



VINTAGE

The Undying Grass

Yashar Kemal

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About the Book

Turkey's greatest novelist, Yashar Kemal was an unsurpassed storyteller who brought to life a world of staggering violence and hallucinatory beauty. Kemal's books delve deeply into the entrenched social and historical conflicts that scar the Middle East. *The Wind from the Plain* trilogy is widely seen as his masterpiece, alongside the legendary *Memed My Hawk*.

Three men are caught in a triangle of politics. Memidik, a young hunter, is obsessed by an urge to kill the tyrannous headman, Sefer, who has caused him so much pain and humiliation. Yet, each time he tries, he is overcome by fear. Then the accidental death of another man in the community fires him with renewed determination. Sefer, meanwhile, is sentenced to solitude and the local champion, Tashbash, is invested with mythical powers.

The web of fantasy and intrigue spun around the villagers enmeshes them in plots of bravery and illusion in this extraordinary story of survival.

About the Author

Yashar Kemal (1923 – 2015) was born on the cotton-growing plains of Chukurova, which feature in his ***The Wind from the Plain*** trilogy. His championship of poor peasants lost him a succession of jobs, but he was eventually able to buy a typewriter and set himself up as a public letter-writer in the small town of Kadirli. After a spell as a journalist, he published a volume of short stories in 1952, and then, in 1955, his first novel ***Memed, My Hawk*** won the **Varlik Prize** for best novel of the year. His highly distinguished literary career continued in this vein; his work won countless prizes from all over the world and has been translated into several languages. Kemal was a member of the Central Committee of the banned Workers' Party, and in 1971 he was held in prison for 26 days before being released without charge. Subsequently, he was placed on trial for action in support of Kurdish dissidents. Among the many international prizes and honours he received in recognition of his gifts as a writer and his courageous fight for human rights, were the French **Légion d'Honneur** and the **Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger**, as well as being **nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature**. Kemal was Turkey's most influential living writer and, in the words of John Berger, "one of the modern world's great storytellers".

By the same author

MEMED, MY HAWK
THE WIND FROM THE PLAIN
ANATOLIAN TALES
THEY BURN THE THISTLES
IRON EARTH, COPPER SKY
THE LEGEND OF ARARAT
THE LEGEND OF THE THOUSAND BULLS
THE LORDS OF AKCHASAZ:
Murder in the Ironsmiths' Market
THE SAGA OF A SEAGULL
THE SEA-CROSSED FISHERMAN
THE BIRDS HAVE ALSO GONE

Yashar Kemal

THE UNDYING GRASS

Translated from the Turkish by
Thilda Kemal



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We would like to state that for technical reasons the names
Ömer, Ökkesh, and Ümmet are printed throughout the book
as Omer, Okkesh and Ummet.

*How day by day Memidik's anger grew within him
until it was past enduring*

Swiftly Memidik whipped the willow-leaf knife from its sheath. It flashed lightning-blue under the moon, tracing a wide arc through the air. He was like a rock-hawk ready to pounce on its prey. He gave a spring, then stopped motionless, rigid, his legs taut and quivering, his body heavy as an ingot of lead.

Moonlight swathed the trees and grass, the knolls and hillocks which seemed to be stirring, broadening and lengthening in the silvery brightness. A pale gloom filled vale and gully. The Anavarza crags cast their shadow upon the Jeyhan River, a molten silver sheen on the great wide plain, torpid, soundless, still, vanishing a while in the shadow of the crags then resuming its luminous meandering way.

The sound of footsteps crunching over the pebbles in the dusky creek drew nearer and the clatter of scattering pebbles echoed and re-echoed through the moonlit night. Sometimes the footfalls were faint and far and then they were ringing close in his ears. They stopped and in the sudden silence he heard the cracking of dry twigs as a nightjar hopped from branch to branch. Without warning a huge, tall shadow loomed into view alongside the stream and like a shot Memidik flung himself behind a bush. The shadow came onwards with a swinging gait. It grew taller and taller. It towered high, then stooped very low. It swelled, jumped, fell, rose then suddenly unfurled itself

upon the ground. And all at once it lunged at Memidik. He went limp. The knife dropped from his hand, leaving a tingling numbness. He bent down and groped for it among the stubble. His hands were shaking as though they would fly off. The knife gleamed briefly blue under the moon. The shadow was right before him now, a pair of long springy wide-striding legs, long black legs that came and went, came and went, blocking his view like a dark wall. Memidik's knees gave way and he crumpled down at the foot of the bush.

