

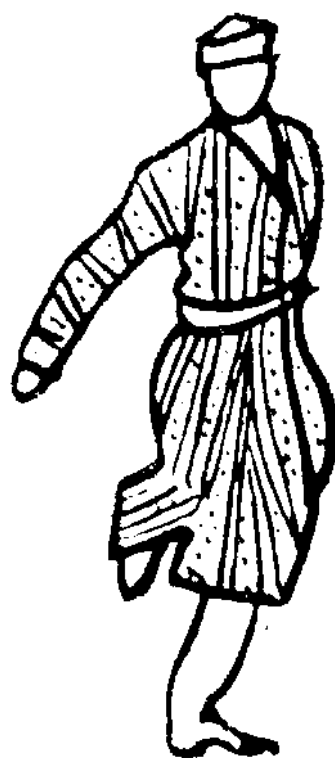


SHARAF RASHIDOV
THE VICTORS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The life story of Sharaf Rashidov, Uzbek writer, is typical of the majority of Uzbekistan's present-day intelligentsia. Born in a poor farmer's family, Rashidov had to start helping his father when he was only eleven.

Jizak, where the author was born on November 6th, 1917, was a small village the inhabitants of which eked out a bleak, hungry existence.

The brightest moments of his childhood are associated for Rashidov with his father and mother. The people, bowed down by their back-breaking labour, found consolation in song.

"My father," Sharaf Rashidov recalls, "taught me to love work since early childhood, and my mother taught me to love songs."

As a schoolboy Rashidov began to collect folk songs, to put legends and tales in writing, and soon after he tried his hand at writing poetry himself.

His first big work, a poem about Soviet frontier guards called *Border Guards*, was published in 1937.

Rashidov graduated from the Phylological Department of the Uzbek State University on the eve of the Great Patriotic War, and was appointed editor of the regional newspaper *Lenin Yuly*.

He volunteered soon after war broke out, was badly wounded and demobilized in 1942, and returned to Samarkand to take up his old job.

His collection of war-time poetry *Hatred* came out in 1945.

Rashidov, with his rare journalistic flare, often published his articles in the press, which in 1949 were collected and put out in a separate edition entitled *History's Verdict*.

Rashidov combines writing with an active political career. In May 1950 he was elected Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan and Vice-Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.

Rashidov became especially popular as a writer after his book *The Victors* came out in 1951.

Sharaf Rashidov is also widely known as an active fighter for peace. As a member of different delegations he has visited Finland, China, India, Indonesia, the United Arab Republic, Pakistan, Burma, Viet-Nam, Afghanistan and Mongolia.

While sojourning in the different countries of the East he met many of their authors and showed a keen interest in their folk legends, sayings and stories. His story *The Song of Kashmir* (1957) was based on a legend of the Kashmir people. A new novel has come out lately called *Mightier than Storm* which is a stirring story of men developing virgin lands.

Sharaf Rashidov has been awarded two Orders of Lenin, the order of the Red Banner of Labour, the Red Star, the Badge of Honour and others.

"An entirely new type of farmer has come into the history of agriculture of all ages and peoples with the establishment of collective farms. Purposeful to remake Nature, he has entered into battle with the elements armed with marvellous technique."

I. Michurin

A line of gold flared up above the mountains—a slash across the dark sky. Now the disc of the sun rose swiftly above the mountain top and instantly everything was bathed in light: the rocks and hollows, the shrubbery on the mountain sides and the slender nut-trees at the foot.

The trees, slumbering in the coolness of the night, stretched to the sun, dipping their leaves in its light and warmth. Silvery brooks glimmered in the mountains, threading their way among the rocks of granite.

Day broke.

The sun rose higher and higher in the sky with every minute. The air grew noticeably warmer. Dew melted in the grass. Twilight still lurked in the depth of the gul-

lies, but even there it was beginning to thin out, receding before the light of day. The mountains unfolded in new and ever new colours.

The village of Altyn-Sai lay at the foot of the Kok-Tau. Seen from the mountain top in the summer, the village looked like a huge orchard. The numerous farm cottages were submerged in the green up to the very roofs. Here and there tall, tapering lombardy poplars jutted out amid this lush green sea.

A broad strip of carpeting, fiery-red with poppies, ran along the foot of the mountain beyond the end houses of the village. Closer to the mountain side the poppies gave way to violets, then a wilderness of vines and pistachios and, thronging the very foot of the mountain, a dense growth of nut-trees.

