his fist. It was so unexpected that the falcon pecked at the empty space where the meat had been—the vanished meat. Again without the bird noticing, Konchoi unfastened the leash from the foot of the tuur and wound the free end round his hand. Still half squatting, he moved away a little and called the bird in a calm, expressionless voice. Again the meat was on the glove. The gerfalcon was intelligent, he understood the man wanted him to eat the meat from the glove. And with a quick flutter he alighted on it.

Now a very satisfied falconer rose with the bird, and noticed the torn strap. All right, after feeding he'd mend it. Konchoi was delighted to find the falcon amenable.

Again the left hand stealthily removed the meat from the glove; Konchoi moved the right hand with glove and falcon outwards from the shoulder, turned his head to the left and spat on the meat in his left hand. Human spittle made the meat juicier, tastier, and after it the falcon would not experience thirst. The young gerfalcon started at the sound of the spit and tensed all his feathers not to fall ignominiously off the glove, but the meat appeared again right in front of his beak and forgetful of everything he went for it. He ate

eagerly, with enjoyment, and gradually fear left his little heart—even when the naked human hand touched his already firmly flattened feathers, touched them and stroked them, beginning with the head and continuing to the very tip of the tail.

7

Asanaly had finally lost all hope of persuading Konchoi to part with his bird. He was nervous and restless, but he swore that one way or another he would not leave the gerfalcon with that heart of flint, and so calmed himself a little. With every day he felt more strongly drawn to the young gerfalcon, not yet trained to hunt with man. With his wide knowledge of birds he could visualise what Konchoi was doing every hour, how he was feeding the bird and getting it accustomed to him. Not everyone can train a falcon. One has to win its affection; if it dislikes you, then you can try all you want, you'll do nothing with it.

Asanaly pictured Konchoi fussing round the falcon while it remained unresponsive, ruffled up, alien. You must have a different approach, but was Konchoi capable of it? It must be with love, letting the bird feel the warmth of your heart so that it accepts you as a friend, so that when it sees you it strains to meet you. If a man does not understand that, a falcon will be revenged, it will turn stubborn and may even die of its stubbornness.

Asanaly imagined himself in Konchoi's place (I could do it, I'd make every effort) and to tell the truth, thought with equal agitation of the young gerfalcon and its master.

On the eleventh day after the capture Asanaly couldn't hold out and made his way to the fortunate falconer. Konchoi was in the act of feeding his bird. The falcon sat on his glove while he walked up and down the empty room. Asanaly entered, walking quietly (you mustn't frighten a bird) and after a word of greeting went over to the barred window and leaned against the cold wall.

"Voleikum atsalam," Konchoi replied to the greeting, stroking the head and back of the young gerfalcon with his left hand. "How are you? Why don't you look in? What's new?"

"I have no cause for complaint, thanks be to Allah." Asanaly looked at the bird and let a word fall without thinking. "There's a bit of food stuck in his crop, don't you see it? Give him the meat of birds with the feathers, that'll clear his crop."

He's starting, thought Konchoi angrily, but kept it all in. Thinks himself an expert, teaches everybody. He's the man who knows it all and the rest of us are all fools. He can't see that it's none of his

business and he should keep his nose out, and if you say anything he's offended. But why does he interfere in other folks' business?

"If you don't clear his crop you won't get him trained so fast," Asanaly continued. "And he seems a good bird. And affectionate. I see he likes a bit of petting. He wants your kindness. You'll be able to fly him against a wolf even, he won't spare himself if it's his master's wish."

"When is togoshuuT' asked Konchoi, referring to a position of the planets that tells when to expect the birds' migration.

"Let's see, what month is it now?"

"September—yes, September."

"Then it's passed—last Friday, I think."

"I must do a tirnye. He doesn't feel me yet, the wind's in his head." (Tirnye is a method of training when the eyelids of a difficult bird are temporarily sewn together.)

"No—why?!" said Asanaly, alarmed. "Why torture the bird? You've a heavy hand, you'll ruin him. And you could manage without. Better use kindness, he hasn't moulted yet. Look, try keeping him a week in darkness. Absolute darkness. Cover the window tightly and leave him in peace, he'll soon forget, very soon."

"Yes, you're right, I must cover the window. He's wily, he's getting his food free. Show him meat and he comes to me, but if I don't he's quite indifferent. The clever rascal!"

"Wise bird! Look, his eyes are clear, they shine like at the bottom of a well. Moves freely now, too: just a little patience —let me have him, Konchoi. All the same the credit's yours, there's less than half left to do. It'd foe a shame to spoil him. —Well, all right, say nothing, be obstinate. Have it your own way, all right, I won't interfere, I'm just talking, take no notice."

"Take him. You yourself refused, Asanaly. On my conditions take him. Can I train a falcon with another falconer beside me? I stand back for the expert." And just as though the exchange of pricks had not taken place he continued, "They used to say that in the old days great falconers used to drop hot lead into the falcons' ears. What d'you think of that, eh?"

"Nay, Konchoi, stop talking nonsense. If you can't master the falcon, let me have him. It's clear as day to me that in a couple of months he'll be devoted to man. Then I'll bring him to you."

Look at that now, what an idea he's got of himself, thought Konchoi, but he didn't want to start a quarrel. Got a nerve, his thoughts went on, a bird Konchoi's trained doesn't suit him, but one he's trained ought to please Konchoi. Oh no, neighbour, nothing doing!

"He's crunched up that strap, I'll have to get another," the forester said calmly, to change the subject.

"Don't let him get depressed, make it more interesting for him."

Asanaly is Asanaly, can't do anything about that, thought Konchoi and said aloud, "Yes, looks as if he's finding life boring, bless him." While the old men were talking the falcon was dealing with the food. The last scrap disposed of, he shook himself, ruffled his feathers and looked about him. There was no meat left. He looked at the grated opening where the pale light came from, and started, for there, beyond that grating, were the rays of the real sun, and the sweet, clear air. In its invisible but palpable density columns of light, the sun's rays, supported the sky like the trunks of trees. Outside that aperture all was as it had been! He had only seemed to forget that beautiful, open, free space. Oh, to fly, to fly! But something kept him there on the leather glove. Not the jesses, not the human hand. Something in himself.

When the bare-faced and bare-handed creatures left, the young gerfalcon, ruffled and alone on the tuur, quietened down.

Everything was quiet.

