

Ahmet, The Treasurer's Son

An Oriental Tale from
The Arabian Nights – perhaps!

By Asger Lund

1.

It is said of Sultan Omar Ben-Nahar, chief of the Faithful in Shiraz, that when he was a young man during the reign of his father he led a most self-indulgent life and did nothing whatever to resist any sort of carnal temptation. In fact his dissipations, in the company of two friends of his age called Jafar ai-Din and Ali el-Kafur, reached such a proportion that they came to the attention of the Sultan, his father, who ordered the Captain of the Guard to search for the offending trio through all the high and low places of the city and bring them forthwith into his presence.

And so the next day it was three extremely subdued and frightened youths who stood before their ruler with lowered eyes and pale faces. They were just twenty years old at the time. The Sultan gave them a choice: either marry immediately and settle down as sensible husbands and solid citizens, or be exiled for the rest of their lives.

Omar, long accustomed to having his own way, protested sulkily, but in vain. Ali, the most sensible and open-hearted of the three, begged forgiveness for his sins and promised to turn over a new leaf. Jafar, who was more devious, saw that the Sultan's anger was in earnest and his determination very real indeed, and he inquired politely who their future wives were to be.

Now it happened that the Sheik Zein el-Kahar, half-brother to the Sultan, was visiting in the royal palace and had brought with him to Shiraz his three daughters for the specific purpose of finding husbands for them. Thus Omar became married to Suleika, the sheik's oldest daughter, Jafar to her sister Zubaidah and Ali to Fatimah, the youngest and prettiest of all. When, some years later, Omar succeeded his father as Sultan, Jafar became his Grand Vezier

and Ali Treasurer of the Sultanate.

Within a year of their marriage all three couples had sons, who grew up as playmates and classmates in the royal school. By the time they were fourteen they were engaging in precisely the same kind of pranks and tomfoolery their fathers had been famous for.

The royal prince was named Abu. He was a coarse-limbed lad, inclined to bossiness. He felt superior to his two companions not only because of his title but also because his zeb had already reached the length and thickness of a grown man. His features did not suggest a very great intellect. He was stubborn, and when he did not get his way he sulked.

Hasan, the Vezier's son, had inherited his father's instinct for cunning and intrigue. Often he was the deciding force in the boys' enterprises without Abu ever realizing it. His face was narrow and intense, with eyes that watched, judged and schemed.

And then there was Ahmet, the treasurer's son. Ahmet was so beautiful that it hurt the eyes to look at him, and yet everyone was compelled to look whenever he passed and gasp in admiration. The other two teased him about his beauty. They called him "Baby Doll" and were quick to seize each opportunity to place him in an unfavorable or ridiculous light. Often in school Ahmet suffered for some piece of mutual roguery which the other two were able to blame on him alone, and then they watched with glee as Ahmet's bare and beautiful bottom was treated to the schoolmaster's dreaded whip.

Another reason for the spiteful behavior of the two boys was their mothers' hatred of their younger sister (and Ahmet's mother) Fatimah. It was Fatimah's fate to be the only beauty, and the only kind and gentle heart, in her family. Despite the better marriages the older sisters had made, they never lost their childhood envy, and night after night they poured the poison of their dislike into their husbands' ears and day after day sought to turn their sons against the beautiful Ahmet.

Time, rather than healing old hatreds, only exacerbated the situation, for Suleika and Zubaidah grew increasingly dissatisfied with the nocturnal performances of their husbands. The Sultan, always fond of good eating and sweet stuff, was now fat and shapeless as a garden slug and the plain Suleika soon came to regard the regular plowing of her pastures by his sizable, eager zeb as a painful and detestable duty. Zubaidah was not much better off, although hers was quite another problem. The Grand Vezier had thrown himself so totally into all the intrigue which his position offered that he soon quite lost interest in the pleasures, such as he might find, of his own bed, with the result that Fatimah's cove became a lonely and unfrequented place and her thirst for the fire and sweet fruit of love grew by the day. In this light the marital bliss of their younger sister became an abomination in the eyes of Suleika and Zubaidah – and it was no help that Ahmet, of all the three cousins, was clearly the most beautiful, most admired – and cheerful, for the treasurer and his lovely wife were proud and satisfied with their son and Ahmet returned their love with well-

mannered respect and filial devotion.

Shortly after the boys turned fifteen, at a time when the hot juices of youth were running most strongly in their veins, a messenger arrived from Ispahan with an invitation to all sultans, emirs and sheiks to participate in a birthday feast in the royal palace for the Sultan's daughter. The young lady would turn fourteen and a competition in sports and martial arts was planned as a way of examining marriageable youths. Abu, Hasan and Ahmet, of course, were invited, and they immediately started their preparations. They had lessons in shooting with bow and arrow, scimitar fighting and dueling with lance. They practiced running and swimming, singing and reciting, since nobody was quite sure what the competition would consist of. All the best teachers were summoned from near and far; in the months that followed the three boys were so occupied that they had little time for their usual pranks.

It was difficult to say who was the better of the three, since the weaknesses of one were the strengths of another. Abu, the royal prince, was by far the strongest and heaviest, but he was slow of body and mind. Hasan used his native cunning to judge his risks and calculate the weaknesses of his opponents with great shrewdness. Furthermore, he had the gift of a golden tongue, being able to spin long and intricate tales with all the innocence of a born liar. Ahmet was the lightest and most slender, but what he lacked in strength and cunning he easily made up for in his keen eye and fast reactions. His fingers were deft; the strings of both bow and citar fell naturally into his hand and his voice was clear and pure in song.

So each boy prepared himself according to his own abilities until it was time for their departure. At last the caravan was assembled, with slaves and cooks and warriors to protect them against bandits and wild animals, and they set off, the three sisters, their sons and all their retainers.

The moon was full when they began; it was no longer in the sky by the time they drew near to Ispahan. One of their last camp sites was by a big and placid river, and there, while the heat of the day was still upon them, the three lads took off along the shore seeking a secluded place. Finding one at last, they dropped their dusty traveling clothes and dived headlong into the waters, naked as they had been when they had come into this world fifteen years before.

They splashed and squirted each other with their mouths. They rode on one another's shoulders. They swam through each other's legs and attacked one another beneath the cool surface of the water. Then Abu stood on a sand bar, awash only to his knees, and, brandishing his zeb, which rose to the occasion, challenged his companions to race him to completion. Hasan accepted the wager (and determined that it would be wise to lose by a second or two) but Ahmet said he would rather dive for precious stones on the river bed.

"Oh, let him play with his rocks," said Abu. "Come on, Hasan, we'll show Baby Doll what a man does with his zeb."

And so the royal prince and the son of the Grand Vezier stood in the shallow water, two young warriors facing the reddening sun with their hands flying on

themselves, until the royal rapier spat forth a silver arc and Abu whooped in triumph and collapsed into the water. A moment later the river received the calculated offering of Hasan, too.

Now it happened that their mothers had also taken a stroll together along the river bank. They heard Abu's cry and the laughter of the two others and they cautiously walked up behind some bushes to have a closer and secret look. They arrived just after the zeb-brandishing competition had come to its natural conclusion and their three sons were once more playing as lively young boys in the water. Fatimah, satisfied in her marriage and noting once again how much more beautiful and graceful her son was than the others, smiled with motherly pride. But Suleika and Zubaidah, athirst for the hot passions of love, found their hungry eyes fastening on the proud, supple body of their sister's son, his keen, sensuous face and bright, gleaming glance. When they looked down to their nephew's zeb their knees trembled with desire. Although scarcely haired at all, it was full and dangled hypnotizingly between the boy's firm thighs – quite a lot bigger just then than the tired, shrunken and recently milked appendages of their own sons.

“We had better go,” said Suleika, in a strange, tense voice.

“Yes, this isn't right,” agreed the equally troubled Zubaidah.

Their sister smilingly agreed, and they withdrew.

But neither Suleika nor Zubaidah could put out of her mind the memory of that exciting youth and each became obsessed by the desire to see his virgin zeb lift its head in attack and then to welcome its victorious entry into her burning sheath.

After the evening meal, while dusk was falling and the travelers were preparing for sleep, Ahmet wandered off alone a short distance from the caravan camp. He sat down on a rock and was just watching the sky deepen from twilight blue into a star-pricked, diamond-decorated tapestry which stretched from horizon to horizon when he heard footsteps behind him. He jumped to his feet, but sat down again with a polite greeting when he saw that it was just his aunt, the wife of the Grand Vezier. Zubaidah seated herself at his side and placed an arm around his shoulder and, although she usually didn't behave quite this affectionately, Ahmet did not find it especially strange. They talked about this and that, but gradually Zubaidah's questions became personal.

“Dear Ahmet, I am your aunt. You needn't hide from me that you know quite well what all boys do to their zebs when they are alone.”

Ahmet blushed, but in the starlight it couldn't be seen. He stuttered and mumbled, but he managed to remain non-committal.

“You have grown into such a big and handsome lad,” his aunt continued. “Surely you can put it to better use. And you owe your aunt Zubaidah, who loves you, a glimpse of this most precious treasure.”

She had moved gradually closer. Ahmet would have dearly loved to have left right then and there, but he was too well-behaved to do anything but stay politely right where he was, even when she placed a hand on his thigh and began

exploring with her fingers for the magic lever of her young nephew's charm.

In time, however, the sight, the warm touch, the sweet, boyish smell of Ahmet's hair and breath and skin proved irresistible. Zubaidah was no longer able to contain the passions which writhed beneath her aristocratic control. With a hoarse cry she pulled the boy to her bosom, pressed her burning lips to his and grasped, through his trousers, that idolized zeb which, since she had first laid eyes upon it that very afternoon, had become a fiery obsession.

