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An
Anthology of
CHUVASH
Poetry

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INTRODUCED BY GENNADY AYGI

Kestenttin Ivanov

(Kestenttin Ivanov)

(1890–1915)

Kestenttin (Konstantin) Ivanov was born in the village of Slakpus in the Belebey district of Bashkiria, the son of a rich and literate peasant. In 1903 he entered the Chuvash school in Simbirsk, and in 1907 was expelled together with some classmates for a political strike. In the autumn of that year, Ivan Yakovlev invited him back to Simbirsk to work on the Chuvash translation commission (he translated the 'Song of Songs' for the Chuvash Bible). He was a day pupil at the Simbirsk classical *gymnasium* until 1909 and in the autumn of 1910 began to teach writing and drawing in the women's section of the Chuvash school of Simbirsk. More details of his life will be found in the Introduction, pp. xxviii–xxix.

Narspi, the long narrative poem which made him famous, was published anonymously in Yakovlev's 1908 anthology 'Stories and Traditions of the Chuvash'. It has since been published several times in Russian, has been translated into several of the languages of the USSR and published in separate editions in Bulgaria and Hungary. Apart from this poem, Ivanov also wrote two long legendary poems, a number of shorter poems and an unfinished verse drama. His work gave definitive form to the Chuvash literary language and established new poetic norms, close to those of European literature.

A monument was erected to Ivanov in Cheboksary in 1952. The Chuvash theatre of music and drama bears his name, and in 1966 the Chuvash government established a Kestenttin Ivanov Prize for literature and the arts.

Narspi

(extract)

In the steppe amid the green grass
Grows a bright yellow buttercup.
In the great village of Silbi
Grows a girl, the young Narspi.
She has a luminous, tender face
Like the yellow flower of the field.
And her eyes are deep black,
Like black agates they shine.
Curly plaits of hair entwined

Swing gaily at her back;
And when she walks lightly by,
Necklaces ring at every step.
She has but to shoot a glance
And the young man's heart beats faster;
She has only to give a smile
And the young man's soul is softened.
Who can look on the meadow flower
And not feel his eyes burn bright?
Who can see such a girl
And not greet her with a sigh?

* * *

As soon as the sun has gone to rest,
She briskly washes and dries herself,
And goes to join the choral dance
With a *shyulgeme* on her breast;
A *tevet*, ringing *shigr-shigr*
Is hanging from her shoulder;
A red silk kerchief, maiden-like,
Is tied in a knot around her head.
And in the choral dance her voice
Is like the voice of a rare bird,
But when she laughs with all her heart,
You would say: ah, she is strong.
Until the choral dance is done,

This voice cheers the dancers on . . .
And now the morning star is rising,
Smiling light from the sky's depths.
And Narspi, in her father's house,
Is sleeping peaceful and untroubled;
Dreaming only happy dreams,
She is happy too in sleep.

* * *

Up with the dawn, Narspi dresses –
Straight away she sets to work:
Singing, she takes a silver thread,
Embroiders patterns on the cloth,

Or else sits down to sew a seam
As even as a row of beads.
The steel dog with the scanty tail
Vanishes, then appears again;
And then she will sit down to weave,
How she can make her shuttle play!
Or else she takes the spinning wheel
And winds her distaff in a trice.
Perhaps the cat is on the bench
Starting to wash its face with its paw,
And here too Narspi is ready,
Preparing food and drink for the guests . . .
Yes, her life was well spent,
Till the time of maidenhood was done,
Till the time they came to her father's house
To marry her to a foreign man . . .

(1908)

(*shyulgeme* and *tevet* – adornments)