Then came the sound of footsteps. Suddenly the aperture seemed to become one with the walls, the light stopped coming through, it had vanished.

The young gerfalcon was ready to fly, but the sudden darkness put an end to his spirited mood. You must have light to fly. When the sun after disporting itself with its rays disappears somewhere the birds too leave the sky. But why had the white rays left him now? He did not want to sleep, his eyes were open although they could see nothing.

The footsteps became fainter in the distance and the young gerfalcon was alone in the darkness.

Konchoi decided to follow without delay the advice of Asanaly, who was after all more experienced. Leaving a falcon in absolute darkness, one of the training methods, is intended to confuse the bird, to wipe his memory clean of former impressions, former flight. The idea is that he will emerge from the darkness recognising only his master, the man will be father and mother and the tuur made by human hands will be his only home. A trained falcon should be convinced that his master is stronger, cleverer and wiser than he, so there is no sense in resisting. As long as a falcon does not know fear, as long as he has flight, freedom, light, he has no understanding of the love of life. By altering his urge to live, one at the same time alters the nature of the falcon.

Asanaly came again when it was time to open the window.

Konchoi could have waited even a bit longer, thought Asanaly, but he hadn't. When Asanaly had been taking the horse to water in the morning he had been thinking, and afterwards he made his way to Konchoi's house. He went into the yard and left the horse by the hitching rail, then seeing that the window of the old house was open, made his way straight to the new one, where Konchoi and Saikal were standing at the door. Asanaly saw at once by his frowning brows that Konchoi was not in the best of tempers. "Has he decided to make friends, or is he still sulking?" asked Asanaly as he approached his neighbour.

"Things aren't going badly, not badly at all." That was Saikal. "What are you doing these days? How's the family?"

"When did you let the light in, Konchoi?"

"Two days ago I opened the window. That was long enough to keep him. Yes, and he's begun to respond as soon as he hears my footsteps."

"M'yes. Too soon to let him have light. You're a queer cuss, Konchoi, when you ought to feel for him you don't, and then when you oughtn't you can't hold out. Everything the wrong way round. Is his crop clear?"

"He spat it all out himself. There was a hare's skin in the house, Saikal had had it a long time, I gave it him, he pecked a bit, skin and fur, and in the morning vomited everything up, fur and all. Quietened him a bit. Today or maybe tomorrow I'm taking him out into the yard."

"Don't be in too great a hurry. You've got a week in hand."

Konchoi was morosely silent.

"A week here or there, what's the difference," Asanaly continued.

"Patience. You'll have plenty of time for hunting. Take him into the field when you're quite certain that he's yours, like your own son."

"What business of yours is my gerfalcon?"

"No need to snap," said Asanaly, somewhat embarrassed nevertheless. "With that temper of yours you'll soon drive everyone away, you'll see—nobody'll want to come to you."

There came a day when the young falcon was carried out into the yard, into the free air!

The first thing he felt was that his unaccustomed eyes seemed to close of themselves. He wanted to open them but the lids again quickly shut off the brightness. He felt a delicious languor from the slow movement of the warm air. And the sun, the hot sun stood high in the heavens! The deep sky was dark blue at the horizon, pale blue nearer the sun—the bird could not distinguish colours but he could see light, and he looked at the sun almost shyly, avoiding a direct gaze as though ashamed of some fault.

The falcon ruffled and shook his feathers, to let each one bathe in the warm air. He shook himself noisily and wanted to sneeze, but at that moment his eye fell on the four-footed animal like a fox except that it was black—that wretched, foolish, fawning creature.

The young gerfalcon was irritated by the sight, the feathers on his neck rose as he glared at the dog.

Taigan ran to the man, his eyes fixed in utter devotion, he crouched, he stood—begging for attention. This wretched sight angered the young gerfalcon still more. Abasement was disgusting, even in another! The black twig of a tail swung tirelessly from side to side, pleading for pity and kindness. Revolting!

The bird averted his eyes. He sneezed twice. His eyes watered, drawing a light curtain over the visible brightness of the world. But after his eyes were washed by tears that remained hanging on the wrinkled lower lid and the cheek, ready to fall, how bright and clear everything was.

He bated, but the man did not release him, the straps held him prisoner. With a jerk the man made him sit where he had been, on the glove. So that was forbidden. The man did not want to let him go. But why? In that dark place the man had been kind, and had never once hurt him. Recently the falcon had even been left untied; when the man appeared at the door he had called with his voice of thunder, and the falcon had flown from the tuur onto the glove, to the meat which the man always brought, and he felt that the man was pleased to see how swiftly he flew. More than once he would put him back on the tuur, again and again, and then call him to fly. Of course, it was a very short flight, just a few wing-beats. But here he could fly freely, fly high, fly far. Far! There was so much free air, you could swoop and hover all day in it.

Why wasn't he allowed to fly?

A pile of logs and twigs lay in the corner of the yard opposite the penthouse. The man walked to them intending to place the falcon on them, but he immediately guessed what was wanted and hopped from the glove straight on to a dry branch, having first assured himself that it would bear his weight. Now he was able to see the whole of that bare-faced creature. He was doing something with a lot of flat rope he held, trying something this way and that. The straps hung freely from the bird's feet, but then the man joined them to other long ropes. The falcon let him do everything he wanted without any resistance. Again the big, clumsy black creature had come into sight, he moved about restlessly, never taking his eyes off his master, just as though he had committed some fault and was ashamed, desperately ashamed, oh how he was suffering, panting with it, he was begging for forgiveness. There, on

his back, all four feet in the air. Lying there right at the man's feet, and the man taking no notice of him. He swept the ground with his tail, raising the dust, his coat was grey with it. It made the gerfalcon angry, his neck feathers rose, his eyes widened, his beak opened and his tongue emerged in a hiss.

At last Konchoi had all the ends of the long leash tied. He noticed, not for the first time, that the sight of Taigan irritated the gerfalcon. Better send the dog away. But Taigan did not get up, he thought his master had stamped just accidentally, without meaning anything, and continued fawning upon him. In such cases Konchoi did not usually send him away. But the master stamped again, stamped hard, and shouted at him, too. Yes, that was serious, those were the sounds the master always made when Taigan must go away, and with obedient haste he jumped up, went off a little way and then turned and looked back. Perhaps master might want his help again? Better not go too far. And that bird the master seemed to value so much was still sitting on the wood. Why? Didn't the master's shout concern it? Sitting there, important, apparently dozing.