Ahmet kicked out in surprise. At first he was scared; then disgust replaced his fear. With a strangled cry he cast off the offensive embrace, leapt to his feet and ran away, frantically trying to rearrange his clothing. But as he rounded a big boulder by the riverside he ran into a dark figure who exclaimed, "But it is Ahmet! Dear me, what is the matter? You are quite beside yourself, and your trousers are nearly falling off your hips!"

It was Suleika – the one other woman to whom he would be quite unable to give any sensible explanation.

"What are you mumbling about, Ahmet!" Suleika demanded. "By the grace of Allah, you haven't been performing the abominable act of self-abuse? Well, as your aunt I shall soon find out!"

And before Ahmet knew what was happening she had released his belt altogether, his pants had fallen to the ground and she was inspecting his most private and enjoyable toy for signs of a practice not at all unknown to him although quite differently labeled. His senses, however, were no more aroused from this peculiar situation than from Zubaidah's near-rape, and when he found that this aunt, too, was attempting something more than a simple inspection of his virtue – rather an aggressive attempt to get his zeb to raise its proud head – he gave her a violent push which sent her sprawling in the dew-soaked sand.

"Has everyone in my family been moon-struck?" he thought, once again struggling to hoist his trousers. "So help me, she had already positioned herself to take a formidable bite out of my poor zeb . . ."

He walked back to the family tent, went straight to bed without a word about his strange nocturnal experiences and, with some difficulty, fell into a troubled sleep.

In the meantime, by the riverside, Suleika had been helped to her feet by her sister Zubaidah, who laughingly told her she had witnessed the whole scene.

"Well, so what?" Suleika shot back. "I had the doubtful pleasure of witnessing *your* unsuccessful attack upon our beautiful nephew's virtue!"

Now it was Zubaidah's turn to sulk, but soon they were united by their common humiliation and on friendly terms again.

"That brat's unbearable, and Fatimah's pride in him is quite insufferable," Suleika said. "One would think she didn't know that my son Abu was the crown prince, and that he is many times bigger and stronger than Ahmet."

"True. Hasan cannot stand the conceit of that pretty boy!"

As they talked their spite grew and grew. If Ahmet was unable to be moved by their beauty and charm he must be one of those despicable creatures who

experienced love crawling upon their bellies.

“Obviously it was a mistake for Allah to have equipped him with such a beautiful zeb. He doesn't deserve one!” said Zubaidah.

“Perhaps we can rid him of it somehow,” Suleika said. “Suppose we tell our dear sons that Ahmet tried to make love to us – unsuccessfully, of course!”

And they bent their dark heads together in the dark night, happy at last in conspiracy.

2.

More than a thousand miles away, in Africa, there still lived in those years the renowned Abdallah el-Hamid, the greatest and wisest sorcerer in all the world. Allah had granted him a long and happy life, an enviable series of joys and triumphs, but now he was old and weary and he found his mind was increasingly preoccupied with that ultimate journey toward the soothing, cool pastures of Paradise.

Nobody knew how old Abdallah el-Hamid really was, not even Kemal, his beloved foster son. Kemal bore the family name of el-Hamid with his mentor's blessing. He was a strong, handsome young man of 22 and was already an accomplished magician in his own right. From early on he had been carefully taught. When he was only eight he had transformed a common green caterpillar into a magnificent butterfly, although this had taken over a week. At the age of twelve, with Abdallah's help, he discovered that his body had its own small magic wand which, with the larger one of his dear foster father, could perform any number of miracles and transformations of mood. By the time he was sixteen he had read all the magic tracts in his master's library, used nearly every preparation from the casks stored in the deepest basement of Abdallah el-Hamid's subterranean palace. Now he need fear neither the jinnies of heaven nor those of earth.

At last the time came when Kemal and Abdallah realized that their final parting was a hand. “My dear son,” said the old man, “we both know that this is not a moment of grief. I leave life and this mortal frame knowing I have done my best to teach you everything I know. My work is done and my worldly possessions I happily leave to you.”

Kemal gazed into the tired but beautiful old eyes and was swept with sorrow at the prospect of having to continue life without his beloved mentor. At the same time he was moved and indescribably elevated at the old man's acceptance of death.

“We have no need of concealing things from each other,” Abdallah el-Hamid continued, “and so I must tell you of one final worry. Your resistance to marriage – and your reason for it – delight and comfort me, as you know

perfectly well. Witchcraft and magic ought never to come within reach of women or girls – one might as well hand a torch to a toddler inside a powder-room. So the fact that you love males and not females is not the root of my distress.

“You are surrounded by a selection of the most beautiful boys in all of Islam, and as far as I know you make the most of your opportunities to lie in their well-shaped arms and bury your zeb between their nether cheeks. Yet I find you often silent and out of sorts, gazing off into space for hours at a time. Before I part I must know what is troubling you, for I will not be able to tread the paths of Paradise with an easy mind unless I know that when I am gone my inheritance will be managed according to the spirit of my life.”

Kemal nodded and gave his foster father a loving smile. “Noble and paternal protector, I understand perfectly, and it is my most fervent wish that I could find my way to total happiness. If, in your inconceivable wisdom, you could help me, my debt to you, already boundless, will reach up to Paradise itself!”

The old man placed a hand on the youth's shoulder and searched his innermost soul. “Tell me, my son, what troubles you and I shall do my best.”

Without hesitation Kemal repeated that the charms of women were still unimportant to him, that love with willing boys and passionate youths was for him the only road to carnal bliss. “But the quenching of this bodily thirst does not quite satisfy me any more. I immersed myself in studies and experiments, but recently I have found that even the most dramatic tricks, the most elegant transformations, have only left me the sadder at my inability to transform my own unhappiness into the kind of blessed peace Allah has granted you.”

“Is it love you are lacking?” Abdallah inquired.

“What I need is someone I can love with all my own heart, someone I can help, comfort and guide and who belongs to me completely. Not as my slaves belong to me, for they *have* to love me, but somebody who loves me with his own free will and who can help, comfort and guide me, too. Somewhere, in all the vastness of Islam, there must be such a boy. But how and where do I find him?”

“You have discovered, as so many before you, that your wealth and power are only obstacles to true love?”

Kemal nodded with a worried frown. “Yes, and the one I love cannot be just another beautiful boy with sweet breath and lovely teeth and smooth, young limbs, another willing lad with good manners and a quick mind. He must be the most beautiful and pleasing boy in all the world, of course, but how do I find him and, when I do, how do I then decide if his love is true? Those are the two questions which have haunted me – and seem to be saddening your last days on earth.”

“You have lifted a stone from my heart, Kemal!” the old magician sighed. “Your problems, of course, are as old as creation but to those with our powers they shouldn't be insoluble. Your first question will be answered in a few minutes with my farewell present. The second you will have to find the answer

to yourself when I am gone, but perhaps I can make the way easier for you by asking a few last questions.”

“This is more than I had hoped for,” Kemal said, smiling in happy surprise.

The old magician's face brightened for a moment. “Kemal, this is how I like to remember you, and the image that will be in my mind as I cross to Paradise! Tell me first, what do you demand of true love? Fidelity?”

Kemal knitted his brows and thought for a few seconds. “Yes, but a fidelity of the mind, the soul. Not a physical one.”

“And why not?”

“Because that would just be an illusion. The body often betrays its owner. It can be conquered by force or bought with gold. If this kind of fidelity was sufficient I wouldn't be searching for something else, for I already have it with my young friends and slaves.”

“That is right,” Abdallah declared, regarding him attentively. “What, then, *are* the conditions which must be met?”

This time Kemal closed his eyes and pondered for quite a while. Then he looked squarely at his mentor and answered slowly and with conviction, “First, he has to be without doubt of the permanent direction of his love, that he would not later be snared by the sweet charms and insinuations of females. Second, he must love me, with all his heart and all his mind. Third, this love must be unpurchasable by wealth or power, even in the most pressing and critical situations when selling his body is the only way he can survive. Fourth, his love must be strong enough to resist the courtship of even the bravest and most accomplished of men or the most beautiful and charming youth.”

Abdallah nodded his head several times and said with a smile that the one remaining question was whether such perfection existed.

Kemal sighed. “Just that thought bothers me constantly, yet I am convinced that somewhere, among the thousands and thousands of desirable boys and beautiful youths, such a person is right now alive but how to find him! How to know who he is! How to test him!”

“The testing will take time,” the old magician said kindly. “But as to who is the most beautiful boy in all of Islam... let us ask.” And he turned to a small table at his bedside upon which a crystal ball, now dark, rested.

“Noble Father, only you can see into that.”

“You forget, though we are mortal, this is not.” Abdallah had taken the ball and placed it on his lap. “Put your hands upon it, too: its next command will be my last – and your first.”

Kemal did as he was told, and then, for the first time in his life, he saw the light within it begin as a sort of swirl of snow-flakes. Then the storm cleared and they were looking at a shallow place in a wide river and two boys standing in it brandishing their ready zeb. Kemal watched as one threw an arc of silver seed, listened to the hoarse cry of triumph, but was disappointed because neither of the boys was of more than average good looks. Then there was a swirl of water at their feet; a third boy sprang out of the river, and, oh, how different this

one was!

For several minutes they watched the ball in a kind of enchanted trance, then, as the image lost power and began to fade, Kemal turned to the old man and said, "Dear Father, I have found him!"

"And so did I," the old magician said looking at Kemal with his eyes full of love. And so saying he passed into Paradise.

3.