The unirrigated tracts of land belonging to the Stalin Collective Farm rolled away on the other side of the Kok-Tau.

There was plenty of land but, denied water, it was barren and idle, doing no good to man. In the spring, fiery-red poppies and blue violets covered it from end to end, and then it looked like a vast sea with red-blue waves driven across it by the wind. But spring passed, the flowers wilted, the sun sapped the grass of juice, and the land lay bare, rusty and desolate. The farmer, shielding his eyes with his hand, would gaze across this vastness and say with a bitter sigh: "Our barren land."

There was plenty of land but no irrigated fields. No rivers or canals would flow uphill, and so the unwatered tracts on the other side of the Kok-Tau yielded nothing but some straggly and puny wheat. There was not a

man in the whole village who did not cherish a dream of planting and growing cotton—that peerless treasure of his sunny land—but it was a futile dream where no water was to be had.

A narrow, tortuous path snaking out of the village first looped its intricate way through the poppy field, climbed the Kok-Tau with as much cunning, and then ran across the top of it.

There was another way of reaching the mountain top from Altyn-Sai up a level, well-laid road with sturdy bridges built across the mountain streams. But this took much longer, and to save time the villagers preferred to use the old narrow path. One had to be very nimble-footed and quick, though, to go up or climb down that path safely.

The view from the top of the Kok-Tau ridge in early spring was breath-taking in its wealth of light and colour. The steppe, basking in the rays of the smiling sun, rolled away to the horizon in a harmony of colours. The sun was still gentle. The skies were still serene.

The village orchards stood out in vivid green patches in this flowering steppe.

Just as the first rays of the sun turned the mountain tops to gold, a girl on horseback appeared on the pass. The handsome grey horse, excited by the climb, flung up its head and tugged at the bridle. The girl reined it in with a masterly hand.

The horse obediently changed to a walk, foam dribbling from its mouth on to the path.

The girl paused for a moment just where the descent began. From this height where eagles nest she looked

down upon her native village with the white of the cottages peeping through the green. She saw the village square and the white school-house she had gone to for eight years, the statue of Lenin and the red flag on the club house; this was the club where as a long-legged first-former she had once recited poetry more dead than alive with stage fright, and later had made reports and presided at meetings. There was her home, that small cottage once so noisy and hospitable and now so hushed and lonely. In the old days the place was always bubbling with life, what with her growing brothers and herself, Aikiz, a boisterous little girl; there had been Mother, youthfully light on her feet, busy about the rooms, the courtyard and the kitchen garden. Life had run a brisk and happy course, smoothly and sensibly managed, like a caravan travelling along a level road. And now there was no one in that cottage, no one but Umurzak-ata, an old man bowed down with grief.

This could hardly be called Aikiz's permanent home for she was away most of the time, either at her job or on lengthy business trips. Never before in this submontane region had a young girl, a freshly graduated agronomist, been elected chairman of the village Soviet in preference to some man of experience and prestige. Umurzak-ata was lonely all by himself, of course, but he was naturally flattered by the trust the people put in his daughter. He was seventy-five. Three quarters of a century was a long road to cover.

Though his own life was drawing to a close, his daughter Aikiz never seemed to grow up for him. He still thought her the same naughty and even whimsical

child who needed her parents' constant care and guidance.

Poor old, lonely Umurzak-ata. . . .

Sensing the nearness of home the horse refused to stand still and flung its head impatiently.

"Patience, Baichibar!"

Aikiz swerved sharply towards the pass and jumped down to the ground. Loosening the saddle girth and unbridling the horse, she patted Baichibar's satin-smooth neck.

"Enjoy yourself."

Without stirring from the spot, Baichibar turned his slender beautiful head to his mistress, gingerly took the sleeve of her jacket into his teeth and began to tug at it.

"Well, what is it you want? I've nothing to give you."

Aikiz's arm grew warm with the horse's hot breath. She took a lump of sugar from her pocket and said with feigned sternness:

"Here, you spoilt brat."

Baichibar's soft lips touched her palm. The sugar crunched loudly in the horse's teeth. With his mane flying in the wind, Baichibar galloped away towards some rocks where tufts of young grass grew between the stones.

