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The Legend of the Thousand Bulls by Yasar Kemal

THE LAST OF THE NOMADS

by Roger Norman, *Turkish Daily News*

Yasar Kemal occupies a very special place in twentieth century Turkish literature, Steinbeck and Hemingway combined as it were, or D.H. Lawrence along with Thomas Hardy and then something added, a political dimension, for Yasar Kemal has become perhaps the best known champion of human rights in Turkey, the godfather of freedom of conscience. He is no stranger to prison and currently has a suspended prison sentence hanging over him.

He is best known in the literary world for a series of novels written in the two decades following 1955, the year when his first and best-loved novel *Memed, My Hawk* (or *Ince Memed*) appeared. He was born in the cotton growing region of Cukurova, the triangle of hot and well-watered plainland south of Adana and Tarsus, where the majority of his stories are set. Change in Cukurova.

The Legend of the Thousand Bulls (or *Binbogalar Efsanesi*) was published a little over 25 years ago, in 1971 and concerns the trials and tribulations of a tribe of nomadic Turcomans, the Yoruks once a mighty people of two thousand black tents and at the time of the story -- the premiership of Adnan Menderes during the 1950s -- a dwindling and persecuted minority whose nomadic ways are under assault in a Turkey of settled farmers, burgeoning cities, mechanized agriculture and a cash economy. In the summer, the Yoruks tend their flocks in the lush pastures of Aladag. In autumn they move down to set up their winter encampments in the milder climes of the Cukurova plain. And so they have done for centuries.

But the plain has changed. The tractors have moved in. What used

to be common pastureland has been taken over by the cotton plantations and the wheatfields. Title deeds exist where no title deeds existed before. The majority of the local tribes have reluctantly surrendered their nomadic ways and are settled in villages. Their tents are folded, their flocks are gone, they work as laborers for rich landowners or they have become shopkeepers, or even policemen. Year by year there is less space for the Yoruks, less hospitality, more suspicion. Tolls are levied on their camp sites. They stop to rest for a few hours and find a delegation of armed villagers arriving to exact their dues and move them on. They are a people with a long and proud history and the reputation for great wealth. Still their carpets are magnificent, their animals are fat, the beauty of their girls is legendary. But the day of their greatness is gone for ever. History has left them behind. Haydar's sword.

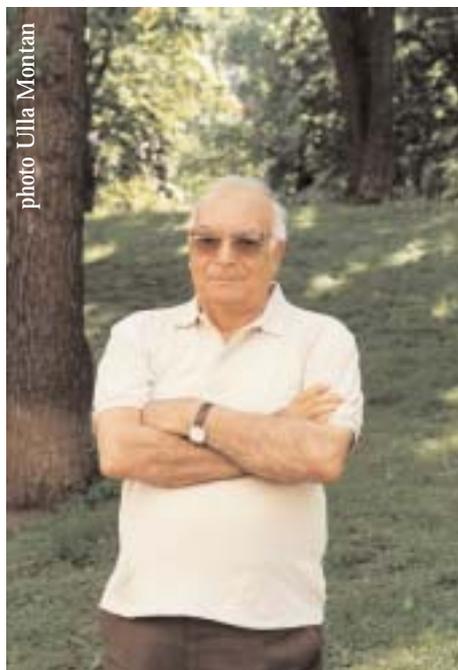
The most respected man of the

tribe is Old Haydar, the Master Blacksmith, the last in a thousand-year-old tradition of metalworking, and his hearth is holy. There was always this sense of the arcane, the mysterious, almost the occult, among ancient metalworkers. It was an art whose secrets were jealously guarded, there was something astonishing and perhaps supernatural in the way they could create things of beauty out of lumps of raw rock. They were a caste apart, special, even dangerous. For thirty years, Old Haydar has been making a sword with verses inscribed in gold, and this sword, in the old man's mind, is destined to save his tribe from the terrible ignominy of being hounded from pillar to post in lands they had always considered their heritage.

«We gave their names to all the rivers, to all the mountains, to every single part of this plain. Every stone, every rock, every piece of earth bears the name of a Yoruk tribe. Wasn't it all ours? How did they come to claim what is ours? Why? When?»

Old Haydar will present the sword to the greatest bey of Cukurova, or he will take it to Ankara and give it to Ismet Pasa himself. He doesn't know, and nobody dares to tell him, that Ismet Inonu is no longer Turkey's leader. Haydar has heard the name Menderes but it means nothing to him. Sparrows, hoopoes and barn owls.

Old Haydar, who looks «like an old Hittite deity», is rebuffed by the great bey and bewildered by the «new cruel world» that confronts him in the city of Adana. Finally he takes the bus to Ankara to find



Ismet Pasa, and cannot get beyond the man at the gate of the Pembe Kosk. Yet here, at the gate, he finally succeeds in presenting the famous sword to the hero of the war of Independence.