When the three families from Shiraz arrived with their caravan in Isphahan they found the city teeming like an excited ant-hill. All of Islam had gathered for the festivities. There were singers and dancers, magicians and jugglers, courtesans and thieves. The markets were overflowing with goods. Ahmet's nose, long parched on the journey by the smell of camel sweat and smoke, twitched now to the scents of perfume and spices, of gum and pitch, the aroma of fresh fruit ripening in the food stalls in the sun.

They took lodgings in the caravanserai of a certain Bahlul which was located close to the Sultan's palace. Bahlul was a large man of variable temper, brother-in-law to the Grand Vezier. Through this family connection he was able to fill his inn with the richest and most distinguished visitors to Isphahan. At the moment the place was so busy that even Bahlul's wife, two daughters and twelve-year-old son Zeid were pressed into service, which under normal conditions was not necessary at all. The three children were all good looking and well behaved and so delighted the guests that many an extra coin was pressed into their outstretched hands.

Bahlul, however, watched his children like a hawk and took care that nobody behaved improperly, especially where the boy Zeid was concerned; if anyone did he roared like a wounded lion. Once a rich traveling salesman from Basra patted Zeid's cheeks a little too kindly and asked the boy to serve him his meals in his rooms. Bahlul threw the salesman out of the caravanserai with all of his retinue, then returned to the other guests and roared that he would personally cut off the zeb of anyone who tried to lure his son into acts of a lewd nature – and he looked menacingly around the room to emphasize that this swift vengeance would be wreaked on any malefactor regardless of rank or position. After that the guests were very careful with the kinds of compliments and pleasantries they offered the children.

Most of the time, however, Bahlul was an amiable host and the atmosphere in the caravanserai was animated and pleasant. The guests were a cross section of Islam's enormous talent, and the evenings, if the truth be known, were probably even more interesting than those passed in the Sultan's palace. Poets read their poems, musicians played, old warriors told of ancient battles, and one

of the most popular of the guests was a young minstrel who simply introduced himself as Kamakan. He was not only pleasant but he played his long-necked citar like a master, singing gay and sad songs to bring tears and laughter to his listeners. Suleika and Zubaidah agreed that such a well-behaved young person just had to come from a very good family. When they questioned Kamakan he was politely evasive – which only strengthened their conviction. But Ahmet noticed several times that the singer seemed to look at him with a more than normal interest, and this was disturbing: he blushed and felt quite shy and became aware of hitherto unknown feelings rising in his soul.

For Ahmet and his two cousins the preliminary competition the next day went very well indeed. In every event one or the other of the three boys prevailed, and at the banquet that night the Sultan announced that at the final trials the only competitors would be Abu, Hasan and Ahmet. They would shoot two rounds with bow and arrow: one would be to a fixed target; the other would be scored on distance. And the boy who won would become the Sultan's son-in-law a year hence.

One can imagine the excitement in Bahlul's caravanserai that night. Everyone wanted to congratulate the three youths, but Ahmet was aware that for one reason or another none of the three of them was as exuberantly happy as he ought to have been. Abu and Hasan knew quite well that Ahmet was the best shot, so it seemed almost certain that Ahmet would win, but to Ahmet the thought of being married to the Sultan's only daughter, beautiful though she was, only filled him with indifference and a slight depression. To his surprise and chagrin he had discovered at the banquet that fantasies about the pleasures of a wedding night in no way brought on the expected firm towering of his ever-ready zeb: if anything it seemed to withdraw at such thoughts. How sad it would be if that happened on a real wedding night! Tired and indisposed, he forsook his companions and went early to bed.

It was several hours later that Kamakan put away his long-necked citar to the protests of the other guests and set off alone for his quarters, but anyone who might have been watching would have seen him pause outside one of the bedrooms from which issued loud voices of anger and derisive laughter. They would have observed him bend his head to listen for a moment, then hurry off to his own room, wrap himself in a dark cloak and climb out the window into the night.

A moment later the minstrel was kneeling under the window of the room occupied by Abu and Hasan, eavesdropping on an evil conspiracy plotted by the two cousins and their mothers and aimed not only at eliminating Ahmet as a competitor in the final shooting but at depriving him of his precious zeb as well. Ahmet was to be given a strong sleeping potion the following evening, and so was Bahlul's young son Zeid. When the drug had taken effect they would abduct the 12-year-old boy, carry him to Ahmet's room, and then undress both of them and put them together in the same bed. Early in the morning, when Zeid

was discovered missing, a search would be made, and the rest would follow as a matter of course.

“Perhaps one of you should rape the little boy,” said Zubaidah, “to leave a bit of evidence in the bed clothes.”

“That will be me,” said Abu.

The next day was a day of rest from the competition. Everywhere the three boys went they were congratulated and questioned about their chances in the final shooting on the morrow. Ahmet soon grew bored with all this homage and returned alone to the inn. There he sought a quiet corner in the garden to ponder the troubling whirlpools of thought and sensation which were spoiling his temper. A few minutes later he heard someone approaching and was relieved to see it was Kamakan. The minstrel politely inquired if he might join him.

“You are most welcome,” said Ahmet; already his spirits were beginning to rise.

“Perhaps I shouldn't talk about the shooting tomorrow,” said Kamakan. “Am I right that you aren't especially looking forward to the prospect of winning?”

Ahmet nodded. “But it's too late to do anything about that now. I am by far the best shot, as my whole family knows. It would be impossible not to win without it looking contrived. My dear father and mother wouldn't understand at all – and I would have no reasonable explanation to give them.”

“But there is an explanation, isn't there?” Kamakan gently probed. “Not that I have any right to an answer.”

“Of course. I don't want to marry the Sultan's daughter, and there's a very good reason for that, too. It's just that I cannot give it to anybody. I only wish I could find a way to lose without it seeming deliberate!”

Kamakan looked at him thoughtfully. “I would like you to regard me as a friend, Ahmet,” he began. “I am sure you have noticed how highly I have come to value you, but Allah forbid that I ever express my interest in you other than by admiring glances, unless, of course, you give me permission to do more.”

Ahmet thanked him with slightly colored cheeks, saying he already knew that Kamakan was a friend but he was so completely preoccupied at the moment with his problems that he had little thought for anything else.

“Then I'll just have to help you – if I may, Ahmet,” Kamakan said and, as the boy looked at him in surprise, he continued, “I believe I know what to do. I am not going to tell you, since you have to play your part, too, and I don't want to promise too much in advance. Tomorrow you just go into the arena and shoot up to your best, not losing heart even if you immediately take the lead. Trust me, and pray to Allah, and you won't have to marry the Sultan's daughter.”

Ahmet leapt to his feet and delivered an impulsive kiss hot on Kamakan's mouth and said, “If you are really able to fulfill such a promise, then you are not only a friend of mine but my very best friend – for life!” And he fled to his rooms leaving Kamakan standing alone in the garden with the sweet taste of the boy's glowing kiss still upon his lips.

That evening the conspirators put their plan of vengeance to work. Both Ahmet and Zeid drank their potions without any suspicion; both became sleepy at an early hour and had to leave for their beds. As soon as all the caravanseraï was quiet Abu stole into Zeid's room, lifted the sleeping child in his strong arms and carried him to Ahmet's bed. Hasan and their mothers were waiting for him, and now they set about stripping the two drugged boys – when they discovered that Ahmet's zeb was already raising its lovely head they giggled.

“Last time it ever does that,” growled Abu.

“Leave it for Bahlul,” his mother warned. “Only touch the little one.”

“Yes, Aunt Suleika,” said Hasan. “Now it is time for you to leave. Abu has man's work to do.”

When they were alone the two cousins turned Zeid on his stomach and caressed his pert white globes that rose, warm and defenseless, into their hands. Then, as Hasan held the boy by his shoulders, Abu mounted him, casually wet down his engorged zeb with spittle and in one cruel lunge thrust it home. A quiver went through the small body, but the sleeping potion was of the highest quality and Zeid remained deeply asleep as the future Sultan of Shiraz took his plunging pleasure over him and in him and then, with a hoarse cry, fell off him and withdrew to watch, with satisfaction and pride, a tiny tickle of the boy's blood form at the violated portal and run down over the smooth thighs into the bed clothes.

“Perfect,” said Hasan. “Now let us get our sleep for the games tomorrow.”

Outside the window, Kamakan, wrapped in his dark cloak, had been observing all of this. He waited until the cousins had left, then he crawled through the window and, taking a jar from the folds of his cloak, gently fingered some salve into the violated portal of the young boy. The bleeding soon stopped. Now he lifted the lad in his arms and carried him back to the boy's own bed where he tucked him in and, bending down to place a gentle kiss upon his brow, said, “One week ago I would have taken you even as Abu did, but with infinitely greater care. Now I can only leave you to your innocent slumber. Thank you, Zeid, for the help you have been to me this evening!”

He went back to Ahmet's room, tidied up, changed the linen, then lifted the sleeping boy in his arms and started down the darkened corridor to his own quarters. There all was ready. He put Ahmet down on an old, worn carpet which he had earlier that night spread upon the floor, placed beside him his long-necked citar, then knelt beside both and gave his command. A moment later the room was empty and nobody ever would have known that it had recently been occupied but for a lingering scent of sandalwood.

When Ahmet awoke he was surprised to find himself staring at the star-pricked heavens rather than the familiar beams of his bedroom in the caravanserai. He was lying, quite naked, in a little patch of grass beside a cliff which rose just behind. The night was cool but not cold; a breeze whimpered from time to time in the bushes clinging to ledges in the rock. He raised himself on an elbow, then saw the dark form of Kamakan standing protectively beside him. Before them was Isphahan, white buildings just visible in the starlight, lit here and there by an occasional torch.