Aikiz followed the horse with her eyes, then turned and slowly walked towards the descent, flipping the legs of her smart riding boots with her crop. She raised her head and looked to the right of the path: there reared a great rock of porous stone covered with lichen, the

rock was as tall as a house. She clambered up it. Whenever she came riding this way she always rested a while on top of this rock, sitting there and thinking things over. Sometimes her thoughts would be happy, warming all her being as it were. Sometimes they would be anxious, when there was some hitch in her work, or she was annoyed with herself or with a friend. Sometimes she thought about life in general, of her family, of the future of her people. Sometimes she thought of her trifling personal affairs, a silly quarrel with her girl-friend, or a new dress that was a disappointment. She was an agronomist and the chairman of the village Soviet, but at the same time she was only a very young girl with all the awakening emotions of youth.

Aikiz was not feeling happy that day.

Frowning, she peered towards the west. There, on the horizon, the land showed hazily yellow—dead land.

Kyzyl-Kum.

Desert land.

The high dry wind came tearing from there in summer, bringing disaster to the farm's fields, scorching everything with the fiery breath of the desert.

This year, for the first time in history, a shelter belt of plantings confronted the farmers' eternal enemy. But it would take quite some years before the elms and acacias grew strong enough, flinging wide their sturdy branches, to withstand the onslaught of the dry wind and hurl it back into the vastness of the Kyzyl-Kum.

Aikiz thought apprehensively of the enemy lying low there in the west, crouching before its ominous leap.

She untied her bright silk kerchief and loosened her hair. Her fingers absently combed the black strands falling below her waist and plaited them into two heavy plaits. Aikiz could not rid herself of her anxious thoughts. Looking down from this height the belt of young trees seemed nothing more than a miserable strip of grass which a herd could trample down with no effort at all. Oh, the years they'd have to wait before the trees grew tall and strong!

"If we had only planted this belt ten or fifteen years ago!" Aikiz was thinking.

She threw her plaits over her shoulder and felt the familiar thud on her shoulder-blades. Aikiz arranged the two plaits in a crown and put on her silk kerchief again.

She hated untidiness and carelessness in appearance or anything else. Before riding back home, after tramping the farm's fields all day, she invariably dusted and cleaned her riding boots. She held that a person should never let himself go, either in the presence of others or when left to himself.

She looked at herself in her pocket mirror.

"Alimjan..." she thought. Aikiz quickly slipped the mirror back into her pocket, blushing as though Alimjan could see her now.

"Baichibar!" she called, climbing down the rock.

The horse raised his head on hearing his mistress' call. He gave a shrill neigh and galloped back to Aikiz.

Leading Baichibar by the bridle, Aikiz began the descent from the pass.

The path ran down the mountain side thickly grown over with grass. Reaching the foot of the mountain, it

dived into the shadow of the nut-tree thicket. Yangok-Sai, a swift mountain stream, rushed down into the narrow valley, gurgling and leaping over the stones.

Baichibar thirstily strained towards the water.

When she had watered her horse, Aikiz bridled him again, tightened the saddle girth and jumped into the saddle. The water frothed as it swirled about Baichibar's legs.

Hitting the valley floor the little mountain stream swerved towards the east and as swiftly rushed on. This frugal water supply was all that their kolkhoz had for their orchards and vegetable plots. And there was no water for the fields.

When she had waded across the Yangok-Sai, Aikiz decided not to take the road which was some distance away from the stream. Instead, making a small detour, she went down the wide and gentle slope which began at the foot of the mountain and continued far into the steppe.

Baichibar's hoofs clattered on the ground untouched by a plough since the beginning of time. The soil was rich and fertile. The roots of plants rotting in it through countless centuries had made it so. Give this blessed land water and it will grow anything man plants, yielding untold harvests.

Give it water!

Six or seven kilometres away from the village of Altyn-Sai, the two mountain streams, Yangok-Sai and Uzun-Sai, join into one and carry their waters impetuously down and away. This is the Altyn-Sai River, which is what has given the name to the village. But the river

does not give a single drop of water to its namesake, and there is no power on earth that could force the Altyn-Sai to flow uphill.

Thousands and thousands of acres of fertile land lie locked in heavy slumber, languid with thirst, and the only relief they know is the short-lived grass that covers them in the fleeting days of spring.

Water, water!

"Only a short while ago Mirzachul was nothing but a desert, a hungry steppe," Aikiz was thinking. "But then people cut canals across it, gave the land water, brought machines to work the fields, and turned the hungry steppe into a land of plenty."