'Damn you knife,' he muttered when the shadow had vanished in the distance. 'Damn you, damn you, I've failed again.'

It was the same every time. Memidik's body, his hands and his feet would not obey him. And so he could not kill Muhtar Sefer. That snowy winter's day for instance. For how long had he lain in wait, behind the mulberry tree in front of Sefer's house, taut and ready to spring upon him, and then, when Sefer had come out at last, Memidik's body had gone to pieces, he had been soaked in sweat from head to toe ...

He crouched beside the bush, still trembling, but gripping the handle of his knife with all his might.

'I must kill him tonight. Tonight! Tonight's the last moment ... So long as that man lives I'm dead.'

The soles of his feet, his knees, his testicles ached suddenly, and a wave of nausea swept over him. Never could he get that beating out of his mind. Never, not for one minute ... He had endured it for the sake of Tashbash, the saint whose countenance was bright as clear water, who turned the night into day when he walked abroad with the seven poplar-tall balls of light in his wake, Tashbash who had vanished, gone to join the Forty Holy Men. It was Muhtar Sefer's henchman, Omer, who had beaten Memidik so cruelly. Afterwards for three months he had been nailed to his bed, passing blood. Was it possible to beat a man like

that – to within an inch of his life? Even that monster Omer would have drawn the line somewhere, but Sefer, Tashbash's sworn enemy, had egged him on. The neighbours had gathered at his bedside: 'Poor Memidik, he'll never pull through,' they had said. 'What a heathen that Muhtar Sefer is!' And how his poor mother had wept! Memidik had not died, no, but he had never been himself again. Never once had he been able to look anyone in the face after that, not even his mother. He had gone to hide his shame in the mountains and the steppe and had spent all his days hunting, for Memidik was an expert huntsman.

'I shan't ever rest as long as he lives. I'll kill him. And then I'll be able to look people in the face again.'

He had whetted the willow-leaf knife till it could sunder a thread at the slightest touch, and night after night, all through that snowy winter, he had lain in wait for Sefer with the knife freezing into his hand. Sometimes they would come face to face, but then that traitor body of Memidik's would start to tremble and the knife would drop from his hand on to the snow. 'It's the cold,' he told himself at last. 'Waiting in this freezing weather does this to a man. I'll kill him when we go down to the Chukurova for the cotton. I'll kill him there, on the very first day, so help me God.'

How sure of himself he had been, but now his body had failed him again! 'I'd better kill myself,' he muttered bitterly. 'That's the only thing left for me to do ...' But would he have the courage to do even that?

He started off following the way the shadow had gone. Two or three hundred paces farther he struck a patch of blackthorn bushes that bit at his legs and tore at his shalvar-trousers. The bitter smell of burdock filled the night, together with whiffs of mint and lungwort, of harvested fields and swamp. Wet scents in the wet night under a wet moon ... He felt better now and the strength flowed back into his body. He followed the narrow path

down to the creek then climbed up the bank. Beyond the bank was an old graveyard. Closing his eyes he turned away quickly and never opened them once until he was back down in the creek at the ford where the clear water spread over a wide, flat surface lined with white gleaming pebbles and the up-streaming fish glowed and sparkled as though about to leap out into the air.

And then he saw him. He was sitting on a boulder with his feet in the water. What wide shoulders he had! A giant's shoulders ... 'The Muhtar's not as big as that,' Memidik thought. 'God knows, it must be the moonlight that makes him seem so big ... People look four, five times as large in the dark. Maybe I'm ten times larger myself by now ...' The idea gave him fresh confidence. On tiptoe he drew nearer and nearer. He gripped the knife ready to strike but once again his body gave way and he sank to the ground shaking as though seized with ague.

In front of the shadow a large spangled fish leapt out of the water. Three times it leapt, its silver belly flashing under the moon. The man lifted his head. Then he threw a pebble at the fish.

Memidik's anger knew no bounds. Why did he feel so cold inside? Why was he trembling? Why couldn't he rise now resolutely and plunge the knife right into the man's heart as far as it could go? How his blood would stream into the water, staining it red ... And there he sat now, quite motionless, unsuspecting ... Now, on tiptoe, without making a sound ... A sudden cry: 'God, I'm done for!' ... The cry echoed and re-echoed in Memidik's ears: 'God, I'm done for ...'

He dragged himself to the edge of the stream and tried to drink, but his hands shook so that the little water he managed to scoop up spilled down his neck.