Ahmet's mind reeled with questions, but, before he could put them into words, Kamakan knelt and told him of the plot hatched by his two cousins and their mothers and how he had foiled it. It took a few minutes for sleep, and the sleeping potion, to clear out of Ahmet's thoughts; then he realized how enormous was his debt of gratitude and he leapt to his feet and threw himself into Kamakan's arms. Now all restraint was cast aside as burning kiss followed burning kiss and the zeb of the naked boy, already rearing in sleep, pressed firm against Kamakan, a wordless confession of what was needed. The passion and fire of his body struck the boy nearly dumb with happiness. Kamakan caught his butting zeb, felt its abundance and vitality – and became acutely and painfully conscious that his own zeb, too, eagerly wanted out. They sank as one into the dew-splagred grass.

Thus Ahmet lost his virginity, an experience which caused him no end of pleasure and delight. Beneath the bright stars their mutual passions, seen only by the unblinking eyes of little rock creatures, mounted to such heights of delirium that Ahmet unresistingly allowed his friend to mount him and thrust his formidable scimitar between his buttocks and trembling thighs. Now they were one in the eternal night. Beneath his back Ahmet felt the cool grass, above him loomed the strong, laboring shoulders and the working hips of his friend, two souls joined where flesh has the most feeling. And all the time their lips drank from each other as two thirsty men do from a well. At last all that was inside them broke out like glowing lava, exploded deep as an earthquake from the buried scimitar of Kamakan and sky high from Ahmed's foaming zeb.

Afterwards the two lovers fell asleep in each other's arms but opened their eyes at the first cock-crow. Their zebs had awakened before them, and this time they loved tenderly and slowly, as the sky caught fire from one tiny cloud and the dawn advanced above them until the whole heavens were streaked with red and purple and gold.

When at last their own glory had once again pulsed to fulfillment and faded, Ahmet looked into Kamakan's eyes and proclaimed his everlasting love. He was then surprised, and deeply distressed, when Kamakan tried to dampen his enthusiasm.

“Don't you believe me, Kamakan? Or am I just a momentary satisfaction for your hungry loins? You say you are my friend – and I certainly believe *that* after all the strange events of this night – but I need you as more than just a friend!”

“Indeed I believe you, Ahmet,” said Kamakan gravely. “I am quite sure you mean every word you say. You are still young, however, and the marvelous love of this past night was your first experience of that sort with another human being. How do I know – how do *you* know – that such interest in a man is nothing but a passing preoccupation with love as a purely physical delight? That your imagination will not be captured by the more usual obsession with female forms and charms as you grow into the full power of maturity? That your tastes won't be overwhelmed by any of a multitude of sensual pleasures, to fall for a noble man or woman who has more wealth or more power or is just better looking than I? My love for you is immense, but just for that reason – because you are not a moment's folly – I do hesitate.”

With tears in his eyes catching the red glory of the dawn, Ahmet protested that his love was the most perfect in all of Islam and the only question that remained was whether his friend's was equally great.

“What do you demand of me, Kamakan? How shall I ever convince you that my love is infinite and unbreakable?”

The young man took the boy's face between his two hands, kissed him passionately and for a long time and then held him away to look him deep in the eyes.

“The shooting will soon start, Ahmet, and when it is finished I shall be gone. No, please don't cry. Listen to my words instead. True love conquers all and it is up to you to effect our reunion. If you do in fact love me as dearly as you say then no difficulties will be too severe, no opponent unbeatable, no distance too great. You only have to believe in one single fact: deep in my heart burns an unquenchable yearning for a true love that will overcome everything, and the memory of this one night and the boy who brought it to me is etched in fire in my heart. May Allah take my life, or the use of my limbs on the spot, if this is not a truth as solemn and sure as Mekka and Medina: from now to eternity you and only you occupy my soul and command my body; only you or death will be able to extinguish the fire that roars through my veins!”

Ahmet bowed his head and started to cry again, but, feeling Kamakan's comforting arm come about his shoulders, he lifted his tear-streaked face and regarded his friend with resolution.

“If I have to travel to the ends of the world I am going to find you, Kamakan, for without you and the promise of your love life is as dry as a dune of sand and as empty as the sky. I call upon Allah to witness my promise.”

The two lovers embraced passionately, and then Ahmet stepped into the clothes Kamakan had brought for him, shouldered his quiver and took up his bow and set off with a resolute step toward the shooting range.

The crowd had assembled for the competition on the plains not far from the city gate, and a gay and lively multitude it was. For the Sultan and his family a pavilion had been erected and this was hung with the finest silks and tapestries. Sweet incense burned into the clear early-morning air. There were stalls for the visiting sheiks; hundreds of pennants lined the shooting range.

It was an astonished and vastly relieved Ali and Fatimah that saw their son approaching now from the direction of the mountains looking quite confident and unconcerned. They put to him a hundred questions but all he told them was that he had arisen early in order to meditate under Allah's open ceiling. Abu and Hasan and their parents were in such lovely confusion that Ahmet kept a straight face only with the utmost difficulty.

After the target shooting his lead was considerable. He could feel the excitement of the crowd, that everyone wanted him to win. Now came the distance trials. First Abu stepped up to the line. As he tested his bow and placed an arrow upon the string such a hush came over the crowd that the plain became quiet as a deserted mountain meadow. At last he released the arrow and it shot far out across the range, dropping to earth well beyond the last pennant. There was a shout of admiration, for this was a truly magnificent shot. Proud and happy, Abu acknowledged the cheering and the congratulations of his family, and then Hasan took his place at the shooting line.

This time the arrow flew even farther and a murmur of astonishment replaced the cheers. Never before had shooting like this been seen; even Ahmet shook his head in wonder as he congratulated his cousin with a somewhat forced smile.

Then it was Ahmet's turn. Once again the crowd went quiet. He bent his bow, elevated. A silent prayer to Allah and a quick thought for Kamakan, and he released the string. He watched the arrow rise. There was a sigh from the spectators – which soon grew into an ear-splitting roar of amazement as they saw the arrow level off and then continue on and on, past the range, over the plains and finally disappear in the distance, looking for all the world as though it would go on flying like that for ever.

The Sultan dispatched horsemen to search for it but they soon returned shaking their heads and empty handed. More riders were ordered out but they, too, returned without the arrow. Then the Sultan rose in his pavilion and announced that he could not in all fairness decide in favor of Ahmet even though everyone present knew he was the real winner. The decision therefore went to Hasan who would have the great honor of marrying his daughter one year hence. Ahmet congratulated his surprised cousin with a faint smile, saluted the Sultan and his daughter with a deep bow and left the shooting range arm in arm with his parents.

“The idea of marrying so young does not really appeal to me,” he explained to them. “Even with the Sultan's daughter being such a beautiful and virtuous girl and her father the best of in-laws, I am not really disappointed. Everyone today saw who was best. If Allah in his infinite wisdom had wanted me to win

the prize as well as the match he surely would have arranged for my arrow to be found.”

Ali and Fatimah brightened at these words for deep in their hearts they had not been too happy about the prospect of sending their only son to Ispahan so soon.

5.

The caravan for Shiraz was not to leave for another week, and shortly after the shooting event Ahmet set off alone on horseback to search for his arrow. He was convinced that Kamakan was behind its strange disappearance, that in finding it he would ultimately find his friend. And he remembered exactly where he had been aiming. For two days, now, he rode under what he somehow knew was the path of its flight; around noon on the third day he fetched up at the base of tall white mountain cliffs. He reined in his horse, looked down, and there saw his arrow lying in the grass, point bent and torn as though it had hit the rock wall above with enormous force. He even saw a nick in the smooth face of the cliff; curious, he dismounted and let a finger search the small round mark. Suddenly he jumped back for the rock before him began to yield. It moved inward with a grinding sound and now revealed a dark staircase which lead back and down into the mountain.

After some hesitation he tied his horse to a tree and stepped inside, but as soon as he set foot on the steps the secret door silently closed above him. No matter how hard he struck it with his fists it would not move an inch and no matter how persistently he probed the area with the point of his dagger he could find no crack where it joined the wall. Obviously powerful forces were at work; he slumped onto the cold rock floor, feeling like a very small mouse in a very big trap. But slowly his eyes became accustomed to the dark and he now saw at the end of the tunnel a slight halo of light. Taking his courage in hand, he started to descend the steps. The light grew brighter; his hope grew with it, and by the time he was at the bottom of the staircase he was taking the steps two at a time and at last sprang through a doorway into the most gorgeous garden he had ever seen.

There were trees hung with fruits and flowers of every sort which breathed a sweet, balsamic fragrance into the air. Overhead flew brightly colored birds and their calls were lovelier than any music; beneath their wings darted a myriad of iridescent insects. Ahmet wondered whether he had somehow died unexpectedly and entered Paradise, but then he noticed a foot path and, putting all speculation out of his mind, he began to follow it.

The path wound through groves of fir and flower-spangled meadows, over tumbling brooks and beside placid ponds which reflected a gentle and placid

sky. At last he heard soft music, as of women singing from far off, and stepped into a clearing. There he saw, in the middle distance, a white pavilion of the most exquisite perfection. A figure appeared on the portico. The boy's heart leapt up: could it be Kamakan? But, as he approached, it turned out to be a girl of remarkable loveliness, and she was calling him by name.

"Welcome, most beautiful of youths, to my humble dwelling," she said. "My name is Paribanu and everything around you belongs to me. Come, let my slaves bathe and dress you, for you must be weary after so long a journey."

Ahmet was about to open his mouth to ask a thousand questions when Paribanu put a finger to his lips and said all would be explained later, after he had been refreshed.

She led him inside, and now the pavilion turned out to be but one wing of a vast palace which gave back and back into the depths of the forest. They walked through halls of alabaster and gold, of great vaulted crystal ceilings against which sweet-singing birds beat their turquoise wings. There were tapestries so vivid you could almost hear the lions roar and see the tree leaves shimmer.

