

## ▼ FROM *IN THE EMPIRE OF GENGHIS KHAN* BY STANLEY STEWART

Throughout the evening people came to warn me about themselves. They sat on the grass outside my tent, unburdening themselves with pre-emptive confessions. The following day would be difficult, they said. Weddings were boisterous occasions. People became unpredictable. They counselled me about particular individuals, then admitted that they themselves could be as bad as the next fellow. I would be wise to get away early before things got out of hand.

In the morning the groom and his supporters, a party of about seven or eight relations, set off to fetch the bride from her **ger**, which lay some 15 miles away. An old Russian truck, the equivalent of the wedding **Rolls**, had been specially hired for the occasion.

When they arrived the groom would be obliged to search for his bride who by tradition must hide from him. It would not be too difficult. The tradition is that she hides under a bed in the neighbouring **ger**. While we waited for their return we were given breakfast in the newlyweds' **ger**. Over the past weeks it had been lovingly prepared by relations. It was like a show **ger** from **Ideal Gers**... Biscuits, slabs of white cheese and boiled sweets had been **arrayed** on every surface in dizzy tiers like wedding cakes. On a low stool stood a mountainous plate of sheep parts, with the favoured cut, the great fatty tail, like a grey glacier on its summit.

Younger sisters hustled in and out making last-minute preparations. While we were at breakfast the first lookouts were posted to watch for the return of the truck bearing the wedding party from the bride's camp. By mid-afternoon we were still waiting. Apparently a wedding breakfast would have been given to the groom and his accompanying party at the bride's camp, and complicated calculations were now performed concerning the number of miles to the bride's **ger**, divided by the speed of the truck combined with the probable duration of the breakfast, and finally multiplied by the estimated consumption of **arkhi**.

At four o'clock a spiral of dust finally appeared beyond a distant ridge. When the truck drew up in front of the wedding **ger**, it was clear that the **lavish** hospitality of the bride's camp had been the cause of the delay. The back of the truck was crammed with wedding guests in such a state of **dishevelled** merriment that we had some difficulty persuading them to disembark. The bride's mother, apparently convinced that they were at the wrong **ger**, required four men to convey her to **terra firma**. The bride's elder sister, shrugging off all assistance, fell headfirst from the **tailgate**, bounced twice and came to rest, smiling, against a door post.

**ger** Mongolian home.

**Rolls** Rolls Royce, a luxury make of car that is often used for weddings.

**Ideal Gers** A play on the name of a British magazine, *Ideal Home*.

**arrayed** Arranged.

**arkhi** A clear spirit distilled from milk.

**lavish** Very generous.

**dishevelled** Disordered, disarranged.

**terra firma** [Latin] Solid ground.

**tailgate** The back end of the truck.