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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The BAGHEETA

by Val Lewton



THE church bells of Ghizikhan pealed out slow, lazy music to mark the end of the morning prayer. Kolya turned his head idly to look at the village. From his vantage-point in the open porch of the armorer's shop where he was engaged in polishing the swords and other weapons which his uncle had chosen to place on display that day, Kolya could see the entire length of Ghizikhan's single street. It was early and the long shadows of the Caucasian peaks fell like dark, irregular bars across the valley. Only through the gap between Mount Elbruz and the volcanic peak of Silibal came sunlight, falling squarely upon the village. In this pleasant light the folk of Ghizi-

khan went about their early morning tasks. At the well the maidens jostled one another, giggling as they drew up water. Kolya's eyes, although he had just grown to manhood, avoided this group, but turned with interest upon the shepherds who were having a last, long draft at the inn door before going on to relieve the men who had guarded the flocks through the night hours.

It was a sight that Kolya could see any time, and, yawning, he turned back to the task in hand, the scouring of a new sword blade with water and white sand. Diligently he worked the scouring-cloth back and forth, his long, fair hair falling down over his forehead as he bent to the task. Of a



"The eyes were yellow, and burning as the burnished brass of the altar rail."

C. C. SEINE

sudden a cry went up at the other end of the village, and Kolya's head was upflung as if by magic.

Two men were running toward the inn. Between them they carried a shapeless bundle. Kolya could only catch the colors of the object—red and white. As they ran they cried out: "A Bagheeta! A Bagheeta! We have seen her!"

Kolya identified the burden which they carried between them. It was a

sheep, torn to death by a panther. Dropping the scouring-cloth, Kolya ran to where a knot of men had gathered about the two shepherds. He forced his way toward the center of the crowd until he could hear the words of one of the men: "—black as wood from a fire, bigger than any natural leopard—a monster, I tell you! Varla and I came upon her at her meal. With my own eyes I saw her—you can measure for yourselves

—from here to here," the shepherd indicated a huge, bloody rent in the flank of the slain sheep, "she took one mouthful. A real Bagheeta—I swear it!"

The men around him crowded closer to see the evidence. It was true; an enormous mouth had made those long gashes in the carcass.

The *hetman* of Ghizikhan, pulling at his virgin beard, questioned the shepherd: "Fool, what did you do? Did you let the beast escape so that it may enjoy such a feast as this from our table whenever he wills it?"

The shepherd protested: "It was a real Bagheeta, I tell you, *Hetman!* What could we do? Varla shot at her, but you know that no bullet can harm a Bagheeta—not even a silver bullet. She just snarled at us and walked away."

"Walked away?" the *hetman's* tones were dubious.

"Yes, *Hetman*, I have said it so: walked away, just turned and walked away. She knew we couldn't hurt her. Both Varla and I are married men, you know!"

"Aye, *Hetman*, I believe them." It was Davil who spoke, Davil the old minstrel, who in his youth had killed a Bagheeta. "This Bagheeta must be the same leopard we hunted all these last three days. If it had been a real leopard its skin would have been drying on the walls of your house by now, *Hetman*, but only a pure youth who can resist her blandishments can kill a Bagheeta. You must select a pure youth to hunt down this were-beast—a real St. Vladimir, pure of heart as a virgin."

"Nonsense! These are old wives' tales, falser than your rimes, Davil," Rifkhas the huntsman, whose very garments smelled always of the forest, spoke out heatedly. "What is this beast, you say—a black leopard? To the east, beyond Elbruz, they are as common as black crows are in our land! It was the hard winter and the heavy snows which have driven

them here. One good shot from my old rifle and your Bagheeta will be deader than the sheep he's killed. Do not forget, Davil, that I too have killed one of these black kittens, and with a rifle and a lead ball—I saw no signs of magic or sorcery.

"I have grown sick of these old lies which send our young men frightened into the forest. Believe me, it is safer in the forest than before the coffee-pots in the *khan*. King God has made man lord above the beasts and they all fear him."

But by now the women of Ghizikhan had swarmed to the scene of the excitement, and their loud outcries drowned out the old huntsman's logic. Shrill voices explained the myth to those too young to know the significance of a black leopard among the spotted ones.