When he looked again the man was gone. He jumped up, not trembling any more, already running. He must catch Sefer now, this moment, when he had strength enough,

when he knew he could stab his dirty worthless body again and again and again without wavering. He rushed on, scattering pebbles to right and left along the shingle. 'Aaah, if only I could find him now ... Now ...' This time his hand would be firm, his body strong.

The soles of his feet and his toes ached where Sefer had burned them to make him come to after he had fainted under the blows ... How he had jumped up to the very ceiling of the room from the pain ... 'It's nearly a year since that day ...' He was talking aloud to himself. 'Ah, but he killed me. He really killed me on that day ...' An agonizing pain shot through his limbs. It was as though he were being beaten all over again and this happened to him whenever he brought that day to mind. A real pain held him spitted, writhing, holding his groin in both hands, rocking to and fro.

A light breeze sprang up and stirred him back to life. The moon had slipped behind the clouds. He heard reeds rustling somewhere. He turned and ran back along the stream. 'Sefer killed me! But I ... I'll kill him!'

At the ford he pulled up short, for there, less than fifty paces away, was the shadow sitting just where he had been before, his feet dangling in the stream.

'Now,' he said. 'While he's sitting there quite still, quite absorbed ... Now's the time.' But no sooner had he said this than his body turned to jelly. He dropped to the ground. Sefer had not moved. Three large fish leapt out of the water in front of him, their silver bellies flashing briefly. Then Sefer rose. He stretched out his arms until his whole body cracked and he began to walk. He stepped right over the crouching Memidik and passed on. Memidik could not lift the arm that held the knife, he could not even move. Sefer went his way and disappeared behind a thicket of plumbago shrubs.

'Damn you!' Memidik shouted. 'Damn you, my worthless body! What's the matter with me? But I'll do it yet, body,

you watch! Walk out on me as much as you like, I'll kill him yet.'

Suddenly Sefer was there again, sitting in his own place, casting pebbles at the flying fish. Memidik stared, and as he stared Sefer began to swell. He grew larger and larger before his eyes and Memidik's fear increased. 'There's something about this man, some mystery, some sorcery ... He just slips through your fingers like water. He's a devil, a jinn ... What can I do? I can't kill him, I can't!'

After all, who ever heard of killing a man just because he had given you a beating? 'Yes, but I can't look anyone in the face any more. I want to sink into the earth, out of sight. I can't even go near Zeliha and speak to her, let alone tell her ... Oh God, why can't I do it? Why am I so afraid?'

'Afraid? No, no, it isn't fear!' A voice sounded in his ear. He listened, but it had stopped.

They were face to face now, quite near, the distance between them wiped away. The stream babbled in their ears. The drone of a distant tractor filled the night. A car drove by. Its headlights swept over the Anavarza crags and caught them where they sat. Dazzled, they could not for a while see each other, or the flowing water, the rushes and the planetrees. Overhead a flock of birds glided through the light like a black cloud. Memidik was in the grip of a fever. His trembling increased. He could not stop it. He shook so much that his body ached.

Then the moon set. The earth drew a long angry breath like a sigh. It quivered, stretched and swayed, burning itself into Memidik's body. Sefer rose, towering in the darkness, and stretched his arms, his joints creaking loudly. His lifted arms were like a great eagle's wings spread out in the darkness. He took one giant step. Memidik could not escape, he could not stir. He was trapped between the huge long legs.

The planetrees filled the night, blotting out the sky over Memidik's head. The fish leapt three times over the surface

of the stream, three lightning flashes darted up into the sky. Sefer loomed over Memidik, growing larger and larger. Then he vanished.

A voice called from a distance: 'Hey! Hey, Memidik! Listen, is that you? What are you doing around here? Come now, talk to me. No one talks to me, no one at all, just because Tashbash has forbidden it. But Tashbash is not a saint ... If he were, would he have frozen to death like that in the blizzard? Tashbash is dead. Dead! ...'

Memidik stopped trembling. He jumped to his feet. He was like the rock-hawk ready to spring on his prey. He gripped the willow-leaf knife until the blood froze in his palm. 'Tashbash isn't dead!' he shouted. 'It's not a dream, it's true. It's true! He's not dead, I saw him. I saw him with the seven bright balls of light behind him. I saw him smiling in the dazzling brightness of the lights.'

'He's dead, my child, dead.' Sefer's voice was low, soft, insinuating. 'The lights are dead and so is Tashbash. Come talk to me. He's dead and gone. Lights can die too. The streams die, the earth itself dies ... Even saints die ...'

