A SWIFT-FOOTED HORSE

by

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It is interesting to watch a mirage quivering and rippling in the distance, but it is hard to determine what the tiny dots are that shift in the haze. Only when you come closer do you see that they are horsemen racing across the plain. Racing is the favorite sport of plainsmen, and a fast horse fills every Mongol with admiration and delight.

Pulling hard on the bit, Surenhuu dashed to the winning post. He wiped the lather from his horse and lit a cigarette. The graceful dun horse, its sides heaving so that the ribs stood out, pawed the ground with its graceful legs and shook its beautiful head. From time to time it tossed its head high until it appeared to be ready to take off for the clouds. It moved its ears. Surenhuu's heart swelled with pride at having such a horse.

Other riders came racing up. They admired the horse and called it Shuvuu Saaral [Swift-footed Horse]. They begged Surenhuu to sell them the horse, offering him the price of several young horses. Surenhuu refused.

"I don't want to sell him," he said, running his hand over the horse's head.

All the men discussed the merits of the horse. Only toward the end of the day did they ride off into the rays of the setting sun in groups of two and three, heading for home. When they halted on the way they continued to discuss the horse.

The first rays of the morning sun lit up the sky, and the moon, a sliver arched like an eyebrow, vanished. Autumn hoarfrost glittered all around. The peaks of the mountains loomed in the
distance. Surenhuu stepped out of his ger, saddled his horse, and galloped off toward the west.

By the time the sun rose, Surenhuu had crossed several hills and rivers. Seated carelessly in the saddle, he was trying to cover a distance of two days' travel in one. He wanted to reach a distant aimag by night. Shuvuun Saaral was going at a fast trot, his bridle jangling.

Man and horse sped across the plain. It was a clear, sunny day, with a gentle breeze ruffling the grass by the roadside. Far ahead, a herd of antelopes swept like a wave across the road. In the far distance there was a glimpse of a nomad camp. That was where Sunjidma lived.

Surenhuu and his horse swept past the neighboring aimag. It was all so interesting — hills and rivers they had never seen before. Horses and cattle were grazing everywhere. They passed gers beside which milch mares were neighing. It was time for airag and feasting, but where was the time to stop by and make merry? Surenhuu was not interested. He was in a hurry, and so he galloped past without halting. Shuvuun Saaral was tearing along as swiftly as he had in the morning. His graceful legs raised clouds of dust. The nomad dwellers, young and old, gazed in surprise after the horseman flying ahead on his beautiful horse.

But Surenhuu had already vanished from view. The closer he came to the camp the more excited he grew. He rejoiced at the thought of seeing Sunjidma again. It was rapidly growing dark and the moon had not yet come up. In this unfamiliar locality he could only trust to his swift-footed horse. No matter how Surenhuu strained his eyes he could no longer make out the hills in the distance and could only depend for direction on the stars in the sky. He halted to get his bearings. At that moment a light flickered close by.

Again Surenhuu's heart leaped with joy as he drove his horse forward. Nothing interfered with his swift onrush. Sparks flew
from the hooves of his steed. Soon he came to two or three gers huddled at the foot of a hill. Sunjidma emerged from the first ger to quiet the dogs. Her sweet face shone in the gloom of the night.