It is a were-beast, they said, half leopard and half woman, the reincarnation of a virgin who has died from wrongs inflicted upon her by sinful men, and who comes again to the world so that she may prey upon the flocks of the sinful. Only a pure youth, one who has lain clean and alone, can hope to slay the mystic beast. He must ride out against the Bagheeta with only a sword at his side and a prayer to King God upon his lips. The Bagheeta, so the women said, will change at his coming into a beautiful woman and attempt to coerce him into an embrace. If she is successful, if the youth kisses her, his life is forfeited. Changing again into a black leopard, the Bagheeta will tear him limb from limb. But, if he remain steadfast in his purity, then surely will he slay the beast.

KOLYA listened eagerly. It was not the first time he had heard the legend. When they had done talking he looked again at the dead sheep. The bloody, mangled flesh, bearing clear marks of the enormous fangs which had rent it so hideously, sent little shivers up his spine. He had

often heard Davil sing his song of the slaying of the Bagheeta, and standing in the warm sunlight, Kolya grew cold thinking on the dark forest and the dark beast, only its golden eyes visible in the night. He could see vividly the heavy, crushing paws, the curving claws, the red and rending mouth.

Suddenly the *hetman's* voice rang clearly above the chatter of the women: "Who among the *Jighitti*—the good, brave horsemen of our village—is pure of heart and free of sin? Let him stand forward, sword in his right hand!"

A silence fell upon the villagers, and all eyes were turned, first to the face of one youth and then to the face of another. All upon whom the eyes of the villagers fell turned blood-red and averted their faces.

The *hetman* grew impatient. He began to call the young men by name: "Rustumsal? What! And you but sixteen! Fie upon the women of Ghizikhan! Valodja? Shame! Badyr? Shamy! Vanar?"

All shook their heads.

Then Kolya, his heart pounding with excitement, stepped forward. In his right hand he held his sword, a silent declaration of his intention. Behind him he could hear his mother shrilling: "*Hetman*, he is too young! It is but yesterday that he rode in the *Jigitovka*. Only two days has he worked as a man among men."

The *hetman* paid no attention to her.

Bending forward so that he might look into Kolya's eyes, he asked: "How old are you?"

Kolya answered sturdily: "Sixteen."

"And you have never laid yourself down beside a woman, nor lusted after her with your eyes?"

"No," said Kolya.

The *hetman* doffed his *karakul chapka* and with it still clasped in his

hand, pointed to Kolya. A shout went up. Kolya the orphan, nephew of the armorer, had been chosen to hunt down the Bagheeta.

AN HOUR later the men of the village, accoutered as if for war or holiday, rode out from Ghizikhan in a long cavalcade. Kolya, dressed in his best *kaftan* of Burgundy-colored silk, a sleek black *chapka* set jauntily on his head, and wreaths of flowers about his horse's neck, rode at their head. At his side hung the best sword from his uncle's shop. The Silver Maid, his uncle called it, and for no price would he sell it, neither to prince nor commoner, saying always: "Only by the grace of King God was I able to forge such a sword. One can not sell God's gifts for gold."

Beside Kolya rode the *hetman*, and behind them the two old enemies, Davil the minstrel and Rifkhas the huntsman, wrangling as they rode.

"I have lived in the woods my whole life," the huntsman was saying, "and not one, but many of these Bagheetas have I seen killed with bullets. The Russians pay well for their black skins."

Davil silenced his arguments with a burst of song:

"I ride beneath the silver stars,
All in my war array;
I ride beneath the silver stars
To break Bagheeta's sway.

"The stars are bright and bright am I
Clad in my war array.
The land about does gloomy lie,
And Bagheeta's sway.

"I ride with flowers in my hair
And grim sword at my side,
Among the youths I am most fair
And in war foremost ride.

"To me unknown a maiden's wiles:
For see, my heart is pure.
God looks upon my head and smiles:
For see, my heart is pure."

"Blah!" said Rifkhas, spurring his horse a bit so as to catch up with Kolya and leave Davil to ride by him-

self, singing the song which he had composed many years ago in celebration of his own victory over a Bagheeta.

Kolya heard the song behind him go on and on as they rode forward to where the shepherds had seen the leopard.

"Unfeared by me the Deva's call,
The war's grim chance of death,
But here soft footsteps thud and fall,
And quickly comes my breath."

The lad shuddered. He could well imagine the sinuous body of the beast, black as the night it walked through, creeping through the tree trunks in the forest. How dark the forest would be after the moon had gone down! Kolya's horse quivered. It was as if his master's agitation had been conveyed to her too, and that she also knew of the trial ahead of them.