A huge figure, much larger than Sefer, rose before him like a wall. His arms swooped down on the night like a great eagle's wings and enveloped sky and earth. Memidik had no time to turn, no time to give way. The knife jerked and flashed, tracing a long flame-like arc in the darkness. It came and went, came and went, plunging into the soft flesh of the outstretched silent body.

From the tip of the knife, from Memidik's fingers, the blood dripped, dripped endlessly till break of day, seeping into the sandy earth.

*How Old Halil went looking for his fellow villagers
in the cotton fields of the Chukurova plain*

When it was time to go down to the cotton the villagers of Injejik provided Old Halil with a horse, an aged and scraggy one it is true, but still it carried him all the way down to the Chukurova plain. They even produced a real Circassian saddle for him, worn and tattered but yet soft and comfortable. Halil rode proudly erect at the head of the caravan, holding an old whip negligently over his left knee like a cavalier. He was overflowing with joy.

'Ah, these Injejik villagers ... They're what I call human beings. Not like those mean people at home who don't know my true worth. When I think of that old harridan Meryemdje, that vicious Muhtar Sefer, that simpleton of a Tashbash ... The things they did to me! Go back there? God forbid! Go to see those dogs again? Never!'

If only Meryemdje could see him now! If only he could meet with his villagers at a crossroads on the way ... How Meryemdje's eyes would pop out of her head! He whipped up the horse with pleasurable anticipation. All the way down to the Chukurova he nursed this hope, but not a single Yalak villager did he see. His riding a horse straight as a young shoot, the Circassian saddle, the whip, all were in vain ...

The villagers of Injejik had found work on a large plantation near Kösreli. The crop was plentiful this year, with every cotton boll blooming large as a fist and the whole plain white as though it had snowed.

Old Halil stared at the snow-white fields. 'How the world's changed!' he exclaimed. 'Why, if we'd had such crops in our youth, we'd have made a hundred kilos a day. Isn't that so, Jabbar?'

'It's progress,' Jabbar declared. 'Even the Chukurova man is taller now than he was. People here used to be no higher than your finger.'

'I could easily manage twenty kilos now, old as I am,' Old Halil observed happily.

'Me too,' Jabbar said.

It was at Injejik that Old Halil had taken refuge after fleeing from his home village of Yalak. How he had got through the Long Valley that pitch-black night without freezing in the raging blizzard, how he had found his way to Injejik and, what's more, to the very door of his old friend Jabbar, of this he recalled nothing, nothing at all. All he knew was that he had opened his eyes and there was Jabbar with his smiling face offering him a glass of warm tea.

'How did I get here, Jabbar?'

'That's what I was going to ask you, Halil ...'

'How long have I been here?'

'A full fortnight ...'

Old Halil had risen from his bed at once, and that very day all the villagers had thronged about him to hear his tale.

'Those Yalak villagers,' he began, 'they've all gone mad. Every one of them from seven to seventy, including Muhtar Sefer and Tashbash. As for that Meryemdje, she's raving mad. Don't be surprised if you hear very soon that they've flown at each other's throats and not a single one of them is left alive.'

And so he had rambled on, regaling the people of Injejik with comic tales about Yalak village. It was enough to mention the name of Yalak and Old Halil would start off. 'And what's more, Tashbash's words will come true,' he

concluded. 'Serpents, great big serpents will rain upon that village and devour every one of its inhabitants ... Meryemdje too. Even Tashbash himself ...'

The people of Inejik were curious. 'Who knows what those Yalakers had done to this poor old man for him to leave his home in the teeth of winter and almost freeze to death! Who knows ...'

Old Halil had ensconced himself beside Jabbar's hearth and he never stirred from the house. He started at the slightest sound. 'They'll kill me in the end, those vicious Yalakers, those pharaohs,' he kept saying as he cast anxious glances at the door. He forgot how to sleep and at least once a week he would take his last leave of the Inejik villagers.

'I came here to save my skin, to this land of milk and honey, with its purple crags, its cedars and black junipers, its fine, kind, friendly people. I thought I would be safe in the house of my dear friend Jabbar, who in his youth was just as good a horse-thief as I was. But it's no use, those Yalak people will kill me yet, you'll see. If not today, then tomorrow. Let me say farewell to you now, my dear friends. Ah, you don't know those vicious villagers! And all because I brought them down a little late for the cotton picking last year. It was their fault, for they would not give me a horse, and I ask you, how could I, old as you see me, walk down all the way to the Chukurova? So I didn't give the signal as I usually do, and when we did get there all the good fields were already being picked. They wanted to kill me, to tear me to pieces, but I ran away back to the village and hid in the grain crib. And then that worthless son of mine, that snivelly Hadji, found me and he went and told the others. So there I was, surrounded by a huge crowd, men, women and children, and in a twinkling they had stripped me naked and were building up a fire right there in the middle of the village, a fire as big as a threshing floor. They meant to throw me into the fire like that, stark naked ... Ya Allah! I

cried, and I made a dash for it. I ran with the whole of Yalak village at my heels, led by that queen of old whores, Meryemdje. I gave them the slip at last and made straight for my secret cave. Then I came to you. Now hide me, hide me well ...'