At last they stopped and Paribanu clapped her hands three times. Three slaves appeared. One was a huge negro with a shaved and glistening head; the other two were beautiful youths. Paribanu left, now, and Ahmet followed the slaves through more chambers and hallways until a final door was opened and he stood at the edge of a great sunken blue-tiled bath above which fragrant steam was curling.

There he was bathed and scrubbed, then placed upon a marble table and anointed with perfumes and oils. He closed his eyes; six skilled hands plied his legs and his arms, his shoulders and his thighs, working out the weariness.

Nor was his rearing zeb neglected. "We must make this ready for our mistress," said the negro slave, and he massaged into it a very special potion of oil and scent while the two youths continued their smiling work elsewhere on his body. "But don't ask here for a final satisfaction: that She must do for you."

A short while later, dressed in a stunning robe of gold and white, he was shown into Paribanu's bedroom.

"You must know, dearest Ahmet," Paribanu began, "that I am one of the most powerful fairies in the world. Earth and ocean obey my orders and even the mightiest of air-jinnies prostrate themselves at my feet. Wealth means nothing to me, nor does power, since with just one word the richest treasures or the most terrible of invocations are at my disposal."

She seated herself on a couch of silk and gold and indicated that Ahmet was to sit beside her.

"Now it happens that the daughter of the Sultan of Isphahan is my godchild," the fairy continued. "Quite naturally I wanted to witness the competition for her hand in marriage. But there, for the first time in my life, I felt a stab of jealousy when it gradually became clear that you, my Ahmet, were going to be the winner. You must forgive my wilfulness: it was my magic which carried your arrow to these cliffs, knowing you would go searching for it until it was found."

She offered him a soft hand and pulled him closer to her side. "But, gentle Paribanu," Ahmet protested, "why was *I* chosen for such an honor?"

She put his hand upon her breast. "Feel how my heart beats at the sight of your beauty! That is how it beat the day I first saw you inside the Sultan's palace. At the final shooting I decided that you and only you were worthy of being my husband. All my belongings I will share with you; with my magic powers I shall give you eternal youth and beauty. No ruler has ever had such power as will be yours to command – and I myself will be your obedient and humble slave in everything!"

Ahmet was petrified with awe; his mind reeled at the thought of these promised wonders, and the sight and scent of this lovely young woman were intoxicating beyond compare. Yet he found that his zeb was not responding at all to what his mind told him was the chance of his lifetime; though blood colored his cheeks all love liquids fled his loins, leaving his lance of conquest limp as a withered willow twig.

Regretfully he shook his head. "Noble and honorable Paribanu, I am extremely grateful for your complimentary words and I shall evermore cherish in memory this offer of the most beautiful woman in the whole world and her overwhelming hospitality. Though I tremble before your wrath, I must nevertheless decline. Noble Paribanu, it is impossible for me to marry you: I already love another."

"What?" the fairy exclaimed in surprise. "Who is more beautiful or desirable than I? Is it my god- daughter?"

"No, not at all," Ahmet hastily replied. "It is true that I could neither find nor even imagine a more beautiful, powerful and altogether admirable woman than you, but I can only repeat that my love has already been given to somebody else."

Paribanu jumped to her feet, her lovely face coloring with anger. "Presumptuous child, you dare reject my love in favor of a mere mortal? I demand her name, so that I may prove she is not worthy of you! Then you will thank me on your knees for having saved you from such a dreary fate!"

Ahmet was standing, now, too. Although the wrath of the mighty fairy was like the roar of many storms, he hesitated for only a moment, then said, "Mighty Paribanu, I do not deserve your anger. It was you who brought me here, not a wish of my own. Perhaps you intend to hold me prisoner, and if so there is nothing I can do about it. But force me to love you, you cannot, though I admire both your looks and your power. I am not going to tell you the name of the person I love. Suffice it to say that it belongs to a man and not a woman."

The fairy stared at him with astonishment, then broke into a derisive laugh. "Well, well, the zeb of beautiful Ahmet has already been stroked by the thieving fingers of some loathsome voluptuary. Perhaps he has even impaled you on the ground with his filthy zeb rammed into your backside?" Ahmet blushed to the tips of his ears but didn't reply. "I see it's true. You've been ridden and humiliated like a mortal woman. But you are still just a boy and boys are

notoriously easy for such men to seduce. I shall save you from your morass of depravity. I shall demonstrate for you once and for all the pure love which Allah has ordained and commanded.”

Now anger blazed in Ahmet's eyes, and he replied, “It is not in my power to prevent you from trying, Mistress of the Spirits, but I am afraid your project is doomed to failure.”

“We shall see about that, oh Ahmet! We shall certainly see!”

Without knowing just how it happened, Ahmet found himself pulled down into the soft, silken cushions of the sofa, lying, quite naked, in the arms of the mighty fairy. Expertly she explored and caressed his body. When her fingers and lips had roused his well-shaped zeb to proud and quivering erection she gave a little cry of triumph and delight, but as soon as she prepared to slide it into the fragrant cleavage of her pleasure garden it bent and toppled over and dwindled out of all recognition. She tried another technique and another position, and Ahmet willingly complied with her request, but the result was the same. Again and again she tried, using all her powers and all her magic to make that most wonderful of zebs penetrate to the core her fiery furnace, but it was all to no avail. Each time the rearing stallion refused to enter the stables.

At last she jumped up with a terrible cry of rage. “Allah be merciful with you, Ahmet, for I could never be! My revenge would be cruel indeed were it not for the sacred laws of hospitality. Get thee hence, oh miserable creature!”

The floor shook. Heavy smoke and stifling vapors filled the room until Ahmet found himself blinded and struggling for breath. His head roared and he felt dizzy and when he tried to get to his feet he collapsed in a dead faint.

When he came to he was once again fully clad in his traveling clothes, stretched out in the grass where he had found the arrow, his horse calmly grazing beside him. But now the arrow was gone, there was no mark on the cliff and not a trace of a crack where the entrance to the subterranean palace had been.

6.

One morning about two weeks later, as Ali el-Kafur was about to leave his home for the palace at Shiraz, a platoon from the Sultan's guard forced its way into the house, arrested him and led him away in chains. Fatimah and Ahmet immediately set out on foot to seek an audience with the Sultan to clear up whatever misunderstanding lay behind this baffling event but they were turned away before the gates. Again and again, over the next several days, they went to the palace, but each time they were dismissed. At length they heard through kind neighbors that Ali el-Kafur had been convicted of stealing from the Sultan's treasury and was presently languishing in a deep dungeon awaiting execution.

Fatimah took on her black veil and went to her sisters to beg for her husband's life. She returned an hour later, and at one glance Ahmet could see she had suddenly become an old woman. Taking Ahmet in her arms she weepingly told him how her sisters had laughed at her, taunted her with their good fortune and her misery and revealed at last not only the depth of their hatred for her and her family but also how they had managed to arrange Ali's arrest and disgrace and how Ali would soon lose his head.

As the day of execution drew near Fatimah slowly pined away. She had no appetite and, since all their possessions had been confiscated to partially repay Ali's presumed theft, they had little to pay for her care. Ahmet poured out his troubles to their family doctor. This was a kind and helpful old man who agreed to examine Fatimah free of charge, but how, he wanted to know, would Ahmet find money to purchase medicines and proper foods? If nothing else, the boy replied, he would go to the money-lender in the bazaar.

"And what will you give as a guarantee?" the doctor wanted to know.

"Myself," Ahmet replied unhesitatingly. "I must have some value, even as a slave."

One day Ahmet was sitting on the staircase outside their house, broken-hearted and worried to death, searching his mind for ways to save his father's life and his mother's health, when an exquisitely dressed merchant with noble manners, who had been passing the house for several days, stopped and addressed the boy. He said that his name was Ghanem Ben-Ayub and he was the richest man in Baghdad except for the Caliph himself.

"I have learned of the disaster that has hit you and your family, and I would be most distressed to see a beautiful youth like you suffer the humiliation of losing his father on the executioner's block and his mother for lack of money for food and drugs. Please don't think badly of me, that I address you like this, offering my assistance without invitation, but my heart and soul were enslaved by you the first time I beheld your perfect body, your charming manners and your lovely face. I thought you were an angel from Paradise, and it has taken me a long time to gather courage to approach you like this. With your permission, divine Ahmet, I shall try to help, but if my lovelorn gazes are embarrassing you just have to order me to leave."

Ahmet looked up and thanked Ghanem Ben-Ayub for his kind words. "Unfortunately," Ahmet continued, "I am too engrossed in our family worries to reply with equal politeness and finesse, but loving gazes are never embarrassing. I do not, however, quite understand how you might help, for my father is to be executed in two days and my mother will almost certainly follow him into the grave shortly after!"

Ghanem Ben-Ayub replied that in his judgment both problems could be solved with a suitable number of gold coins, and gold was exactly what he possessed in great abundance. If Ali el-Kafur's debts were paid, and an additional bribe placed in the right hands, Ahmet's father would soon be out of jail, and this would certainly rekindle Fatimah's flame of life; the expensive

remedies and enough good food would do the rest.

“And why should a foreign merchant offer to pay such a huge amount of money?” Ahmet asked as politely as he could, although he had more than a suspicion of what the answer would be.

Ghanem Ben-Ayub smiled a little sadly. “You force me to put my proposal more bluntly than I would have liked. You are a quick-witted youth and I shall try to avoid unnecessary evasions. In return for the fortune which you quite rightly assume I would have to spend I would ask for the honor of being your lover, as only slender, well-shaped youths are able to make my still highly functional zeb raise its head towards Allah's heaven!”