The horse with one eye took in the forester busy tying and untying something, and the falcon on the woodpile, and the dog moving away, offended. The horse caught the dog's glance. This was a dog he knew, free to go where he would. But of no use to a horse. The hay in the manger was finished, some more needed bringing, but what did a dog care? He could drink from the bucket, but bring water—no. Only the master could do that, and his eyes sought the master's hands moving swiftly on the straps. He'd have to wait; and now the horse looked only at Konchoi.

A fragrant breeze came from the penthouse side of the yard. All welcomed it, each in his own way. To the falcon it brought memory; he could distinguish the scent of a wild pigeon, and memory brought the taste of dark meat and hot pigeon's blood. Oh, to catch that pigeon—he was ready to pursue it untiringly, any distance, to reach it, to kill it in flight. He was sitting on the dry branch, unconstrained. The way was clear to the free sky above, the white sun—what more did he need? He bated so strongly that the man barely had time to grab the ends of the jesses.

"Now, now, love, calm down." Konchoi stroked the feathers. "Look, I'm giving you a long leash. What have you marked? Where? My word, what a hunter. All right, I'm nearly finished. Just a little patience. I understand, I understand."

The leash lengthened, Konchoi stooped, fastened one end to a heavy log and walked calmly away towards the gate. He passed the middle of the woodpile, turned to the falcon and called him. At first the bird

was surprised—why did the man go away, leave him alone, with the sky near? Previously he had not been allowed into the sky, was he going to be allowed there now? No, the man was calling him and there was meat on his glove. He wanted the gerfalcon to eat. Better fly over. The man had never deceived him.

An instant, and the gerfalcon was on the glove.

"May you be lucky and clever," the falconer addressed him. "It's a grand bird you are. You're learning obedience. Touch wood. I think I've tamed you. Today I'll show you a lure, something alive, eh? There, that's enough, you've eaten enough, my friend. You need to be a little hungry, see? Wait a bit. Patience, get a little hungrier. Then you'll strike well. All right, after the hunt you can eat all you want."

Stealthily the falconer removed the remains of the meat and hid it away in the leather bag hanging at his left side.

The previous evening his father had said, "Come home in good time, we're going into the fields," so Konchoi's eldest son asked to be let off early from work

They mounted, Konchoi on his chestnut with the falcon on his wrist and his son on another horse, with a homespun bag fastened to the saddle. The bag contained a live hare; Konchoi had been trying a whole week to catch one and had succeeded only the previous day. The gerfalcon knew instinctively that this ride was a very special one, important, something in the men's manner told him. Both were serious, tense. Suddenly a hare squeaked. Could it be riding with them? But where? In the bag? But how did a hare come to be in the bag?

They trotted quietly along until—what was that? From somewhere, suddenly, a hare appeared and raced off over the field. It was quite close, one sweep of the wings would be enough to bring the falcon on to the soft back, but the place was open, the trees were far away, no need to hurry. Then the man on whose hand he was sitting, tensely watching, suddenly raised his hand and then dropped it so that the falcon's wings opened of themselves. And before he had time to realise it, the force beneath his feet almost flung him into the air. He was flying! He should have pushed off a fraction later but never mind, energetically working his wings the falcon straightened his body in the air. Then came that glorious feeling of lightness. Yes, he was really flying! The jesses no longer pulled him back, as though they didn't exist.

Freedom—where have you been all this time? Why had he had to sit in torment for so long?

He did soon become conscious of the jesses and the leash, of their weight which prevented him tucking up his legs, streamlining his

body according to the rules of falcon flight. But all the same he was flying, really flying. His eyes never left the hare which was jinking over level ground bare of cover, but he wanted to draw out this flight. How long he had been pining for the heights! Let the hare run, twist and turn, he would strike just the same. But meanwhile he revelled in the sweetness of endless flight, his little heart beat fast for joy.

From that height he could see everything down below, even the distraught upturned faces of the men who had brought him arid the motionless black beast like a fox.

"Tsok! Tsok!" called the falcon. All the rebellion, the longing, the suffering burst from his throat and from his heart in that cry, leaving only the joy of flying, of freedom.

He felt an urge for the mountains. In an instant he recalled the forest where he could sit on trees and on the ledges of cliffs rising from them—and what a sweep of distance was open before one! Sitting high up, it feels as though one were still flying.

He had flown to the second tree where the forest began when he wanted to rest a bit, the long dangling leash did, after all, hinder him. To fly high enough to cross the trees was impossible. He had just enough strength to reach the top of an old pine, to its highest, gently descending branch. The branch bent with the weight of the falcon, then straightened and rocked a little up and down.

Avian instinct caused the local birds to become very quiet—a gerfalcon, a hunter, was among them. So long as he was around, better make themselves inconspicuous, keep mum and stop their hopping from branch to branch. For his part the gerfalcon, king of the birds in the mountain woods, was well aware of all this. It sometimes happens that bird life seems to disappear—because none dares to feel free when there's a falcon about. That is a rule of birds; the young gerfalcon had forgotten it, but now he remembered what this sudden silence meant.

The silence was unbroken for a long time.

It was broken in the end by distant barking, barking that continued and approached. The sound came from back there, from the ground—that was no bird. Why, of course, that black four-legged shadow of the master had run ahead of him. What did he want here? He kept jumping up at the tree, wanted to climb it, seemingly. Ugh, how angry he was, his eyes blazed, his mouth was wide with the tongue hanging out, dripping saliva. Disgusting!

Then came the two men. How had they caught up, after being left so far behind? But he still had time. While they were at a distance he would be able to fly away. If they tried to climb, the branches would never support their huge bodies. No, he would not let himself

be caught. They could not fly, they had to keep to the ground, walk with their two legs and four legs, top-top, pacing off the ground, first one foot in front, then the other. They wouldn't catch him. As Konchoi rode, the barking told him which way the falcon had gone. So they came to the pine at the top of which their falcon sat. Konchoi had lost his temper, he didn't even call the bird but told his son, "Up with you! Quick!"

After a good deal of effort the son reached a branch near the end of the dangling leash. He settled himself firmly, reached out his hand—too far. He tried with his whip handle—no good He broke off a branch and with that he drew the end of the leash within reach. The young gerfalcon started at the crack of the breaking branch and wanted to fly over to another tree, but it was too late, the leash pulled him inexorably down. He struggled, worked his wings to rise, rise, rise, but no, he came right into the hands of the humans.