Davil's song went on:

"Of death alone I have no fear,
Nor yet of sword hurt deep,
But now a silent move I hear,
From darkness gold eyes peep.

"My brave horse trembles in his fear,
And tighter grows my rein.
Somewhere from night two gold eyes
peer
And mark his frightened pain."

A restive horse in the darkness of the midnight forest; a silent and unseen foe, waiting to leap from ambush, to strike one down with huge paws, to rend one with enormous teeth; Kolya could almost smell the fetid, hot breath which was to issue from the gaping jaws. Yet all this must be true; had not the minstrel killed just such a beast in his youth? Was not this the very song inspired by the feat? Kolya gazed nervously into the green depths of the forest, crowding in upon the trail. Somewhere in its fastnesses was the Bagheeta, crouched, waiting, confident in its supernatural powers.

Rifkhas' voice was speaking to his ear: "I'm sorry that they're not let-

ting you carry a gun, lad. You could wait for the Bagheeta by the water hole. He must drink after his kill. Didst ever note how the cats go to the water butt when they have eaten a rat in the granary? These leopards, black or spotted, are but big cats; they too must drink after they eat. You could shoot the beast easily if the light were good. But these fools, full of old wives' tales, they make it difficult for you. When the good King God has given us gunpowder, what sense is there to send you into the forest with but a sword in your hand? Likewise, when God gives mankind a full moon to hunt by, why in the name of the Seven Peris must they make you wait until the moon has set before you go a-hunting? Why? Because old women like Davil are frightened of the dark, and they would have you be frightened also. Have no fear! There is no beast nor were-beast that will not run from a man. Have no fear, Kolya. I, who have been a huntsman for thirty years, tell you that."

From behind them came the voice of the other old man. He had changed his tune. It was no longer slow, measured and fearsome, the words filled with dread. It came forth exultantly, as if he had just conquered fear. He sang:

"But now I tremble once again,
For here a fair maid comes.
I tremble with no thought of pain
For here a fair maid comes.

"Her lips are scarlet pomegranates,
Her cheeks like Kavkas' snows,
Her eyes are tense as one who waits
For sounds of ringing blows.

"Her speech is all of lovely things
That are in other climes,
Of butterflies with silver wings
And bells with silken chimes.

"She lifteth up her laughing mouth
And I bend down my own."

Davil's voice fell. Deep and fearsome it pounded against Kolya's ears:

"What is this chill wind from the south?
This noise of bone on bone?"

Kolya's heart skipped a beat. What if he were to have no warning? What if he were to be so entranced by the Bagheeta's charms that he were to kiss her?

Davil's chant answered the question for him:

"I fear, I fear and gaze at her
Who looks with such a mien;
I fear, I fear and strain from her
Whose yellow eyes are keen.

"Out sword! Out sword! Bagheeta's eyes
Look now into your own.
Out sword! Out sword! He only dies
Who must the kiss atone.

"With tooth and claw Bagheeta flies
Straight at my armored throat,
And now so close his yellow eyes
That I have falsely smote—"

Kolya's imagination conjured up the gleaming eyes, the hot breath of the beast, its claws sinking into his shoulder. He could feel the sense of helplessness as he was torn from the saddle—the weight of the giant cat upon his body.

Rifkhas' cranky voice, speaking in the calming tones of prose, allayed his fears.

"I'd like to have your chance at this beastie, Kolya," Rifkhas was saying. "One black pelt like that would supply me with wine and caresses for an entire year—aye, even an old fellow like myself could buy the soft arms of women with the price of such a pelt. It's a rare chance you have. If only these fools would let you go on foot. You can't hunt leopards on horseback. Why, the sound of your horse's hoofs will echo for miles about. Get off your horse and creep to the water hole, being careful to see that he doesn't get the wind of you; that's the only way you'll get close enough to Master Bagheeta to kill him with a sword.

"Mind what I tell you, Kolya, and forget all these old women who'd tell you that a leopard can change into a woman just because it happens to be black instead of spotted. Mind what

I tell you, Kolya, and with the money you get for the pelt you can set up an armorer's shop of your own."

Behind him, Kolya could hear Davil still singing, describing his own encounter with the dread and mystic beast long, long ago. The fierce half-joy of the conflict and the anguish of those long-healed wounds were in the voice of the old minstrel as he sang:

"Deep, deep I strike, again, again;
Deep do his talons rend.
I am oblivious of my pain
And fast my blows descend.