With eager expectation Ghanem Ben-Ayub looked into Ahmet's face. “I am unable to answer an offer like that right away with a plain yes or no,” the boy said, blushing becomingly. “First I must speak with my mother, And then I need a little time for thought myself. I shall come to you this evening with my decision.”

Ahmet went to his mother's bed and told her about Ghanem Ben-Ayub's proposal, but when he had finished Fatimah raised herself off the pillows and grasped and caressed her son's hand.

“You mean well, Ahmet, but my son is never going to be a rich man's toy!” she declared in a firm voice.

“But, Mother, he would only be buying my body, not my soul. I am already so heavily in debt that I shall without a doubt end as a slave anyhow as soon as that money-lender discovers I haven't even one pitiful copper coin to my name!”

Fatimah shook her head. “My beloved son, it's not quite the same. As a slave you would be paying the debt with your physical work, not your physical graces. No, Ahmet, I forbid you to let our family misfortune drive you to such a disgrace. I would rather die knowing that my only son is still able to look honest people in the face. Let's not discuss it any more. I am extremely tired and would like to sleep now.”

Ahmet remained at Fatimah's bedside for a long time watching his mother after she had fallen asleep. Tears poured down his cheeks; sobbing shook his youthful frame. At last he dried his face and set out resolutely on foot to the inn where the merchant from Baghdad had his lodging. He was immediately shown into Ghanem Ben-Ayub's room by a richly costumed negro slave.

“Welcome, Ahmet el-Kafur!” said the merchant. “You bring a reply, I presume, so please don't keep me waiting, as I passionately yearn for your love.”

Ahmet answered that he did indeed come with a reply, but whether it was a pleasant or an unpleasant one he did not know. “A food trader wants a contract,” the boy began, “and he demands that such an agreement be observed.”

“I take it that you look upon this conversation as a business negotiation. Fine, that suits me perfectly. Obviously you do not bring me a simple yes or no.”

Ahmet nodded. “It is only possible for me to sell what belongs to me – not

what has already been given away. When you tell me you yearn for my love, what is this yearning really for? My body is for sale, and if that is what you desire my answer is yes. I can also offer my loyalty and such personal talents as I have, and should these be enough the answer is still yes. But if it is a craving for the true love of my soul, then the answer must be no, for that has already been given to somebody else.”

The merchant looked speculatively at the boy. “It is true that I long for the physical possession of your body; at this very moment I nearly perish at the thought of having your perfection at my side and experiencing your acquiescence under my weight – that alone should be worth a small fortune to me. I also appreciate that you offer your loyalty and personal talents. But I must confess that I would demand your true love too. Perfect love implies total submission and honest fidelity until death; it is this which I offer to purchase with such an enormous sum of money, not an incomplete lover.”

“That is what I thought, noble sir,” Ahmet answered without hesitation, “but I can not, of course, sell what isn't mine, regardless of my needs!”

“If your love has been given away without compensation you are still free to take it back again,” Ghanem Ben-Ayub quickly countered. “Consider well what's at stake: your father's life, your mother's health, your own future. Take the advice of an experienced tradesman: be bound only by witnessed agreements – loose promises are as ephemeral as last year's winter snow.”

Quietly Ahmet explained that then his commitment was binding after all, for Allah himself had been called in as a witness, but perhaps He was not a very effective merchant, either.

Ghanem Ben-Ayub's face showed his disappointment, but he couldn't help smiling in admiration. “It is probably true that you are too honest. You could easily have sold me your carnal love and, through simple affection and loyalty, concealed the fact that no love flowed from your soul. But the damage is done; I could never forget what you have told me, regardless of how willing or desirable you might be. On the other hand, I shall never forget you, for in my eyes you are the most beautiful youth in the whole world, and now you have risen even higher in my estimation. You have taught me that true love can never be purchased. I envy the person to whom you have given your love. May Allah protect you in what lies ahead!”

Two days later Ali el-Kafur was beheaded in the square in front of the Sultan's palace and one week later Fatimah, the Sultan's sister-in-law, died with her son's hand in hers, and Ahmet's tears were as generous as the waters of the ocean.

His weeping had given way to resignation, however, when he was summoned to the *cadi* and there he was sold as a slave for his debts to a certain Baibar, slave trader from Basra. Ahmet had lost everything now: his parents were dead and the rest of his family hated him. All he had were the clothes he wore – his turban, a faded blue tunic that had seen better days and finally a torn

loin-cloth that barely covered his zeb.

They set out in a big caravan of slaves destined for the famous bath houses of Basra. There were about thirty youths and children of both sexes: very young Chinese girls with almond eyes, slender, dark-skinned boys from India, none older than seventeen and some as young as eleven. Baibar was a good businessman. There was no unnecessary cruelty; everyone had enough to eat and drink, yet the trip was still an ordeal, and some of the younger slaves, from the far, green hills of Cathay, perished in the desert crossings. Ahmet was one of the unfortunates who, being strong and fit, had to walk in the tracks of the camels. He made a special friend of a young Indian boy, and every night he slept with him in close embrace, not just to relieve the tension in his zeb but also to protect both of them against the sharp chill of the desert winds once the sun had set. Ahmet's poor dress in no way detracted from his beauty; Baibar, noting the proud carriage of the boy's head and his every day more deeply tanned figure, licked his lips in anticipation of the gold coins this prize jewel would bring in the slave market.

At last the domes and minarets of Basra came into view and the ragged, dusty, sun-bronzed foreign slaves found themselves walking through crowded streets swarming with curious men and women, beside stalls with fruits and vegetables of every sort, and in the air was the smell not only of a great city but the scent of fresh ocean air. Ahmet could not help feeling almost like a human being once again; he caught the eye of the young Indian boy and smiled.

They were taken to the slave trader's quarters, where they were allowed to bathe and wash their clothes, where they were fed and at last permitted to fall into an exhausted sleep on mats of straw.

The next day, for the second time in his life, Ahmet was sold. The auction house was crowded, the bidding lively. There were two sorts of purchasers: the little local traders who sought only a compliant slave to work in their shops and comfort their beds at night, and the rich merchants who sought new concubines of beauty and grace to add to their households. One by one the boys were brought forth in their chains. Fingers were poked into their mouths, looking for sound teeth and sweet breaths. Hands coursed over their bodies: what was this scar, was that sore the pox? A hundred hands, it seemed, examined their zebs. Ahmet saw his little Indian friend go to a swaggering tanner; there were tears in the young lad's eyes as they touched hands one final time before he was led away.

Ahmet, of course, was destined for other uses. With his young but muscular body, poised half-way between childhood and maturity, sun-bronzed, toughened in the long march through the Persian deserts, crowned with his sad, beautiful face, he was the prize jewel of Baibar's collection. Gradually Ahmet became aware that he and two or three other of the more beautiful boys were intended for a large, fat man before whom everyone, including Baibar himself, all but grovelled on the ground. This was Daud el-Daud, the Sultan's half-brother and brother-in-law to the almighty Grand-Vezier of Basra – and also the owner a

large public bath which, as everyone knew, was the most expensive and luxurious male brothel in town. Daud el-Daud bought Ahmet for a sum of money which surprised even Baibar, and Ahmet could not suppress a twinge of pride over how highly his beauty was valued.

The next weeks for Ahmet were the most debasing in all of his young life. The boys at Daud el-Daud's establishment had been carefully selected from many of the races of the world for their outstanding beauty and skills. They were taught the arts of massage, and examined in their competence. They were expected to comply willingly and without protest in all the whims and demands of Daud el-Daud's wealthy customers. Naughty boys were punished with cane or whip; obstinate youths were flogged into compliance, and then the cuts on their backs healed with fine ointments so that after a week or two no scars remained. Some boys were built too small to comfortably accommodate the larger and more violent zebs of their customers, and these were placed amid much wailing and lamentation for hours a day upon specially constructed columns to stretch their gates. Baibar had first seen these devices while on a slave-purchasing trip in China. The artificial love-poles were arranged in rows, of varying sizes, so that each boy would have to make a progression from the narrowest to the thickest. Baibar had them in a room which was known among the boys as "The Paradise of a Hundred Zebs". Not uncommonly, after a busy night with new slaves, several boys could be found miserably impaled there at the same time, with one of Daud el-Daud's trusted eunuchs in attendance.

Ahmet, however, succeeded in performing his duties in such a way that a visit to the "Paradise" was unnecessary, although on a few occasions he had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out when some unusually large and rough customer made him feel as though he was being split from his crotch to his navel. At such times his unsuppressed moaning seemed to ignite and satisfy the owner of the impaling instrument immensely, and as a result there were never any complaints. And Daud el-Daud employed a medical eunuch who knew how to stop the blood after such maltreatment and sooth the aching parts with healing ointments.

As time went by Ahmet discovered, to his surprise, that he was growing accustomed to this strange and humiliating life, which was not too exhausting as long as one lived up to his master's expectations, and their customers' demands. He became aware that the food and drink served in the slave quarters was lightly drugged with some sort of stimulant and, after reflecting upon this for a while, he found it, after all, sensible and practical, for it helped him to give the appearance of pleasure, at least, in his enforced sex experiences. As for Daud el-Daud, he was enormously satisfied with the good buy he had made for this quiet, well-behaved and astonishing beauty who had quickly become the most desired bath-boy in all of Basra. What the fattish brothel owner didn't know were the thoughts of bloody revenge which smouldered behind the boy's submissive facade.

7.