And so the winter passed. Against their better judgement the people of Injejik began to share Halil's fears. Every night they had visions of hundreds of men attacking their village and slaying first Old Halil and then all the rest of them. Summer came and went and still their fears persisted, much as they tried to make light of the whole thing. Thus it was that they left for the Chukurova a week earlier than usual. Yet the whole plain was already white with blooming cotton when they arrived. A white haze spread over it far and wide.

For the first time in maybe a year Old Halil slept a deep untroubled sleep. The east was lighting up when he woke. The sun had not yet risen, but the villagers were already in the fields, their hands working like machines. Without stopping to wash his face, without crouching down at leisure beside the stream, without even easing his bowels, without chewing the faintly-fragrant leaves of the tamarisk, as had always been his custom on the first day of arrival in the Chukurova, Old Halil hurried off to join the cotton pickers. His nimble hands, past masters in the art of stealing horses and breaking fetters, were just as quick at gathering cotton. By noontime his was the tallest mound of all. People stared at him with admiration.

'At his age, such speed!'

'At his age, such energy ...'

'Hard as the old earth ...'

For three full days he worked steadily, without ever once easing his bowels, to his heart's content on the Chukurova earth. In the middle of the night of the third day he rose from his bed and slipped stealthily through the tamarisks to where the gathered cotton was stacked. He went straight

to his mound and began to carry his cotton over to his friend Jabbar's heap. When he had done this he stepped back and gazed at the heap which towered high above all the others now. Then he turned and walked off quickly. He reached the road and plodded on, his bare feet sinking ankle-deep into the cool dust. He felt empty now, alone, deserted. As the sun rose, he felt a lump in his throat and shed a tear or two. Then he smiled. 'You're worse than a woman, Old Halil,' he scolded. 'A mere woman ...'

He saw a group of cotton pickers in a field close to the road and, judging from their clothes, guessed them to be villagers from the Taurus Mountains. It was very hot and he was bathed in sweat. The labourers were sweating too. He greeted them. They looked up, then bent down again, absorbed in their work.

Rebuffed, Old Halil appealed to an old man among them. 'Brother,' he said, 'can you tell me something?'

The old man straightened up: 'What is it, friend?'

Old Halil smiled, then his smile faded and his face grew bitter. 'Have you ever heard of Yalak? That's my village. Old Halil they call me there. I'm looking for my villagers. Do you know if they're picking anywhere around here?'

'Are you Old Halil?' the old man exclaimed with a mixture of surprise and awe. 'Are you the Old Halil who could pry open the strongest hobbles, break down the stoutest doors, and even make away with the horse of the Shah and the Padishah?'

To be remembered again like this ... Old Halil was overcome. His throat grew tight. 'That's me,' he blurted out, then he turned and fled.

The old man and the other labourers left their work and stared after him. He never slowed down, not even when he was on the road again. Tears ran down his cheeks. 'Old Halil, the eagle of these mountains! To come to this ... What a cruel, cruel world, one without mercy ...'

A young man was coming up the road, a robust youth who walked at a tearing pace, raising clouds of dust. His shirt hung unbuttoned over his black hairy chest. Old Halil looked enviously at his tall sunburnt body and thought, 'Eh, Old Halil, to think you were like that once! Now nobody pays any attention to you. You're not even important enough to kill. But I'm going to set fire to that village and burn it down to ashes. We'll see if they think I'm unimportant then!'

'Hey, brother,' he called.

The young man looked at him. His face was hard, confident, angry, but the lock of hair that fell over his forehead gave it a boyish air.

Old Halil's heart was thumping. 'Thank you for stopping, wayfarer ... Thank you ...'

The young man unbent a little. His breathing came hard and he was sweating.

'I'm Old Halil, you know, from Yalak village. D'you know where my people are picking cotton?'

The young man scowled. 'Never heard of Yalak in my life, so how should I know where those people are working!' He waved his hand as though brushing off a fly.

'Are you telling me you've not even heard the name of Old Halil, who could steal the horse of the Shah and the Padishah and of the great outlaw Köroglu himself? Who could break the strongest hobbles and unlock the stoutest doors?' He looked wistfully into the angry green eyes.