«'Oh dear,' Old Haydar said to himself, as he stared in dismay at this frail shrivelled balding ancient who was hobbling up with tiny steps like a sparrow, that was how a man's face would wrinkle up when he'd been frustrated and cruel all his life, as ugly as an old leather pouch... It was impossible to say whether the Pasha was glad, flattered or annoyed. In the end, he took the sword ... and peered at it gravely. Then he smiled and handed it back to old Haydar. 'Very beautiful,' he said. 'Very, very beautiful.' And he hobbled away quickly, hop, hop, like a sparrow, and got into the car that was waiting for him. It drove away and Old Haydar was left holding the sword, stunned.»

The Yoruks, once a mighty people of two thousand black tents, by the time of the premiership of Adnan Menderes during the 1950s were a dwindling and persecuted minority whose nomadic ways were under assault in a Turkey of settled farmers, burgeoning cities, mechanized agriculture and a cash economy



'We gave their names to all the rivers, to all the mountains, to every single part of this plain. Every stone, every rock, every piece of earth bears the name of a Yoruk tribe. Wasn't it all ours? How did they come to claim what is ours? Why? When?'

It is a sad but also a comic experience watching Old Haydar finding out just how much the world he knew has changed. When he comes to the city of Adana, he imagines that every building, every shop, every vehicle is the possession of 'the great Ramazanoglu'.

«Tell him that Haydar, the Master Blacksmith from the Blacksmith's Hearth, is here to visit the great Ramazanoglu of name and fame, as Allah's guest,» he announces grandly. But today's representative of the Ramazanoglu family of name and fame received him in «a room no bigger than a hoopoe's nest!» So, he thought, "everything is changing and coming to an end. Things are happening, unfamiliar cruel things that we don't know, that we don't understand. Nothing can save our world from dying out. Nothing, nobody. We shall become like Ramazanoglu too. The generations after us will sit like him in a tiny room, pondering like barn-owls...» Ottoman traitors.

Yet the truth is that the Turcoman nomads, their expansive, restless and ancient way of life, was under attack much before the middle of the present century. It had started with the Ottomans. The Ottomans, according to Haydar, «had been bred out of the Turcomans, of the same blood, their bonds were of the closest, and yet hadn't they ruined the Turcomans, cut themselves from their own stem?» In 1876, there was a battle between the Ottoman rulers and the Turcoman nomads. The Ottomans, it seemed, wanted to bind the nomads to one

place, to tax them, to enlist them in their army. The Ottomans won the battle, but they paid the price in the end, in Old Haydar's version, for «turning traitor to their roots».

«They had earned the curse of the poor man, of the friend, of the father, the mother, the curse that is worse than all, for it will take effect slowly but surely.» No more songs.

The Legend of a Thousand Bulls is not only the story of the remorseless collapse of a culture, the disappearance of a tribe, it is also a love story between Jeren, beautiful beyond imagining, and Halil, handsome beyond dreams. There is in Yasar Kemal an excessive, exaggerated, over-abundant quality that not all readers will cotton to. His writing is oddly reminiscent of the

Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, of Zorba fame. In Kazantzakis, too, men speak aloud to their God and make no attempt to hide their pride, or their anguish. They also converse with their donkeys, believe in miracles, go grey-haired overnight, love exuberantly and fight fiercely... There are differences too. The Cretans are Aegean folk, seafarers, fish-eaters, wine-bibbers; the nomads of Aladag are mountain men, horsemen, steppe-bred. Perhaps, like some of the wilder characters of Dostoyevsky, their speeches and their acts translate somewhat curiously into the polished tones of English. They need many exclamation marks. They require many uses of words like respect, nobility, pride and passion which our own writers treat with a cautious diffidence. Jeren is capable of killing herself for love; Old Haydar may die from humiliation.

In every corner of Anatolia we left our imprint, the names and emblems of our tribes. So that we should not be forgotten. So that in all these lands our race should take root and prosper... They have driven us on to the dusty roads, they have cast us up into the snow-capped mountains. We became one with the land of Anatolia, intimate with its earth and stones, its flowing waters and blowing winds, with its time-weathered caravansaries and palaces, shrines and cities, with the songs and traditions, the wisdom and lore that had sprouted on this land, growing, greening, the process of thousands of years... In every province we abandoned a part of us, in every clime, in every tract of land. Discarded tents, forgotten, left to rot away... From one single source we had gushed forth, a mighty torrent, overpowering, inexhaustible. Into a thousand sources we split and dispersed and shrunk and drained away, sucked dry. And now perhaps, our songs will never be sung any more.' [S]

The Legend of a Thousand Bulls was first published in 1971 by Cem Yayınevi in Istanbul, and in an English translation by William Collins in 1976.