8

In the morning Konchoi walked from one end of the village to the other. He needed Asanaly, he was afraid to perform *tirnye* alone on the young gerfalcon. After all, there was nothing to be ashamed of if he asked a fellow-villager to help him. They were both elderly men, the same age. They often bickered? Well, it wasn't he who said unpleasant things but Asanaly. And anyway, where'd you find people who were always on the best of terms, without a single harsh word? But this wasn't what worried Konchoi. He would have to persuade Asanaly, who was sometimes difficult, to come to his house and perform the *tirnye*. If he carried the gerfalcon through the village there'd be malicious talk. And if anything with the bird didn't go right, didn't go as it should with proper falconers, the village would never let him forget it, he'd be a laughing stock forever. No, let Asanaly perform the *tirnye*.

"Come in, come in, greetings, Konchoi-bai," said Asanaly warmly, rising from the thick felting that lay on the floor. "Come in here, where have you been keeping? You've never come to see me, and now at last you're here."

"Oh, I just thought I'd look in," answered the forester calmly. "How are you, how's your family, how are your livestock? I happened to be walking through the village, and thought I'd like to drop in on my old falconer friend."

"And you are an honoured guest. If we ourselves do not honour one another, then who will, who needs us, eh, Konchoi?" Then without further ado, "What are you doing with the falcon? Have you tried him with a live lure? Isn't it time?"

"A bit early, I think," Konchoi mumbled. He moved his cap down over his eyes with his right hand and scratched the back of his head with his left. Then he moved the cap back. "He doesn't go for the live quarry, understand?"

"Yes, you've delayed too long, what did I tell you? The bird was affectionate, there'd have been time to train him. A pity you wouldn't let me have him, obstinate cuss that you are. A splendid bird."

"I'm afraid I shan't get anywhere with him without tirnye, I've decided to do it. But I need your help, I've never done it myself."

"Eh, I thought as much, you wouldn't find any other way. ..

Now look, he'll remember it all his life. They understand everything, you know, even though they're not human. You have to go carefully with them. He'll be afraid of you afterwards, likely hate you, too. I say again, wait, be patient, then you can take him out to the fields after his moult. What difference does it make, now or a bit later, if only he's trained right. Don't be in a hurry, he'll reward you afterwards—there'll be plenty of time to eat your fill, there'll be booty enough. Don't hurt him, I beg you."

"I'd try doing timye myself but I haven't anybody to hold him properly. Asanaly, don't refuse, come."

"No. And even if I come I won't do any tirnye. You know yourself I'm no good at hurting anything. How can you torture him? A falcon's like your brother, your son."

Asanaly stopped and stared at the pattern of the carpet. Konchoi—look at him; he argued and made as though he knew it all. A real falconer seeks the way to the bird's heart, whereas all Konchoi wanted was a bird which would do his will. Make it like his dog. Or like himself. Give the bird his own cupidity and unsociable ways. What good could ever come of that?

"You—!" Against all custom, the forester got abruptly to his feet. "If I asked you for a stone to kill a snake you wouldn't give me one. I've seen that today."

"Where are you going? The tea's ready, my old woman's been busy in the yard."

But Konchoi was no longer in the room, was not even in the yard. Asanaly got to the gate in time to see him rounding the corner of a neighbouring house. Taken offence and gone off in a huff.

When Konchoi dashed into his own house his sons were not at home, only Saikal. He decided not to wait for them.

"Hey, woman, find me the tail hairs of that horse we slaughtered for the winter!"

"Here you are," and she held out the skein, "is anything wrong?"

"Give me needles and bring me some undyed silk thread." That too was brought.

He got out a tiny sheep-bell the size of his thumb-nail.

"You can't take a bird near the forest without a bell," he condescended to explain to his wife. "Here, thread the needle. Silk and horse-hair don't poison the blood."

Saikal used a needle to thread the silk through the eye of the bell while Konchoi threaded the other needle with a horsehair.

"Come along."

The young gerfalcon was sitting on the woodpile in the yard. He was glad to see Konchoi, he bated hopefully and his eyes sparkled, but the man did not look at him and did not show him food. He approached, sought a conveniently large log among the scattered logs and twigs, and with a jerk of his head summoned Saikal to sit beside him. Then he reached out for the leash on the ground, pulled it roughly, brought down the bird and placed him on his right knee. The young gerfalcon felt the man's brutality at once. One hand gripped his wings painfully, and then he felt himself turned on to his back, legs helplessly upward. The bare hands gripped him hard, harder, so that he could not move. Something pricked him beneath his tail. It hurt. Badly. His toes curled involuntarily and the long sharp talons interlaced.

Before he had time to realise what was happening, a hand grabbed his head roughly. He had time to see by his right eye something like a long thorn, sharp and white. The hand brought it close, closer, it grew to a twig, no, a straight round branch which suddenly touched his eye!

How it stung! The terrible pain! Fly! Get free!

Again it pierced! And again!

Get away! Even on his feet!

He hissed. His toes curled until his talons were rigid. His beak was so tightly clamped that it seemed ready to crush his tongue. And the pain grew worse.

Un-en-dur-a-ble!

He felt the twig dragged through the pellicle, in and out. After stitching it from the end to end the twig remained there, shutting off the whole eye. The falcon rubbed the eye against the pellicle, forming tears, big red tears. But the twig remained. And the pain remained, agonising. The eye closed.

The hand turned the falcon's head on to the other side. Again the pale thorn. The same twig.

He could not move. He called piteously, "Tsok! Tsok!"

The thorn touched the pellicle of the left eye. It pierced it. Pain!

Again, the pain grew worse. Fly. Even run!

No, he only wanted to lie there, his crop and breast on the ground, to stretch out his neck and stay like that, forever, to die, if only that agonising pain would go.

Let tears of blood flow, let darkness cover his eyes, if only the pain would ease!

And then he wanted nothing, not to fly, not to run, not even to lie stretched out, neck, crop and breast on the ground. From his eyes to his tail he was only pain.

"Well, you see, old woman, we've managed it all right ourselves, without Asanaly." Konchoi was very pleased with himself.

After tirnye the falcon should be left absolutely alone for three days, and given nothing, neither food nor water. After that, Konchoi would draw out the horse-hair and gradually start feeding the bird. Racked with pain and hungry, the falcon would completely forget the past and become biddable. Show him a piece of red felt and he would come flying, asking. Starvation would reduce his weight, too, and that would be good for his flying. He would be hardy and bold, afraid of nothing.