"With horrid shriek he falls aback,
And now my sword is free.
Again he leapeth to attack,
But now my sword is free.

"Half-way in air the leaping beast,
The cleaving sword, have met;
Now may the herdsman joyful feast,
For sword and beast have met!"

"**STOI!**" The *hetman's* command cut short both Davil's song and the movement of the cavalcade. The men grouped themselves about the leader as he explained to them how they could best aid Kolya in his adventure. They had arrived at the copse where the Bagheeta had been seen, he told them, and they would now surround the place in such a way as to turn back the Bagheeta if he, sensing Kolya's innocence, were to attempt an escape. None of the men, he warned them, must dare to engage the creature. This was safe only for Kolya, who was pure of heart.

With the point of his spear the *hetman* drew a rough map in the sand showing the copse and the hollow between two steep cliffs in which it was situated. To each man he designated a certain post at which to watch. He told them that if the Bagheeta approached their positions they must raise up their swords with the cross-like hilts uppermost and loudly sing the hymn of Saint Ivan. Thus, and thus only, could they turn the were-beast back.

At a word from their leader the men galloped off, shouting, to their

positions. Only Davil and Rifkhas remained with Kolya and the *hetman* to wait for the coming of night and the dark of the moon.

It was still late afternoon and, although a pale slice of luminous white moon already rode high in the heavens—sure indication that it would set early—Kolya and the men with him still had a long while to wait before he could ride forth in search of the Bagheeta. Davil was all for passing the time in prayer and the singing of songs, but Rifkhas brought forth an earthen jug of wine and a pack of greasy playing-cards. Soon the three grown men were hard at it, playing one game of cards after another.

Kolya was left to his own devices. He fussed with his horse, watering it at the brook and removing the bridle so that it could graze at will. This took only a short time, and then Kolya was again left with nothing to occupy him but his own fears of the night's trial.

He turned his attention to the copse before him. It was dark with the shadows of the larch and fir trees growing on either side of the brook. This stream had, in the course of the centuries, cut itself a hard bed through the solid rock. Its either bank was precipitous. No animal, Kolya thought to himself, could drink from the stream unless somewhere there was a cleft in the rocky banks. If he were to follow Rifkhas' advice he would have to find such a spot where the leopard could come to drink and there await the Bagheeta's coming.

"But, there will be little need to find the Bagheeta," he reasoned. "She will come creeping upon me and, when she divines that I am pure of heart and have no knowledge of women, then she will turn herself into a maiden, and so lure me to my death."

ON WHISPERING feet, darkness came stealing into the little glen in which they had halted. The beech leaves, quivering in the evening wind, lisped a plaintive song of nervous fear to Kolya's heart. The same breeze, straying through the pine boughs, struck deep soughing chords. Then, as the sun finally set, plunging the land into intense darkness, the evening noises quieted. Robbed of light by which to continue their card game, the three older men sat quietly. Even the horses ceased their trampling and champing in the place where they had been tethered. A cloud was over the slim, silver moon, shaped ominously, Kolya imagined, like a Persian dagger.

Some current of the upper air swept the cloud from before the moon's face. The *hetman*, looking up, remarked that the moon would set in another hour.

Kolya walked to where he had tied his horse. He saddled the animal carefully, glad to crowd fear out of his mind with activity. Putting his knee sharply against his mount's belly, Kolya jerked the girth tight. Then he bridled the horse, feeling with anxious fingers in the darkness to see that the check strap was properly set. When he had done all this he led the beast to where the *hetman*, Davil and Rifkhas sat about a tiny fire that they had kindled, more for light than for warmth.

The *hetman* lectured him: "Pray earnestly, Kolya. Ask forgiveness for your sins. This is a creature of deep sin that you go to fight. Only through sin may it vanquish you. It will tempt you in many ways, but you must resist evil. The sign of the cross and the prayers of our people are most potent against magic. Keep your lips clean from its lips, and your heart clean from the evil it will try to teach you. Only in this way may you hope for victory."