Early one morning, after he had been in Basra for about a half year, Ahmet was awakened by the sounds of the most awful confusion in the streets outside his window. The whole population of the sea-port was in panic, for dawn had revealed that a fleet of Madagascar pirates had drawn up outside the harbor gates under cover of night and the Sultan feared they were going to land forces so numerous that his warriors would be completely outnumbered. Defenses were hurriedly thrown up; every male capable of bearing arms was drafted into the army. For a week the pirates made no move.

Then shortly after dawn one morning the pirates attacked. It was difficult for Ahmet and the other slaves to know which way the battle was going, but the din, the shouts, the clash of steel on steel, the sounds of crashing and burning, told of the fury of the fray. About mid-afternoon Ahmet saw that Daud el-Daud was suddenly busying himself hiding his riches and trying to make his establishment look as much as possible like an ordinary bath house, and at last he confessed to the boys that the city was about to fall. Only Allah could now save them from the pirates.

But then a shout went up from the mob outside: "We are saved! Allah be praised for this miracle!" Daud el-Daud dispatched one of his eunuchs to investigate, and soon the man came back with the message that the great desert warrior, Sheik Ibn Shazaman, had arrived with his men like a tempest out of the blue sky and was dispersing the enemy as though he were an avenger from Allah. Already most of the pirates had been killed and their fleet was disappearing from before the harbor gates at full sail.

That night Sheik Ibn Shazaman was given a hero's welcome at the Sultan's Palace, and there he confessed that one of his reasons for coming to Basra had been to visit its famous baths and brothels. Word of this soon reached the ears of Daud el-Daud, who threw his establishment into a paroxysm of preparation. Out came all his precious ornaments and silver plates from where he had hidden them in panic the day before: Floors were scrubbed, the garden raked, the water in the fountain changed. The next morning the cooks went into the marketplace and came back with a cart-load of vegetables and fruits and six young lambs for slaughter, and they set to work preparing the most delicious banquet. All the boys were bathed and oiled and perfumed by the eunuchs, their hair cut, teeth tended to; new costumes of rich Chinese silk were ordered for them and hastily fitted. By mid-afternoon Daud's establishment looked better than it ever had and even the boys were looking forward to seeing and serving the savior of their city – for didn't everyone know that Madagascar pirates were famous for their cruelty and had a marked preference for young male prisoners to sacrifice to

their deity – and the younger the better?

Ahmet had caught but a glimpse of the famous warrior the day before. He and his men had been enveloped in the traditional desert *aba* with the *quafiya* wrapped about the lower part of their faces. But when he and three of his chief warriors stepped into Daud's bath house he was bare-headed and all the boys remarked upon how young and handsome the desert sheik was. First the guests were bathed and massaged, then they sat down at the banquet table. The boys hurried to and fro with plates and pitchers, with dishes of fish, fowl, fruits and cakes. Even forbidden wine was available for those who wished to drink it. Daud el-Daud, as lord of the mansion, watched this all with deep satisfaction, for wasn't having this important guest in his house a reward from Allah? He smiled at his boys, and saw that they were doing their utmost to please. All were beautiful, but Daud was not the least surprised when Ibn Shazaman leaned forward and inquired who was that extraordinarily shapely youth in the light blue tunic with the burning eyes under an unruly black mane. His eyes had been following Ahmet's movements every time the boy came near the table, and Ahmet himself had noticed the sheik's unmistakable admiration.

"Noble Ibn Shazaman, the name of that youth is Ahmet and he arrived here six months ago with Baibar's caravan. He is an orphan and born in Shiraz not sixteen years ago. Your eyes are sharp as a gerfalcon's and your taste immaculate, for this beautiful youth is my best purchase ever. He is charming and docile; only my most special customers are allowed to experience his splendors."

"Truly a creature of strange perfection!" the sheik said, once again scrutinizing the proud face with an expert eye. "it must bring the passionate lover of beautiful boys to the very pinnacle of happiness to be able to caress such a faultless body and feel the hot passions of his soul open its delightful portal to welcome its conqueror. Most hospitable Daud el-Daud, this boy is the answer to my heart's desire! Demand any price. Tonight I wish to sleep with Ahmet in my arms and in the perfection of his body quench the thirst of the desert in my loins!"

Daud made a deprecating gesture with one bejeweled hand and declared that the liberator of Basra most certainly would have his night sweetened by Ahmet's presence, but it would be ingratitude to Allah to demand payment. Ibn Shazaman and his companions were all guests of his house and he was at once placing himself and everyone under his roof at their service as a humble expression of his gratitude.

At once the astonished and delighted companions of the sheik began selecting their favorite boys for the night, and Ahmet, at a sign from his master, sat down upon a cushion at their feet.

"Our most beloved liberator has expressed a desire to make your acquaintance, dearest Ahmet," Daud explained, "and perhaps to pass his time with us in your company. As his wish is my will, it ought to be yours, too."

"I obey gladly," said Ahmet, not without a faintly teasing gleam in his eye,

“and feel humbled at this unexpected honor.”

Ibn Shazaman turned to one of his warrior companions who was seated at his right and said quietly, in the dialect of his tribe, “I wonder if young Ahmet is as docile and obliging as our fat friend imagines. His proud carriage belies a submissive nature, but, by Allah, what an overwhelming radiation of sensuality he has, even as he sits so modestly at our feet! If this erotic wonder keeps even half of those unsaid, bewitching promises he must be love's apotheosis itself!”

Before the banquet progressed to the stage of orgy, Ibn Shazaman thanked his host for a marvelous evening and withdrew, guided by Ahmet, to the suite of rooms which had been readied for him. There, by the soft light of a single candle and moonlight flowing through a half-opened door, Ahmet let his guest remove his tunic and then stand back to admire what he saw. For the first time in over six months, Ahmet found that his zeb was raising its head even before the caresses had begun.

With a half-strangled roar like a rutting stag, Ibn Shazaman grabbed the naked boy and carried him to the huge bed. It was the hunger of a warrior that had to be satisfied, the thirst of the desert which had to be quenched. The mighty scimitar of Ibn Shazaman cut the air with a born ruler's force. With the irresistibility of a conqueror the great desert warrior first attacked the defenseless outposts, then moved in to make his final forceful entry with his lance raised high in proud salute. And it was with real pleasure that Ahmet used all his knowledge and special skills to bring the sheik's love liquids to the boiling point again and again. The jubilant rhythm in which they joined almost made him remember what love was really like, and made Ibn Shazaman confess that he had now forgotten all the other boys he had ever lusted after.

Afterwards they fell asleep in close embrace, but woke again a few hours later to repeat their successful erotic union with similar luck and happy result. At the break of dawn the sheik opened his eyes once again and for a long time silently regarded the shapely youth lying at his side. Then, with great caution, he mounted the still sleeping Ahmet and let his insatiable zeb find its own way between the boy's inviting love-domes and in the sweet entrance port. The boy did not wake up until the stallion changed from trot to canter, but then he happily let himself be ridden once more by the wild desert horseman.

When at last their passions had cooled and were lying together in the great bed making a light breakfast of grapes and cheeses and cakes which had been placed there the day before, Ibn Shazaman began to question Ahmet about his background.

“I have seen hatred spark in your eyes from time to time,” the sheik said gravely, “and you tell me you were trained in the use of various arms and are a fine archer and a practiced horseman. You could easily make yourself a desert warrior, and, as for myself, I cannot imagine anything better than having you at my side on horseback on our expeditions as well as in the tent when darkness falls.”

Ahmet admitted he dreamed of escape and often wanted to place a knife

between Daud's ribs, if it was possible to cut through the layers of fat, but he could not imagine how such a thing could be accomplished unless the young warrior intended to purchase his liberty from the bath-house owner.

Having said that the boy grew thoughtful. The love-making of the previous night was the first for a very long time that had given him any pleasure; it had released his instinct for self-preservation and with it the memory of Kamakan and his own promise of eternal love. With the barren expanses of his soul so irrigated by love's reviving waters, he burst into tears and collapsed into Ibn Shazaman's protective embrace.

"My Ahmet," the sheik declared, "I would be quite prepared to pay any price your master demanded, but I cannot bear the thought of fat Daud profiting from our love. At the palace all I need do is mention what I wish as sole reward for saving Basra, and you will be free at once."

When his weeping was over, Ahmet got up and bathed his face, then sat down again on the side of the bed beside Ibn Shazaman. He thanked the sheik for his generosity and added that he certainly would like to accompany the desert warriors, not just to get away from Daud and his brothel but also because he found Ibn Shazaman a most pleasant and exciting companion. His problem, however, was that the events of the night before had been so momentous that they had crushed the protective shell which he had carefully built around his soul, and now all the memories of his past life were flooding back.

"If that had not happened," the boy said, "I would have accepted without hesitation, but even then, after some time, I would have remembered that my love had been given away. For that reason I must tell you now that my whole life from here on must be devoted to finding Kamakan again, for I love him more than anything in the whole world. So you see, I would be leaving you just as soon as I had news of him or found a trace to follow. Perhaps this would only happen after a very long time had passed, but it could also happen tomorrow. Now, if you still want me, knowing all this, I shall be most happy to go with you into the desert."

"As sure as Allah rules us all you are an extremely rare creature," Ibn Shazaman declared, "and you need not fear my wrath, as one look into your eyes tells me all too clearly that such feelings would arise only from offended vanity. I can tell you that all my heart wants to abduct you here and now, but had you not confessed your unshakable love for another person but waited until you left me, then my feelings of revenge would surely have conquered my love, crippling it into jealousy. So I dare not bring you with me because I could not bear the thought of our inevitable parting."

Ahmet bent his head as though he were begging the sheik's forgiveness, but Ibn Shazaman gathered him into his strong arms. "I do understand, noble Shazaman," the boy whispered. "But now that you have revived my soul it is impossible for me to endure this place any longer. Leave your dagger with me, that I may cut myself a path out of this slavery – no," he continued with a smile, "not to end my own life but to kill Daud if necessary or whoever else tries to

prevent my escape.”