The young man was astounded. Then he smiled. 'Never heard of him,' he said good-humouredly. 'Never seen a horse-thief. Don't even know what a hobble is.' He waved his hand again and strode off. His hands were black with machine grease and this did not escape Old Halil's eye.

'Look at him!' he cried. 'Just look at that big braggart with his dirty greasy hands. Never heard of Yalak village, he says! Nor of Old Halil. Look at that ass who doesn't even know what hobbles are! Well, my lad, you won't go far in

the world with that head of yours. You'll just go on bumming along the roads like that, all by yourself, filthy with grease from top to toe. Teh, look at you! Bumming on the Chukurova roads is all you'll ever do!'

He went on railing until he saw a cart coming his way. The driver was a youth who looked no more than sixteen. He was holding a bunch of grapes and popping them into his mouth, one by one.

He drew the cart up beside Old Halil. 'Hop in, uncle,' he said. 'Come, let me give you a lift.'

Old Halil got in with the nimbleness of a youth. One of the horses is a chestnut, the other a grey, he thought. That means luck. Then he chided himself: Now where did you go and fetch that one from, Halil? ... Yet, who knows, it might be a lucky pairing of colour after all. There's so little we know about this world. Who can say what brings luck and what doesn't? ...

The young man offered him a bunch of grapes and went on eating in a leisurely way. Old Halil glanced at him and set about eating his grapes in the same fashion.

'Where are you coming from, uncle,' the youth asked. 'And where are you going?'

Somehow Old Halil could not bring himself to say, 'I'm Old Halil. I'm looking for my fellow villagers.' He did not feel like spoiling things for he had taken to this youth with his bright, candid eyes, his warm friendly face, his sun-bleached hair hanging out from under his dusty cap. Anger stormed through him again. If there had been but one youth like this in his village ...

'I'm on the run,' Halil said. 'They want to kill me, friend. They want to drink my blood, to flay me. My enemies are cruel ...' He embarked on his story, how they had stripped him naked and were going to throw him into the fire, how he had escaped by the skin of his teeth and taken refuge in the village of Injejik. Then he described the Injejik villagers. 'I woke up. It was black midnight. Five men, five

giants were looking for me. Oh my God, five dreadful shadows prowling in the night. "Let him be," one of them said, "he's only a poor old man who's taken refuge in our village." "We can't," another said, "we've promised the Yalak villagers. He must be killed." Without waiting another second, I slipped into a clump of bushes nearby. They came and looked at the place where I had been lying. I rolled on from bush to bush, from rock to rock, and towards morning I reached the road. I've been walking like this till you came along and let me ride in your cart. Ah, you won't be the worse for it, my child. The prophet Hizir is always ready to hold out his hand to good people. He's going to help you, I can tell you that. How do I know? Because it happens that one of your pair is a chestnut and the other a grey and that spells luck.'

'Where will you go now, uncle?' the young man asked.

Old Halil hesitated. Then he laughed. 'I'm looking for a place where death doesn't exist, a place death cannot reach.' His face changed and his lips trembled.

'A place death cannot reach?' The youth was puzzled. 'Where can that be?'

Old Halil laughed again. 'Ah, if I knew that, I'd go there straightaway.'

They finished their grapes in silence.

Old Halil was still fretting, unable to make up his mind whether to ask the youth about the Yalak villagers or not when he saw a group of cotton pickers in the distance. He jumped out of the cart. 'I'm going to those people over there,' he said. 'Maybe death doesn't come to them.'

The youth picked a large bunch of grapes from a basket and handed it to him. 'Take this,' he said. 'You're very thin. At this rate death will soon catch up with you.'

'Go in peace my child,' Old Halil said as he took the grapes. 'May you never encounter a stone on your path. You're a good boy.'

He walked off at a rapid pace in the direction of the cotton field.

3

How the village of Yalak went down to the Chukurova plain for the cotton picking

The thistles had come again, swept in from the steppe by the autumnal winds. They swirled, flame-red, through Yalak village, while the villagers bustled about in the usual feverish hurry of imminent departure. Everyone from seven to seventy was astir. Each year the same pandemonium reigned when the time came for the long trek down to the cotton plain.

In all this turmoil only one person remained aloof, a silent spectator drifting aimlessly through the buzzing village like a sleep-walker. No one paid any attention to him. People were too busy to see even the ends of their noses. The first to notice the strange behaviour of the man was the devout Okkesh Dagkurdu.