Davil spoke to him: "Have no fear, Kolya. If your heart is pure, and you resist the blandishments of the Bagheeta—beautiful as she may become—then surely King God will send strength to your sword. I can see you now, riding back to us in the morning with the slain were-beast over your saddle bow——"

Rifkhas cut him short: "I can see you too, Kolya! But I can see what a fool you will look if you follow the advice of this impotent old rimester. There is but one way to hunt—whether you hunt leopards or were-leopards, it makes no difference—and that way is to go stealthily—and not on horseback with a clanking sword at your side. Do what I have told you to do and you will not fail to find the Bagheeta: go to the water hole and wait—else you will not see hair nor hide of the creature all the long night through."

The crescent moon edged down below the horizon.

"It is time, Kolya," said the *hetman*. "May King God bless you, pure of heart."

Kolya mounted, and wheeling his horse, rode toward the forest at a foot pace.

"Mind what I have told you," Rifkhas shouted after him.

As the first slender saplings of the wood brushed against him, Kolya could hear Davil singing:

"I ride beneath the silver stars,
All in my war array.
I ride beneath the silver stars
To break Bagheeta's sway."

His sword swung reassuringly at Kolya's side. From behind him the second verse of Davil's song came floating to his ears.

"The land about does gloomy lie,
And black Bagheeta's way."

The distance muffled the other words of Davil's ballad. But Kolya could remember them. They sang through his mind as the wood grew denser and denser about him. He had

often heard them before. Some verses brought him courage. He recalled:

"I ride with flowers in my hair,
And grim sword at my side,
Among the youths I am most fair,
And in war foremost ride.

"To me unknown a maiden's wiles:
For see; my heart is pure.
God looks upon my head and smiles:
For see; my heart is pure."

Other verses brought him dread:

"King God, look on my woful plight:
Pity and give me aid.
Hang out the moon to give me light
And guide my palsied blade."

The trees rustled in the light night currents. Each falling leaf, each snapping twig, brought sharp ice to the skin of Kolya's back. Clumps of deeper darkness—some fallen tree or jagged stump—denser than the over-flowing night, caused Kolya to tighten his reins and grip fast the hilt of his sword. Out of earshot of the *hetman* and the others, Kolya drew his sword slowly from its sheath. The weight of the weapon, its fine balance, brought no comfort to his disturbed mind. The empty sheath banged now and again against his leg, making him wince at each contact. It would be just so softly, and with just such lack of warning, that the Bagheeta would spring upon him from the dark thickets at either side of the path.

SLOWLY, drawing rein again and again so that he might strain his ears for some sound of his mystic foe, Kolya traversed the wood. Now so frightened was he by the menacing stillness of the forest that he would have preferred to return to the men; but fear of the taunts which he knew to be the lot of a coward forced him on.

Again he rode through the wood. Again he peered right and left for some sign of the beast, fearful always of seeing golden eyes glow at him from the pitch blackness of the night. Every rustle of the wind, every mouse

that scampered on its way, flooded his heart with fear, and filled his eyes with the lithe, black bulk of the Bagheeta, stalking toward him on noiseless paws. With all his heart he wished that the beast would materialize, stand before him, allow him opportunities to slash and thrust and ward. Anything, even deep wounds, would be better than this dreadful uncertainty, this darkness haunted by the dark form of the were-beast.

Near to the place where he had entered the forest, Kolya turned his horse about and rode through again. This time a greater fear had crept into his heart. What if the were-cat were to take advantage of its magical powers? It had done so with Davil. He remembered how he had gone, while still a student at the riding-school, to the village well to wash the blood from his face after a spill, and of how Mailka, the daughter of Davil, had placed her arm about his shoulder, so that with the corner of her apron she might wipe the blood from his forehead. He remembered now with a sense of horrible fear how he had longed to crush her to him, how some strange well-spring in his blood had forced him, against his own will, closer to her. It was only the passing of Brotam, the shepherd, which had prevented him from folding Mailka to his heart. And Mailka was not beautiful, nor willing for embraces. How then would he resist the Bagheeta, beautiful and inviting? He was sick with fear. His stomach was like a pit of empty blackness, as black as the night, as black as the Bagheeta.

It was with relief that he reached the opposite end of the woods and remembered that so far he had not come upon the Bagheeta. Somehow this thought gave food and drink to his fainting heart. If the Bagheeta were so strong, if these tales of supernatural power were true, why then did it not appear and make away with him? It must be, he thought to himself, an ordinary, spotted leopard

which had frightened the shepherds in the morning. With this in mind, Kolya began to make plans to find and kill the beast.