Before the tirnye he had been startled if anyone coughed, but afterwards he wouldn't be afraid of man himself.

Let him suffer a bit, it would be all the better for him afterwards.

The next day the gerfalcon knew only two sensations, infinitely prolonged, oppressive and degrading—pain and hunger. His eyes would not open. Now and then large blood-stained tears would fall. The wounds sewn through with horse-hair had swollen, and the hair itself irritated. It was especially painful before sleeping. Birds tuck their heads under their wing to sleep, but the hair hurt him, sparks flashed before the closed eyes at any touch. So he had to remain on the tuur dozing a little, his head out as though he weren't a bird at all.

At last the day arrived when the man, instead of looking in from the doorway, came up to the gerfalcon, stooped, took his head firmly but gently in his fingers and with a sharp, very painful movement drew the horse-hair out of one eye, then the other. Again pink tears flowed.

As soon as the man's hands released him the falcon hopped to the ground and pressed his breast into the dark corner, his hooked beak against the wall. He could not fly away, the jesses held him.

And he could not fight man, man was too strong for him.

He must wait, patience! Avoid any other movement of those hands which brought such pain.

No struggle could lessen the fear and pain, that knowledge had now become part of him. The hot red tears slowly trickled down to his nostrils and he involuntarily shook his head; the walls, the wooden

tuur, the damp floor gradually soaked up the blood and tears, making brown patches which remained.

He felt, too, that his strength was draining away. He was constantly hungry. He wanted meat. Day and night, every hour. At last the man came with his leather glove and on it the head of a hare with the long ears and the fur. He recognised it at once—a hare. His eyes, though dulled, were still there.

Forgetful of the jesses the gerfalcon bated, but again they did not release him. He tried again, again, with the same result.

Meat! The hare!

The man came very close, his bare hand touched the bird's feathers, gently stroked from head to tail. And the gerfalcon with a strong jerk got free and flew beyond the boundary within which the straps held him. Two strong wing-beats and he was on the hare's head. He had got there, he trembled with the achievement and forgetful of falcon rules started tearing madly at the head, swallowing flesh and bone. And swallowed, swallowed.

"All right, that's enough, enough for the present," and the man cleverly made the remains of the head vanish.

Konchoi went to the tuur and placed the falcon on the perch. But he at once hopped down on to the floor. Doubtful what to do with his half-spread, drooping wings, he ran after the man.

It seemed that in a moment he would speak, demand that Konchoi surrender what he had not yet eaten. It was all wrong! Never before had a defeated and caught animal slipped away from the young gerfalcon's talons, never! His eyes were fixed on Konchoi's bare hand. It was all the fault of that hand. The bare hand had robbed him of his prey, his food. He glared at the hand. Self-confidence rushed over him. He wanted to fight that hand, fight and overcome. Tear his, his food from it. It might be only temporary, but hunger had overcome fear and the falcon no longer feared the bare human hand.

He followed Konchoi closely. His round eyes blazed. To plunge his hind talon to its full extent in that bare hand! But as though guessing his intent it rose and disappeared into a burrow of cloth hanging beside the man.

"Well, my bold hunter," said Konchoi, taking the falcon by the strap, "just another day, and then you'll eat all you want. Patience!"

9

Konchoi came to that same field, the gerfalcon on his wrist, Taigan running behind. More than once on the way the falcon asked to fly

when he saw a quarry, he was eager for any bird, once he almost flew at Taigan.

The falconer was pleased but a little apprehensive, the gerfalcon was desperately eager to fight, he would not spare himself, let alone any other. Put him at a mountain turkey and he would go for it, put him at a fox and he would fight that, too. Well, of course that was good. He would have to be kept hungry the same way, then Konchoi would be assured of good hunting.

With his left hand the falconer tested the lengthened leash and then touched the hare's ears. Hi, long-ears, hide for the present in the very bottom of the bag! The ears were warm and trembled. When a hand touched them the frightened hare fidgeted and beat with all four paws. Then Konchoi grasped it, pulled it out and threw it down. Taigan spotted it at once and expressed his eagerness to set off after him, but his master commanded, "Heel! Stop! Let it alone!" The hare was running, the falcon was straining to be off but the falconer held him until the hare was a shot's distance. Then—"Bismilla rahman rahim! Off you go!" And tossed the falcon into the air. Fly! Forward! Kill, kill, fall like a stone on the back of the running hare!

Konchoi had achieved his cherished aim, he was hunting with his falcon.

Everybody in the village was soon talking about his successful training. The young gerfalcon had surrendered to him. Every night he roosted on the tuur, unfastened; he was accustomed to it. And he was accustomed to wait for permission before taking off. During the hunt he no longer did as he wanted, he did not waste his strength but preserved it as his master wished, for as many hours as necessary. And he went after the quarry as his master directed. A most successful falcon and a most successful falconer. They returned from every hunt with three or four hares, with pheasants, with partridges. To bring down all that in a day took some doing. It required a high degree of concentration, and skill, and the ability to husband and expend strength—that was a fine falconer!

The place where they went hunting was not very far from the village. In the morning they would set out on horseback, leaving behind the people, the houses, every kind of building, the closed yards where horses stood under penthouses, dogs barked and poultry wandered about, and in the evening they returned to all that. The gerfalcon would not have minded sleeping in the forest, but the man was used to sleeping in a house inside a yard surrounded by four earthen walls. And the gerfalcon was now used to it, he understood that the man's wish for a house, to take cover behind walls, arose from fear, uneasiness in the night forest or the

open fields. The gerfalcon now found it quite natural that his master tried to make an end of the hunt and get back before nightfall.

After hunting the gerfalcon usually slept soundly. When they returned the man would take him into the old house and place him on the tuur; he was already nearly asleep. Grey dusk filled the place, whoever entered lost his shadow and became a shadow himself. There was peace here, monotony, all the perspectives were close, unchanging, familiar. The place where he realised how tired he was. He would get so exhausted hunting that riding back on the wrist he had not the strength to keep his wings neatly folded; he would only wait, half asleep, indifferent to everything, for the man to put him on the tuur. The partridges he had killed would have lasted him for several days. But no matter how many birds and beasts he delivered to his master, he was always hungry. It was seldom that he was able to eat his fill of the warm meat. When he did manage to peck the booty before the man arrived to take it from him, he was punished, for some time the man did not take him hunting at all, but left him to pine in loneliness.