“That's the way, my proud eaglet,” said Shazaman, catching the boy's face in his desert-toughened hands. “You have let fate drift you this way and that all too long. Now take my dagger and use it with courage and audacity. I shall do more than leave you a poor gift for your sincere friendship and fabulous honesty. Outside the harbor, in the rocky headlands to the south, there is a little cave called The Devil's Jaws, because the waters and the wind howl through it like a lost soul when a storm comes up out of the Gulf. There you will find a little sailboat filled with bread and fruit and a large leather bag of water. Take it out just after evening falls and, carried by the night breezes, you will be far from Basra when dawn once again breaks across Allah's sky. I and my warriors will be leaving this afternoon. If you make your escape tonight everyone will think you have come with us and no one will search for you at sea.”

Ahmet fell upon his knees and tried to kiss the sheik's hand with heartfelt gratitude, but Ibn Shazaman lifted the boy at once to his feet. “The best way to thank me,” the young warrior said, “is with one of your long kisses that makes the ocean roar in my ears and gives me a taste of what Paradise will be like after I fall some day in battle. Farewell, fair Ahmet, and may Allah speed you to the side of your beloved Kamakan.”

8.

That evening, as the shadows of darkness were beginning to steal across the Persian sky, fat Daud el-Daud, relaxing in his chambers and contemplating the extraordinary good fortune which in such a short period of time had brought to his house both the most beautiful bathboy in all of Islam and its most renowned desert warrior, heard a rustle of silk behind him and turned to see Ahmet standing in the doorway with a jeweled dagger in his hand and his dark eyes blazing with hatred.

“Ahmet, dear boy, what is the meaning of this?” he began, but he got no farther, for in his bewilderment he put up no resistance when Ahmet leapt upon him and drove the dagger into his heart. The last sight Daud el-Daud saw, as the shades of death drew across his soul, was the smile of derision on the face of the boy he had come to value almost as much as all his gold and all his silver.

Ahmet wiped his dagger on the heaving belly of his dying master and stole out of Daud's private entrance onto the street. There he mingled with the townspeople making their way home and was never seen in Basra again.

The boy found the sailboat moored in the cave called The Devil's Jaws just as Ibn Shazaman had promised. He dropped to his knees and thanked Allah with all his heart and sent with his thoughts a whole night full of hot and

passionate kisses to his benefactor now riding with his warriors back to the desert. The fruit and bread were there, and the bag of water, too, and Ahmet noticed that the little boat was tugging at its mooring, driven by some nocturnal current which seemed anxious to spirit it away. He climbed aboard, released the bow line and soon he was on the open sea, hoisting his sail to a fair wind which had the ship dancing like a playful child upon the star-reflecting waves. Weary, but happy at last, he stretched out upon the floorboards and soon was sleeping the deep, blessed sleep of the young and the free.

For three days and three nights Ahmet sailed down the great sea of Persia and, although he occasionally took the steering pole, the boat seemed to be guiding itself. Land appeared from time to time on his left or his right; at length he passed between two headlands some twenty miles apart. After that the waves grew bigger and the skies clouded over. Ahmet rationed his water and ate as little food as possible, supplementing it with the occasional flying fish which landed, flopping and gasping, upon his deck. At night the dark water was lit now by a thousand bright and sparkling things, some as tiny and brilliant as the stars above, but others, big and oily and serpent-like, coiled in the waves and seemed to have been waiting ever since Allah made the oceans for some unfortunate soul to fall overboard.

The wind gathered force. He awakened one morning to find his little craft hurtling through enormous seas and being tossed about from wave to wave like a rubber ball in some giant's playful game. He unstepped the mast and lashed himself to the deck. Helplessly he watched a breaking wave wash away his provisions, and then he was swept by a terrible seasickness which left him so exhausted that he didn't really care whether his little boat stayed afloat or not – all he wanted was for that terrible motion to stop. Alone in the stormy ocean, tied to a few flimsy planks without food or water, racing along to some unknown destination and sick to death, he drifted into unconsciousness.

When Ahmet regained his senses it was pitch-black night, but the ocean was calm and millions of stars were sprinkled across the firmament. He set about putting things to right as best he could. He bailed out the boat, stripped naked and wrung out his tunic and breeches and set them on the ropes to dry. And though there was no breeze whatever and he had lost all his food and drink he was still of good heart. “When Allah has decided to let me live through such a terrible storm he surely does not choose to let me perish in a dead-calm sea!” he thought.

Dawn came with an abruptness which astonished him, and with it a light breeze. He resteped the mast, and once again the little boat set off over the tropical sea as though it knew just where it was headed. He was thirsty, now, and hungry; since the storm he had seen no flying fish playing about the surface of the water, and he had had none to eat. As the sun settled out of a clear sky into Allah's ocean he thought he saw land ahead.

That night Ahmet took no rest, for he did not want to fetch up upon a foreign shore asleep. Shortly after the first light of dawn began to appear on the wet

horizon Ahmet became aware of a roaring in front of him and then he saw that his boat was being driven toward a line of breakers. In a moment it was caught up in white water, lifted with cruel ease and dropped with a horrible crunch into a living barrier of coral. The boat stopped dead, pitched to a sickening angle, and Ahmet was flung out and tumbled over and over by the wave as it raced across the reef. A moment later he bobbed to the surface, gasping for breath, and found that the wave had spent itself and he was floating in the tranquil waters of a turquoise lagoon. Beyond, in the growing daylight, he could make out palm trees and, stripping off his clothes, he began to swim toward the shore.

It took him almost an hour to reach the beach, and by then he was nearly dead with fatigue. He crawled out of the water, found a clear brook where he quenched his thirst and then fell into an exhausted sleep in the warming sand.

He slept all that day and all the following night and when the singing of tropical birds awakened him the next morning he felt wonderfully refreshed. Already his cut legs and bruised hands, his young flesh torn by the wave as it dragged him across the coral reef, were beginning to heal. The lagoon, he discovered, was filled with fish and oysters and the palms back from the beach were heavy with coconuts. Ahmet ate, then set out to explore the tropical forest which seemed so friendly and bounteous. He followed the little brook back into the hills, and it wasn't long before he came to a cascade where the water tumbled over a cliff and beside it was a cave. Some instinct made him go inside. Here the light was green and diffused and seemed to come from a million crystals which lined the walls. So lighted, he followed the twisting passages of the cave back until they suddenly ended in a smooth wall which, when he put his hand to it, gave inward silently.

Now Ahmet found himself staring into a large room, exquisitely furnished with rich carpets and tapestries and precious urns in the niches along the walls. He started violently as he heard a familiar voice addressing him:

“Welcome, Ahmet, you most beautiful of youths! Have no fear but come inside, for nothing bad is ever going to happen to you within these walls.”

Poised, alert, the naked youth stepped through the door and froze like a marble statue carved by a master craftsman, for standing before him was his beloved and he knew at once that his search and his months of torment were at long last over.

“Welcome again, you threefold admirable youth,” the young man whispered, and Ahmet threw himself into his welcoming embrace and began to weep with happiness as though he would never stop. Soon, however, questions started to pour from him like water from a spring, but the other put a finger upon his lips and said, “You are going to hear everything, my little faithful friend, but let us first of all share bread and wine to seal our unbreakable friendship.”

They moved out into a garden where the singing of birds was accompanied by the cool drip of water in a fountain, and there they were served a marvelous meal by black servants dressed in the richest silks. While Ahmet with moist eyes and anxious expectation looked into the face of his most beloved and sorely

missed friend, the young man commenced his story:

“My real name is Kemal el-Hamid and I am heir to the greatest sorcerer the world has ever known. When he died about six months ago I had everything: wealth, power over the earth and sky-jinnies, the most beautiful youths to love me, yet I was obsessed by a single wish: to find true love with and from the most beautiful boy among all of mankind.”

He gave Ahmet a devoted smile and the boy blushed a little. Kemal continued with a nod of his head:

“I found him, as you know, and we loved each other, without him knowing who I was, and he promised to give me his eternal devotion. But ought I to have believed him? Though his words came from the heart he was still young and his mettle needed to be tested. Thus your arrow pointed you to the fairie Paribanu who, upon my command, examined you to see if your dislike of sex with the female species was real. She has asked me to give you her regards, with her most sincere excuses for the treatment you received in her palace, although she admits to enjoying most of it.”

Ahmet laughed out loud at the memory of his troubles in that importunate woman's embrace.

“Then, as the rich merchant Ghanem Ben-Ayub, I wept with you at the loss of your parents, which, despite what was told to you, I would have been powerless to prevent. I was also the desert warrior Ibn Shazaman, and when you declined his offer even during your deepest debasement, all my doubts about you melted away like mountain snow in the fierce sunlight of spring; I was determined to bring you here in the fastest way possible. You have not only met my fierce demands but surpassed even my wildest hopes, so that now, without any doubt or hesitation, I want you – no beg you – to become my friend, my lover and my sole heir!”

The boy could find no words to express his acceptance, but he needed none for his face told Kemal el-Hamid all.

“Beloved Ahmet, from the cup in your hand you have already drunk the most precious elixir, which grants a long life and eternal youth. That is both reward for your unbreakably faithful love and reason for my cruel tests. Eternity is a very long time, and we both had to know if your love could manage it.”

Thereafter Ahmet el-Kafur and Kema el-Hamid sealed their pact with a night of ecstasy such as can only be experienced by two people whose love is true, and thus ends the tale of Ahmet, the Treasurer's Son.