"Thrice have I ridden through the wood on this side of the stream," he deliberated; "then it is reasonable that the Bagheeta, if it is such a creature, is on the other side of the stream. I will go there."

Where the stream narrowed a bit, Kolya jumped his horse across, landing with a thud on the firm bank of the opposite side.

Twice he rode through the woods on this side of the stream, making, at intervals, little sorties through the forest as far as the cliffs which bound the copse on either side. He could find no trace of the Bagheeta.

Intent upon the hunt now Kolya had lost all fear. "It must be," he reasoned, "just as Rifkhas told me, that I must hunt the beast on foot, waiting for him at the water hole."

With this plan in mind, Kolya rode directly along the bank of the creek. The high walls of the creek bed, Kolya clearly saw, would prevent even a creature as agile as a leopard from going to the water's edge for a drink. Then, of a sudden, his horse shied back. Before him, Kolya could see where a slide on each side of the creek had made a sloping pathway to the water. Dismounting, he inspected the place. Hoof marks and paw prints were indubitable proof that the place was in use by all the animals of the vicinity. Kolya led his horse a little way from the bank and tethered it stoutly to an oak sapling.

He divested himself of his *kaftan* and sword belt, pulled his dagger from its sheath and stuck it through the waistband of his breeches. Then, sword in hand, he returned quietly to the water hole. Carefully he stole down half-way to the water and then, flattening his back against the wall of the cut, prepared to wait.

Even as he settled himself in a
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The Bagheeta

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comfortable position, the falling of a pebble attracted his attention to the other bank of the stream. He could distinguish nothing. The water was as dark as the night. But from the water came a lapping sound. Something was drinking there at the edge of the creek. Kolya strained his eyes. He could see nothing. But as he continued to stare into the darkness he caught a gleam of eyes, yellow, round and burning as the burnished brass of the altar rail. Again Kolya heard the sound of water being lapped up by the rough tongue of the animal. The round, golden eyes were hidden as the creature drank.

Lifting his left hand to his mouth, Kolya ran his tongue across the palm and across the back of his fingers. Lifting it cautiously above his head he held it, palm forward, toward the Bagheeta. The palm of his hand felt colder than the back; the wind was blowing toward him. There was no danger of the Bagheeta taking his scent. But there was the danger that the Bagheeta might go back by the way he had come, without passing Kolya's ambush.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Kolya bent and picked up a large stone. With all his strength he threw it into the bushes on the other bank of the stream, then braced himself to cleave down his sword with all his might. The stone landed on the farther bank with a crash. Gold eyes turned up and, with a shriek, the Bagheeta flung herself across the stream and began to climb past Kolya.

With bated breath he waited until the powerful haunches had lifted the creature until its eyes were on a level with his own. For one moment the beast stared straight into his eyes; then Kolya's sword plunged down, slashing the black leopard's shoulder. The Bagheeta shrieked piercingly and

fell back a few feet. Again Kolya struck at it, but the beast, snarling, rolled free. Kolya gathered himself and lunged forward with the point as if toward a human opponent. A great feeling of satisfaction flooded his heart as he felt the blade sink deep into the thick neck of the Bagheeta. There was a choking sound, the quick pant and insuck of painful breathing, and then silence. The Bagheeta was dead.

"It was so easy. It was so easy!" Kolya repeated the phrase again and again in wonderment.

Dawn was breaking. Thin, gray light began to filter into the wood. Mists and vapors like gray wraiths whirled without rime or reason between the tree trunks. Stiff-legged, body and tail relaxed, with blood flowing over the sandstone on which it lay, Kolya could see the Bagheeta. The heavy jaws gaped wide open, and the boy could see clearly the long, thick fangs of the beast. Its paws were thrust out stiffly, the claws, cruel as Tartar simitars, still unsheathed.

Kolya laughed a bit hysterically. It had been so easy, it had been so easy to kill this fearsome thing of dreadful aspect and terrible strength. Two cuts and a single thrust of his sharp sword had killed the Bagheeta. Tough sinews, tearing fangs and rending jaws had been subdued by the steel of his sword. There had been no magic trial of virtue and morals. Davil was a liar, and Rifkhas a true man.

KOLYA sank down upon a stone to rest himself, his eyes still drawn to the inert body of the leopard.

"How they will laugh at Davil when I tell them what a liar he is!" Kolya thought to himself. "How fat and respected he has grown on that one lie these many years! That song of his—with its beautiful maiden and terrible struggle—why, every child in

Ghizikhan knows it by heart, and even the *hetman* believes it. What a lie!"