He never refused the hunt, although he could feel that the endless work was draining his strength. But anything was better than languishing alone in the dungeon, longing for the freedom of the sky and flight; better exhaustion, if he could but have freedom, out in the light of the sun. Boredom drove him to work beyond his strength.

Although it was not only boredom.

In hunting with man there is that thrilling moment when the man himself throws the bird up as though nudging him into freedom. It is a wonderful moment—a leap up and you are away from the bare face, the acrid smell, the thundering voice and the soft—meat-soft—hands. And the fear of them. You are given over to the elements: the clear air, the wind that is caught by your wings and carries you to the height from which your keen vision takes in the earth and all that lives on it. There, a little animal is running as fast as its legs will carry it, frightened by your shadow, and you decide—yourself!—when the moment comes to stoop to it, bear down on it and feel satisfaction in its feebleness, its helplessness. In that satisfaction, that pleasure, lies the fierce joy of hunting.

Work, fight, conquer and at least for a time you can forget the bare hands and the bare face.

Another thing which made hunting attractive to the falcon was the sun, the bright, warm, beautiful sun which—unfortunately!—after riding across the sky all day vanished somewhere over the edge of the world. When he was free the falcon had often made huge circles,

going as far as the Cheshtyube Mountains and farther, to nameless mountains covered with wild forest, far from the hunting field. While he flew this great circle he saw the sun from morning till night. Now he could not allow himself these extravagant flights; if he went more than halfway up the mountain he would lose the direction of the hunt, the animal would escape, the master would be angry, and that meant sitting like a shadow on the tuur in the dark corner, longing for the brightness of the sun.

To fly was life and for him, a hunter, more than life.

To fly, then, meant to hunt. Despite anything.

When the sun and moon meet in the sky, it is a very special day for hunting birds. The whole of the previous night they are tormented by thirst, as though a fire burned within them. In the morning they fly down from their trees or rocky ledges to quench it with drops of dew. Migrating birds remain on the ground, and hunters refrain from killing. This is a law which must not be broken, as every falcon knows. On this sacred day they stay close to the place where they have spent the night, their aloof gaze fixed on the darkening part of the sky, then fly to some place with salty soil, for bitterness is soothed by the bitter. Their beaks are dry, so they alight by a stream or river, stretch out their necks, take a drop of the cold water, throw back their heads and feel the revivifying fluid pass down to the aching stomach to cool it. Or else they sit on a rowan or buckthorn or currant bush and tear off two or three ripe berries. But if any come across a deposit of salt soil, it crumbles under their talons and the birds carefully pick up a fragment so that it lies on the back of the tongue, where it promotes a flow of saliva until it is dropped.

But until the next sunrise, nobody ventures to hunt.

Already at midnight the gergefalcon felt the coming of the day when sun and moon approach. His beak was dry and there was a flame in his stomach. In the morning the man entered but the falcon showed no joy, nor did he respond to the call.

So the man simply went up to him and forcibly placed him on the glove although the bird gave every indication of unwillingness. What does a man know about the laws that govern birds!

So the hunter Konchoi, the falconer Konchoi, rode out with his falcon on his wrist; he was in a good humour, in anticipation of success, as usual these days, and as usual the black dog Taigan ran behind.

They crossed a low pass and descended the slope into a valley where there were hardly any people but plenty of wild life as the falcon very well knew. But surely—surely they were not going hunting today?

Suddenly the man threw him up after a cock pheasant.

Although birds might appear anatomically alike, they differ very widely in the pattern of wings and tail, therefore they fly at differing altitudes. Highest of all fly the berkut eagles, other hunting birds are below them and the rest of the feathered tribe fly low, some very low, just above the grass, or even run over the ground although they are still considered birds. These fall an easy prey to the talons of hunters. The high-flying birds soar through the sky, they are swift and strong and their wing-span is great. Nature has given them that advantage. And they use it for good, from the heights they carefully select their quarry, the weak and sickly, ridding nature of what cannot give strength to the breed.

But having become a hunter in the service of an avaricious man, the gerfalcon broke all avian laws and gradually became a predator, uncaring what he killed and why. He accepted his master as the embodiment of their evil rules and wished for one thing only—to stay alive.

He wanted to live. But all the same, when the day sacred for all birds arrived, the gerfalcon did not surrender to his master's will. It was not so very easy for him to refrain from attacking the stupid pheasant who had taken it into his head to fly on that day; the falcon gained the great height from which he usually fell like a stone on the slow cock pheasants. Once he was over it, it was easy enough to choose the line of his lightning attack, stoop, then with the big hind talon of his left leg slash the outstretched throat of the cock and with the right stab his back, then push off a little and soar again, see how well he had struck and where the pheasant fell. Then he would slacken speed and calmly descend to the struggling, dying body. There was no other end. But this time the gerfalcon slightly lessened the speed of flight, changing to hovering. The frightened cock worked his short wings, beating his sides, trying to maintain his round, plump body, covered with juicy meat, in the air.

The gerfalcon, too, worked his wings hard so as to gain speed for a long spiral. He rose high.

His spiral flight brought him again over the spot where the human hunter stood with his black shadow. The pheasant was not far away from them. He was amidst the bushes but he had alighted on a glade with thick grass. Cunning rascal, he had fallen and remained still, feigning death. He had not even drawn in a wing mixed up with the grass. Sly cock! Now he was a concentration of hearing—was the falcon stooping to him? He had dropped his head, his beak, neck and body were flattened, let none guess that he's alive. Well,

what now? Descend, show that the falcon is too clever for him? Or rise again? Up! Up!

He flew without haste, freely, elegantly. None who creep, who move only on feet, could ever climb up here. There was no need for haste. His natural behaviour had returned, with his whole being he remembered the half-forgotten laws of free falcons. And first and foremost—self control. Avoid timidity and avoid fuss and flurry. Suddenly something seemed to shut off the white eye of the sun, although it still shone on the world, it was not eclipsed. The falcon rotated his head a semicircle to look up. Above him a berkut eagle hovered, this was what had shut off the sun. The shadow had fallen on the gerfalcon and although it was only for an instant, to feel an alien shadow was unpleasant; he sensed a definite chill on his back. With a slight movement of the steering feathers of his tail he altered the direction of his flight and left the shadow.

