It was a mild summer evening. A good many years have passed since but, recalling it today, I can even sense the smell of the freshly rainwashed earth of that evening.

The morning had been sunny, but black clouds suddenly overcast the sky in the afternoon, a clap of thunder and blinding lightning rent the air, and a driving rain came down with hail, like little balls, pelting the ground. Their heads swaying, the cows moved toward the pasture, but the sheep and goats, bunching together, humbly offered their backs to the rain and hail.

Fortunately, the downpour stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Having attended to all the chores, I removed my wet clothes in the ger and hung them over the trivet. Then I lighted a lamp, lay down and took up an old leatherbound book, intending to read some old legends before dropping off to sleep. But I became so engrossed I didn't even notice that midnight had passed. The lamp was flickering in the light breeze, and a moth was whirling tirelessly around it, its wings almost brushing the flame.

And while the snow-white moth was lovingly dancing its dance around the lamp as if nothing else existed in the world but the flickering flame, I read a legend.

"High to the sky rise the red cliffs of the Asgatkhan, with the waters of the Selenge washing its base..." Ah, I know those cliffs well. It was but yesterday that the goats had given me plenty of trouble. Having broken away from the herd, they had
climbed up into those cliffs and couldn't get down. Not a living soul had ever managed to mount the Asgatkhan's hoary summit. Even the Selenge, crashing its waves against the foot of the cliffs, would angrily retreat as if realizing the futility of its efforts.

"At sunset one day, people heard the strains of a morin khuur coming from the Asgatkhan's summit," the legend went on. "A melody of amazing beauty began to sound every evening, right up to sunset. Rumor of this miracle was passed from mouth to mouth until the whole region knew about it. As soon as the sun's disc began to descend toward the horizon, people would secretly make their way to the foot of the mountain to listen to the amazing music. Sharp-sighted youngsters from the other bank once happened to discern two silhouettes at the very summit, a figure sitting motionlessly and another whirling gracefully and waving its arms. The rumor reached a local rich man's son, Badai by name, a bold and handsome but arrogant young man. He took a pair of binoculars that had come down to him from his grandfather and set out for the Asgatkhan.

"As soon as the sun began to set, he saw a girl of astounding beauty appear at the summit. She was leading an old man with a morin khuur by the hand. Seating him at the edge of the high cliff, she disappeared. Badai realized that the old man, sitting motionless like a bronze statue, was blind. Stepping lightly, the girl soon reappeared. She was all in white. Badai could clearly make out how she took off her embroidered booties.

"And then the old man touched the strings with his bow, an enchanting melody poured forth, and the girl, light as a doe, began her graceful dance. Badai couldn't tear his eyes from the binoculars until night fell and there and then made the firm decision to get to the old man and the girl.

"The next day he got himself a little narrow boat and crossed the river. Then, like a lizard, he began to climb the vertical slope. A single careless movement, and he might have gone crashing into the Selenge's eternal embrace. His clothing torn by the sharp rocks and his arms and legs bleeding, Badai finally reached
the summit and hid behind a huge boulder. As soon as the mysterious old man and girl began their duet, Badai stepped from his hiding place. Catching sight of the stranger, the girl froze in her steps and the old man immediately broke off his playing.

"'Who are you?' Badai asked, approaching them.

"Not in the least frightened, the girl straightened her thick braid and retorted with a question of her own: 'And what are you doing here?'

"'Can't a person who can see come to this place just like a blind one does?' Badai asked in a challenging voice. He was fascinated by the girl's beauty, and passion and jealousy were beginning to rage in him. 'So why don't you continue?' he queried expectantly, his hands proudly on his hips.

"The old man, who had been listening suspiciously to their conversation, slowly resumed his playing.

"'Don't you dare!' the girl dashed toward him. The melody broke off suddenly as if the strings had snapped. But handsome Badai continued standing haughtily and unperturbed. 'Who are you,' he continued to press them, 'Father and daughter?'

"A faint smile crossed the blind man's lips. 'You're mistaken, stranger,' the old man said.

"'So this beautiful moth is not your daughter?'

"'You're right, she's a moth that is drawn to a lamp,' the old man said quietly. 'I am the lamp that fires her heart and inspires her dance.'

"'So that's it!' Badai burst out laughing. 'And do you know that there is no eternal lamp?'

"A shadow flashed across the old man's face and his bow touched the strings with a tremble, bringing forth a melody of rising wrath.

"Noticing the old man's agitation, Badai continued insolently: 'And do you know where the moth disappears to when the lamp around which it flutters goes out?"
"And do you, stranger, know that the moth and the lamp have a single life?" the old man muttered, choking with emotion and trying to rise. Quickly putting on her booties, the girl seated him carefully in his place and, with emotion ringing in her voice, addressed Badai: 'Don't bother us! Who are you, anyway?'

"'No reason to get excited,' Badai continued in that offhand tone of his. 'I'm simply talking with the blind old man. As to my identity, you'll find that out when you enter my home,' and he stepped toward the old man, intending to push him over the precipice. But the brave girl blocked his way: 'Why do you want to kill an innocent person?'

"'You needn't worry, my beauty, no harm will come to you. And we still have a lot of time ahead of us to come to know each other better,' and Badai again moved resolutely toward the old man.

"'So that's what you want!!' the girl exclaimed with a piercing laugh, and in a flash a dagger appeared in her hand and she advanced toward the insolent fellow. This was so unexpected that Badai started backing away in fright. The haughty young man had forgotten that but two steps were enough to go flying into the Selenge... and he took three...

'The girl again laughed loudly and her laughter echoed through the forests, gorges and mountains.

'The old man raised his bow and a merry song burst forth. Breaking off her laughter, the girl asked the old man: 'You know what has happened, don't you, my dear friend?'

"'Of course,' the old man replied with a smile. 'I even heard him crash down the precipice like a stone.'

'The girl took off her booties and, getting ready to dance, said: 'How well you brushed off that braggart, my dear friend. I am indeed a moth and you are my lamp. And remember, I'm not only a moth in love with her lamp but its defender!'"

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I finished reading and, steeped in thought, snapped the book shut. The sudden movement extinguished the lamp's flame. Day was
breaking, and the rising sun's first rays were gilding the mountain peaks. Coming to suddenly, I discovered that the moth, which had mindlessly whirled around the flickering flame, was no longer in the ger. It had disappeared together with the flame.