But then doubts began to steal into Kolya's mind. He thought deeply: "If this is untrue, if a Bagheeta is but a black leopard, no more dangerous than a spotted one, why then even the story about Lake Erivan having been created by the tears of God as he wept for the crucifixion of his only Son might be untrue. And the story of Saint Ilya the Archer and his arrows of fire, giving courage to the pure of heart in perilous places, might also be a lie. Even God might be a lie!"

But the gray dawn was ghostly. The trees moved mysteriously in the light winds and the half-light of the morning, and the mountain towered dimly toward the sky. Who knew what dread creatures stalked abroad in the mist? The trees might fall in upon him, the mountains topple to crush him! Kolya put the unreality of God quickly from his mind. A ray of light touched the peak of Silibal and it shone, rose-colored and white, against the blue sky of the morning.

Birds began to twitter in the bushes. A deer came to the water hole to drink, but, upthrusting her muzzle at the scent of the slain leopard, trotted off otherwheres.

"How they will laugh when I tell them what a liar Davil has been these many years!"

Stretching himself, Kolya rose, smiling, and prepared to return to where he knew the *hetman* and the *jigits* of the village awaited him.

He donned his *kaftan* and sword belt, replaced his dagger in its sheath, and started to cleanse his bloody sword with a wisp of grass. As he started on this task, a thought struck him. No, he must let the sword remain bloody—proof of the conflict. He laid it down in the grass carefully. Then, wondering at the weight and size of the animal, Kolya dragged the Ba-

gheeta to where he had tethered his horse. The mare plunged and curvetted at the sight of the dead animal and at the smell of its coagulating blood. When he had secured the body to the high cantle with thongs, Kolya picked up his bloody sword, untethered the horse and mounted into the saddle deliberately.

As the horse nervously threaded its way under the double burden of victor and vanquished, Kolya rode slowly out of the wood with the reins held tight in his left hand. His mind was busy. A thought had come to him. For years Rifkhas had said that a Bagheeta was but a black leopard among the spotted ones. The people of the village had only laughed at him. Davil, the liar, they loved and respected. Rifkhas they thought a strange man, a little mad from having lived so long alone in the woods.

“Even if they believed me,” Kolya was thinking, “they would laugh at Davil only for a day, and then what? Then, no one would fear the Bagheeta any more. And so, no longer,” Kolya reasoned, “would I be honored as a man who had slain a Bagheeta.”

He said to himself: “Surely there must be some reason for this lie. Others have invented it so that they might appear brave and good in the eyes of the village.”

And Mailka, Mailka would certainly never give herself to one who had betrayed her father’s secret. How warm and softly firm her arm had felt against his shoulder that day she had washed his wounds by the well.

“I will do as Davil has done.” Kolya spoke decisively. “I shall tell them that I first saw the Bagheeta as a beautiful maiden, bathing at the water hole, her body surrounded by a white light. That she called me by name and spoke to me courteously—and that, enchanted by her beauty, I had forgotten all warning and bent to kiss her. Then, I shall say that an arrow of fire sprang through the sky.

Knowing it for the sign of Ilya the Archer, I will say that I took warning from this and, springing away from the maiden, drew my sword. So fast that I could not even see the change, the Bagheeta transformed herself again into a leopard and sprang at me. I shall tell them that we fought for an hour and then, just as I was ready to drop my sword from weariness, a great strength surged through me and I killed the beast. Even as Davil has done, so will I do."

At a sharp trot Kolya rode through the outskirts of the wood. Before him, cooking their breakfasts around little fires, were the men of Ghizikhan. With a great shout of triumph, Kolya struck heels to his horse and charged toward them. The men raised their voices in a hail of welcome which sounded thin and shrill among the mountains.

Kolya began to shout the words of Davil's song as he rode toward them:

"Half-way in air the leaping beast,
The cleaving sword, have met.
Now may the herdsmen joyful feast,
For sword and beast have met.

"I rode beneath the silver stars
And broke Bagheeta's sway——"

Kolya lifted his bloody sword high in the air, the cross of the hilt extended toward heaven, as if giving the victory to God. The men doffed their sheepskin caps and knelt in prayer at this proof of King God's all-powerful goodness.

"Blah!" said Rifkhas the huntsman, as he knelt with the rest.