But—how high he was, up with the eagles! The gerfalcon looked down. The forest was a single dark curly mass, the mountains were small, the river a hair. And the master? That huge creature was now a tiny object, an insect. A grain of dust. You couldn't even compare him with the trees, and they were like the hairs of a mouse's whiskers. There he stood on the same spot gazing up into the sky, watching the falcon's flight.

Why had he been afraid of him? He needed only to fly up, to look at him from here, where only falcons and eagles could rise.

The gerfalcon saw on the bank of the unevenly looping river a whitish salty patch. His inner knowledge told him that the sun had crossed to the other half of the sky. Slowly raising his wings he speeded his flight, slicing through the layers of the air currents at a sharpening angle so that they whistled through his wings and tail. The falcon was leaving the quarry. The forester stood, shading his eyes with his hand. Where was he going, where would he alight? He hovered, hovered, bathing in the air—you could have boiled a kettle while he hovered! Aha, he had flown to the salt patch.

Konchoi galloped there with all the speed he could make over the thickly overgrown ravine, but along the noisy mountain river he had to slow down. He kept calling his gerfalcon, calling, trying to make himself heard over the roar of the water.

They'll pay for themselves a hundredfold. All Taragai admires the falcon. I'm glad for your sake."

"They can talk, but a bird's a bird." Konchoi shrugged. "He wants his way and the man wants his. If you are harder and your hand stronger he will be more biddable and hunt better, that's always been known. You have to turn his nature inside out and put in on your fist like a glove, otherwise you'll get nowhere. Well, and so

what about it? I've trained him, and folks say right, he's turned out a fine hunter."

Asanaly understood; he knew that Konchoi had tried putting the falcon at a fox, it had been successful, and now there was no stopping him, he was in a fever of success and thought the success would last forever. But the falcon? He would just get worn out. Perhaps the fatal day of his last fight was not far off. But what did Konchoi care for the falcon? Falconer, indeed—all real falconers knew that a gerfalcon rarely kills a fox, his quarry are ducks, mountain turkeys, hares, badgers, marmots, even musk rats. Sooner or later he'd come up against a wily, experienced fox, and that fox would kill him.

"You haven't forgotten your promise, Konchoi-bai? If you sell the gerfalcon, then only to me. I'm ready to buy him, even though it's you who've trained him."

"Well, then—yes, I promised. I don't deny it."

"I grudge nothing for him, take what you will. Money or beasts, whatever you like. I don't sit with empty hands, praise be to Allah."

"We'll strike a bargain, Asanaly, we'll strike a bargain. But not now, wait till the end of this week while the frost holds. I'll keep the falcon till then, there are two more foxes out there, it's just the time to get their skins. Grand skins, splendid condition and colour—like a flame."

Asanaly was highly pleased. He had saved the falcon, saved it.

The gerfalcon's next hunt began while it was still night.

A piercingly cold east wind had thoroughly chilled the old house by dawn. The falcon shivered when the master entered, wrapped in a warm sheepskin which left only his face visible.

Konchoi put the falcon on his wrist and went out. The frost stung on all sides, but the falcon knew what to do in such cases. Like all birds he ruffled his feathers, letting them lie freely in apparent disorder on his back and sides, and fluffing out the down beneath. Little warmth is then lost, the icy wind passes over the upper layer and does not penetrate to the down.

Kept hungry as he was, the falcon at once guessed that a hunt was in prospect. He never left the closed room when he was full-fed.

As usual, the black fox-like animal ran briskly in front. Everything was white, but that was because of the snow, not - By a loop of the river there grew an old pyramidal poplar and at the very top of its thick crown the gerfalcon sat solitary, looking about with a free, clear eye, without guide. But gradually the eye clouded. Black Taigan ran round the poplar, barking threateningly. The falcon turned his sunken head right and left, watching the enraged dog.

His neck feathers rose, his wings sleeked for a stoop—attack, attack that wretched animal! His beak opened to let out bursting air in a hiss.

"Praise be to Allah! You have not forgotten your slave!"

So the black animal had conducted the master here.

Only a little while before, the falcon had tried a few of salty grains, swallowed three beakfuls of clear spring water and alighted on the tree to rest. And next thing, this black shadow was there. No, he wouldn't be able to avoid a fight, even on that day. Swoop, crush, beat, tear with his beak! Stop that beast following him. Make it let him alone! Stab that long back, hack it until it cracks and breaks. Let that black beast die, with his squealing and barking! But—on this day? When he even turned from the soft, tasty pheasant? The only thing one could eat of that beast was probably the liver.

No. Forbidden. Forbidden on this special day.

The master rode out of the thicket.

And things went on as before.

10

It was the height of winter, the time of the hardest frosts, the time when a fox's fur is at its best.

Konchoi was hunting with his falcon along the plain, the rolling foothills and the ravines by the Cheshtyube Mountains. One week he got two foxes, and what foxes! There were many in the village to marvel at the valuable skins. People began coming oftener to the forester's house, and on winter evenings over strong tea and rich soup they had plenty to say about Konchoi's success. They would meet him on his return from hunting with flattering words and certain hints about a part of the booty.

The fame of the falconer Konchoi grew. The manager of the Forestry sent his son for a skin, his daughter was getting married and he badly wanted a skin to make her a coat collar. The hunter sent a skin, and afterwards, going out into the yard, he found a two-year-old sheep tied to a pillar under the penthouse. Konchoi had decided not to name a price for the skin, let it be a bridal gift, the manager was not a man to haggle with; he would do far better out of an exchange of gifts.

"Salom aleikum, Konchoi-bai," Asanaly greeted the forester one day at the watering place. "They say that in your hands the gerfalcon had become a splendid hunter, brings down everything. There's only a wolf he hasn't killed and that's out of the question." Seeing Konchoi's face darken he added gently, "All the village praises you,

praises your efforts. And the sun, and the sky was dark, almost black like the master's dog.

They rode out. Konchoi too was cold, very. He need not have gone, of course. But what's the use of idling the short winter day away? Stay at home keeping warm? No, much better go hunting. Even if you don't get anything, you breathe the fresh air. And to tell the truth, his promise to Asanaly served as an extra stimulus driving Konchoi out hunting. The frost would lessen, foxes would go off to the mountains where there was plenty of food, as well as being safer. Try to find them there! And then—was greed for a fox the main thing? Allah was his witness, no. The main thing was that Konchoi had not hunted with his falcon enough yet.