‘What’s the matter with you, Long Ali?’ he asked. ‘The village is setting out tomorrow before dawn and you’re not even making a move to pack. Aren’t you going this year? What about your debts? Adil Effendi will flay you alive if you don’t pay him back. He’ll come and seize every stick in your house.’

The news spread through the village. Long Ali not going down to the Chukurova! What could have possessed him? What ruse, what design had he in mind? He must have hit upon something more lucrative than cotton picking, and in the village itself too! What could that be? People racked their brains, but could find nothing that even by a long shot might be taken as a bread-earning occupation in Yalak

village. Then somebody voiced what seemed to most a very likely reason. Long Ali and Tashbash had always been the best of friends. Obviously Long Ali had decided to wait for the saint who could only appear to him when the village was empty and no one was about.

‘Our Lord Tashbash will come to Long Ali and bring him good fortune.’

‘That’s what Ali’s waiting for! And who wouldn’t when he has a powerful saint like that for a blood-brother? Our Lord Tashbash would forget his own wife and children, but not his blood-brother Long Ali.’

‘Saints never let their friends down.’

‘Long Ali’s right to stay here and wait for him. What’s more, when Tashbash comes he’ll bring fat and plenty to the whole village. Let him come ...’

After this people did not give the matter another thought and nobody bothered to ask Ali anything.

Long before daybreak the noise and shouting began in the village. The din was such that it drew echoes from the steppe and shook the very earth. After some time it stopped as suddenly as it had started and only the desultory clink-clank of pots and pans from the departing caravan came echoing faintly from the valley below.

Ali listened until the last muffled sound had died away. A lonely breathless silence settled over the village. He rose from his bed and went out. The night was bright with the moon. Clusters of crystal-red thistles growing between the houses stirred gently in the winds of dawn. He looked at the road that glinted down the valley like a thin pale stream and saw a cloud of dust slowly settling where the caravan had passed. Then he sank down upon a stone and remained quite still with his head in his hands.

Elif had not moved from her bed, but she was awake, listening to old Meryemdje’s groaning and moaning. At daybreak she went out and found her husband sitting on

the stone. 'Ali, Ali,' she whispered, shaking his arm. 'Get up!'

He lifted his head and stared at her. 'What is it, Elif?' he asked. His voice sounded bleak in the morning stillness.

'Your mother,' Elif said. 'She's been muttering and moaning all night. I heard her. Poor lad, she kept saying, because of me he couldn't pay his debts and was disgraced in the eyes of the world. And now this year too, he won't be able to pick cotton. His children will go naked and hungry, all because of me. I must kill myself ... That's what she kept saying. What do you think, Ali? She's a proud woman. If she says she'll do something, then she'll do it ...'

'I don't know.'

'If we stay up here I'm sure your mother will kill herself.'

Just then Meryemdje emerged from the house. They stopped talking and stared at her amazed. Her face was bright and gay, almost young; it was her face of twenty years ago. She held herself erect and even the staff in her hand looked out of place, obsolete. She planted herself before Ali.

'Look, look at me, my Ali,' she said. 'See how well I am! Isn't your mother as nimble as a young gazelle?'

'Yes, like a gazelle!' Ali said quickly. 'How did you do it, Mother? Have you drunk of the water of life? Like Köroglu's immortal white horse ...'

'Ah, Ali my child, you don't know your mother!' Meryemdje said as she executed a few skips. 'See? I can walk like this all the way down to the Chukurova plain and right up to the lake of Meditteranea itself. There's no need to remain here because of me. Don't worry. I'll not be a burden again. You won't have to carry me this time. Forget about last year. You must go. How can you stay here when the whole village has gone? Who ever heard of such a thing? Look! Look at me ...' She flung her stick down and began to run. 'Say mashallah. Mashallah! Strong as steel I am, my children ... Look, just look!' She was gasping now,

but still unwilling to give up. 'You see ... You saw! Like a *jereed* horse, that's how I'll go down to the Chukurova. Last year I was a burden to you, I know, my good Ali, my brave child. But it wasn't because I was old or weak. It was because I was angry with that monster Old Halil. But now we're well rid of him! It'll be different this year ...' She swayed. Her breast heaved like a bellows. 'Never ... a burden to you ... Look ... look ... like a *jereed* horse ... start off ...'

She took another two steps, but her legs failed her and she sank down. Quickly she pushed herself up, tottered back to the house and threw herself upon her bed, half fainting.