Aikiz rode slowly, holding back her impatient horse. Suddenly she reined him in: right in front of her, closer to the foot of the mountain beside a low hillock, she saw a small island of lush, bright green grass.

Aikiz headed towards it. It surprised and puzzled her. She saw a small pool of rain water at the foot of the rise. There was nothing surprising in this of course, for hundreds of such pools appeared at the foot of the mountains after every spring rainfall. What surprised her was that this pool though shallow was still brimming with water.

There had been no rainfall for some time. Where did the water come from then? A tiny rivulet branching off from the pool disappeared into the ground no further than ten metres away. But it was running water nonetheless, it kept rippling away without exhausting the small pool.

There had never been any springs in this region. What nurtured the pool then, Aikiz wondered.

She jumped down and followed the boggy, sodden ground.

The bottom of the pool was lined with white pebbles, washed clean by the water and showing through the slimy, green mud.

Aikiz bent closer. She fancied she saw a spring bubbling up from under this lining of pebbles. Surely there could be no spring here though.

She squatted down and, plunging her hands into the slime at the bottom of the pool, tried to pry away the pebbles lining it. It seemed to her that the little pool grew deeper.

She felt hot, drops of sweat stood out on her forehead. Her heart was beating furiously.

She had no doubts now that she had come upon a mountain spring, and a mighty spring at that.

At last she straightened up. She stood there strenuously trying to remember all she knew about this place. The people called it the Hill of Slavery. Somehow it had never occurred to her before to find out why this humble hillock wore a name so sinister. It was obvious that the place was associated with some legend or ancient story which Aikiz had never heard.

She saw something sticking out of the ground at her very feet. With a few good kicks she knocked off the layer of caked mud.

This revealed a stump of an old plane tree.

Aikiz was puzzled. No trees had ever grown here as far as she knew. Now she looked about her keenly. Her

amazement mounted. On the other side of the pool she saw the mighty roots of another tree stump, gnarled and black, sticking out of the ground and covered with a layer of soil that had not been washed away.

Aikiz's mind worked feverishly. Her face felt hot. Questions thronged her mind: how long ago had the trees grown there, was it a hundred years, or more, when were they chopped down and who had chopped them down? She was quite certain now that the trees had grown close to an abundant spring, but the question was why the spring had dried up.

Aikiz climbed the hillock, leading Baichibar by the bridle.

The moment she got to the top, the solution dawned on her and she was surprised at herself for not seeing it all earlier.

The pool was not confined to the area washed out by the recent rains. From the top of the hillock she clearly saw a long, narrow hollow running down the hill-side. It must have been deep and straight once, but time and winds had demolished it and one could hardly see it now.

She tried to make sure of the all but obliterated traces of the ancient bed before the sun had reached its zenith and driven the shadows out of the creases and folds.

It was a ditch, an irrigation ditch.

Aikiz swung abruptly into the saddle and galloped down the slope, cutting straight across to the village. The wind whistled and howled in her ears. All the colours of the fields merged into one bright ribbon under Baichibar's hoofs.

Umurzak-ata had woken up early that day: sleep is short with the old. He put on a white shirt which came down to his knees, belted it with a blue silk kerchief, and came out on the verandah. The shirt, cut low at the neck, showed his chest, dark with sunburn.

He was tall, somewhat stooped, broad-shouldered; his whole frame emanated power in spite of his advanced years. Mechanically, he thrust his feet into his tall, soft boots, and twitching his shoulders in the morning coolness went down the porch steps and into the courtyard. He shielded his eyes with his large hand and scanned the sky.

The cool morning promised a fine day.

Unhurriedly, the old man poured some water into a shining new samovar, and threw a handful of lighted kindling down the funnel. A hot flame was soon blazing there.

He listened for a moment to hear if it had taken on well and then began to sweep the yard. It must be said that he kept it really spick and span to the envy of his neighbours who were not too keen on housework. Early spring flowers strained upwards to the sun, and their bright petals and leaves sparkled with drops of dew. A rosy light fell on the smooth, well-beaten court.

The old man wielded his broom with pleasure.

He felt the vigour of youth tingling in his muscles. Umurzak-ata kept glancing towards the Kok-Tau. It was three days since Aikiz had gone away, and time dragged on so endlessly without her. But he saw no one on the