Konchoi rode his chestnut up to the saddle, where he had a clear view of the smooth white slope opposite. The first thing he saw was his black Taigan; he had gone a long way from the smooth snow polished by the wind, to a slope of deep but evidently firm snow. And there in front, near a steep drop—Allah the Almighty, grant me success! It was like a running flame, a fox, and what a fox!

Konchoi's eyes blazed, the gerfalcon's eyes blazed. Then the falconer raised his wrist and tossed the falcon towards the fox, following on his chestnut with drumming heels and beating whip.

Away! Away! The hunt is up!

Konchoi galloped, the falcon flew and Taigan ran in a frenzy of eagerness.

Konchoi urged on the horse, called to the falcon, shouted at Taigan. They were backing up their master in an important job and the horse stretched out in a gallop, churning up the snow and stimulated to new efforts by his master's voice.

Only a dozen leaps separated the fox from the drop. It had outdistanced the dog, Taigan could not catch it.

The fox slackened pace to rest; he could see the man on horseback—too far away to worry about.

Suddenly, before he had a chance to see anything else, the fox felt a sharp blow from above and heard the whistle of wings. Even if he had had time to look up, the falcon was too close for him to swerve or dodge.

But he wasn't going to give in tamely.

He rolled into a snowdrift, gathering himself together, ready to slip right or left when the next blow came from above. The loud whistle of wings nearly deafened him. He jerked himself to the right but something strong and sharp struck his thigh and then that something grabbed his neck, squeezing from two sides, pulling his head towards his hind legs. He tried to jerk himself free and stretch, but couldn't. Another talon cut into the other leg. It hurt, hurt

terribly. He quivered. Snow and fur flew on all sides. The talons of the falcon's stretched legs encircled and compressed the lower part of the torso causing him agony, the fox wanted to howl, and there was the thunder of the beating wings in his ears.

He howled, howled like a dog, and then yapped like a dog. He struggled with all his strength to tear himself away from those talons.

The fox still had some strength left and he resorted to trickery, burrowing into the snow, raising a snow flurry to confuse the attacker.

But the attacker still clung to the back of the big, strong, fiery-red fox, he was kept there by his wings and the one foot which anchored him. All four talons gripped the thigh, pierced the flesh almost to the base of the metatarsus; they would not let the quarry escape, but the position gave the falcon no chance to break the spine. The talons of the other foot slid over the supple, agile body, scratching the skin but nothing more. Again and again the gerfalcon tried to pierce the skin, but the thick fur baffled him. Grey-sprinkled after his race through the snow, Taigan at last arrived at the battlefield, throwing up the loose snow so that it almost covered a small bush. He stopped to bark. This fight was no joke, both bird and fox were strong. Taigan decided to make the fox the target of his attack. According to the rules of hunting dogs he should go for the ear, if he could bite through the bone behind it any beast would collapse, even one much stronger. It was with that idea that Taigan attacked, but all he managed to grab was the tail. For the falcon, Taigan had spoiled everything.

The falcon had managed at last to get a grip on the fox's nape and was preparing to finish him off—and here, if you please, comes that black brute! Nothing had ever before interfered in his fights, even the master came only after the gerfalcon had killed. Why did this black shadow of the man, the very sight of whom sent the falcon's feathers up, come along now to help? Help?! Hinder, rather. When the dog attacked, growling, the fox gave a mighty jerk and freed his nape. The falcon's hold was reduced to the hind leg and the covering wings, while the fox faced the dog. They at once joined in struggle, the two four-legged animals. Just as though he were not there at all, as though he could just be ignored!

The enraged falcon fixed his eyes menacingly on Taigan. But Taigan had no attention to spare for him. Then with his third or second, or perhaps the big hind talon he pierced the dog's eye; something spurted and the falcon felt softness and warmth. Closing all his talons on the jaw which was clenched in unbearable pain, he brought them strongly together. The left eye was pierced through,

the dog could not see with it; he tore away from the fox, opening his mouth, slid out of the falcon's claws and thrust his head into the snow.

The fox twisted adroitly; the sharp pain behind his back was still there but the fox could feel that the strength causing it was weakening.

But the falcon had no intention of releasing his prey. He again rose and again attacked the dog, he seemed to be pulling him towards the fox, but the live huddle of two writhing bodies was of course too much for him. He pressed down on them, his two foes, and felt something pierce his belly. It was a fierce pain, similar to the one when the master stitched on the bell. He had no fear of battle, but he had of pain. Better not let it begin, if it did it would torment him endlessly. Release his grip?

The pain increased. It echoed thunderously in the depths of his body. The tendon between his legs cracked.

Fly, fly! Rise in the sky! Leave this place to those who cannot reach the heights!

But his talons would not relax, straighten, release what they held. They did not obey him. He called, "Tsok! Tsok!" That was his dying call.

The first to get free was the fox, he fled over the snow like a flying flame, his bushy brush sweeping a little snow over the bright red tracks.

Black Taigan, frantic with pain, dug up the snow with his paws and pulled backwards with his whole strength, trying to free his face from those talons. He dragged the bird with him, beaten by its wings which gradually weakened. Taigan bit, bit whatever came to his teeth, wing or crop. After the dog (or was it the fox?) had torn the belly of the falcon, their fight was won.

The falcon still held Taigan, no longer by the muzzle but by the fur on the right flank, he was still tearing with his beak, seeking the liver, but the outcome was clear. Writhing like a snake, Taigan freed himself and was able at last to use his big blood-dripping jaws. The sharp fangs tore at the body of the bird, there was the crunch of light bird's bones.

But Taigan could not bark his triumph, his bleeding eye-socket was agony. Plunging once more into the snow he began to whine, and then howled.

"Oh—disaster!" Konchoi alighted and stood motionless in the snow.

"What'll I do now? Where'll I ever find another one like that?"

So the falcon was killed by Taigan? Konchoi stumped heavily towards the battlefield. Frightened, Taigan jumped up and moved

aside, his jaws still gripping the falcon whose wings made vague patterns in the snow.

"Drop it! Drop it, curse you!"

The dead falcon lay on the clean snow, smoky light, like a piece of torn felting.

Konchoi stood in the centre of a circle spattered with blood and the traces of a fierce fight. Taigan whined and howled, plunging his face again and again into the snow.

Translated by **Eve Manning**

The Magazine

Soviet Literature 1985 (PP:62-106)

ISSN-0202-1870