Ali was touched. 'Mother!' he cried as he rushed after her. 'Don't distress yourself. It's not because of you I'm staying here. I can swear that on the Koran, on my children's heads ...' He spoke in her ear as though confiding a great secret. 'Wait, listen and I'll tell you. There's something ...' He paused and looked about warily. 'I'm going to tell you my secret, Mother, but mind you don't give it away, not to anyone on earth, not even to the birds and beasts ...'

Meryemdje's brow cleared, her breathing came more easily. Her dim eyes brightened and colour returned to her face. She was all attention.

'It's because of Tashbash,' Ali told her. 'I've decided to wait for him here. Maybe he'll come back to us, and as he's a saint now, he'll be able to help us and make our lot a little easier. And then there's Spellbound Ahmet. I want to see him too ...'

Meryemdje sat up and glared at him. 'Are you trying to fool me? Me!' Then she sank back on to her pallet. 'Aaah,' she sighed, 'Tashbash is just like you and me, born of human flesh. And as for Spellbound Ahmet ... Who knows where he's roaming now, the poor crazed lad ...'

'Well, there you are! I'll wait for him here. And then ...'

A thin scornful smile flitted across Meryemdje's lips. Ali saw that she was not to be so easily convinced. He had to think of something else. He rose and began to pace the room. Suddenly he stopped short. His hands locked behind his back, he took up a triumphant stance and gave a peal of laughter. Meryemdje looked at him pityingly as at a child.

'Mother,' he whispered in a mysterious voice, 'shall I tell you the truth? Why I don't want to go down to the cotton this year? Guess. Come now, guess.' He laughed. 'All right, I'll tell you. It's because I've found out there's no cotton to be picked this year. All the crop has been eaten up by worms, and what with the drought, even the streams have run dry in the Chukurova. Not a green thing to be found anywhere. So why follow those stupid villagers and go through all that bother for nothing? Just you wait. You'll see how they'll all be back in no time with empty hands and sore feet, exhausted.'

Meryemdje propped herself up on her elbows. 'Let's go, my child,' she said. 'It's not good to stray from the flock. There may be no cotton, no rice, the streams may run dry and the earth be burnt to cinders, but the Chukurova's still the Chukurova, rich and bountiful. We must go, my child, we must. And without delay ...'

'Well, I won't!' Ali burst out. 'I'm not mad. Waste land, that's what the Chukurova is this year, waste barren land. We've got plenty of that around here as it is, haven't we?'

Meryemdje fell back and moaned: 'But we must go! It's not good to break with the old customs. Waste land or not, even if we have to die on the way, we must go ...'

Ali's arms dropped to his sides. Suddenly he flung himself out of the house and rushed out of the village towards the grey undulating steppe. Wave after wave of screeching birds went sweeping by over his head. Red whirling thistles streamed through the air like the birds, wave after wave. Beyond the hill he knew of a solitary place where a meagre spring trickled out from the foot of a leafless tree which no

one had ever identified, but which had always stood there, bald and decrepit. He passed over the crest and through the valley with its blue earth dotted with red and yellow flowered thistles, and came to the old bare tree. He leaned against its trunk and closed his eyes, but the grey and blue earth, the red whirling thistles, the white clouds, the screeching birds, the whole world kept spinning in his head. An irresistible impulse seized him to run and leave everything behind, his home and children, his mother, the murmuring spring and the howling whirling red-thistled wolf-haunted steppe. A sharp pain stabbed knife-like at his body. He opened his eyes and ran on to the next hilltop. From there he could see down below the white road that wound down to the Chukurova. It was swathed in mist, and the sight reminded him of the sea as he had first seen it, vast, overpowering, with a salty tang that was like the smell of the steppe.

He sat down and did not stir until well into the afternoon. In the recesses of his mind, somewhere very near to his heart, images of the Chukurova began to emerge, the distant sea, cotton fields and rice paddies, greasy tractors, hundreds and hundreds of barefoot ragged labourers migrating down the dusty roads, shiny new cars, the smell of petrol. The anguish in his heart lessened. Instead a longing took hold of him. He pressed his hand to the warm earth and gazed at the dust-swirled road. A strong wind was blowing in the direction of the Chukurova, whipping up dust-devils and sweeping them on into the green and blue and mauve of the distant forest. And beyond was the Chukurova with its cotton fields, its teeming roads ... A warm smiling rosininess slowly suffused his sallow, unshaven face. He dashed down the slope and ran all the way home.

‘Elif!’ he called out breathlessly. ‘Elif, come here.’

She appeared on the threshold at once and was startled by the expression on his face. He drew her away to the farthest corner of the neighbouring house.