

THE SEVEN STORIES OF THE SEVEN PRINCESSES

NIZAMI

King Beram had seven wives and he fell in love with each one long before he met any of them. How is that possible? Listen. One day in the Castle of Chewernek, home of the Arab Prince No'man, where the king spent his boyhood as prince, he came across a locked chamber, and after he had it opened and entered, he saw the portraits of seven princesses from seven kingdoms on the wall with his own portrait in the centre. Above them an unknown hand had written that when the prince became king he would marry these seven beauties. This was the will of the seven planets and the Almighty, their lord and creator.

Yezdegird, the prince's father and King of Persia, died soon after and Beram ascended the throne. He wooed the daughters of the rulers of those seven kingdoms and received their assent. He built for his beloved wives a palace with seven domes and in each dome lived one of the princesses.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM INDIA
ON SATURDAY
IN THE BLACK SATURN DOME

On Saturday, after King Beram had prayed in the Temple of Fire he clothed himself in black robes and visited the first dome, dedicated to Saturn, where the princess from India greeted him. They played and made love all day, bathed in the fragrance of aloes and scented wood, till night had painted the white silk of day dark. Then the king, drunk with wine and desire, begged the beauty from Kashmir to open her treasure chest and tell him a story that would waft him, soft as the night wind, to a soothing sleep.

‘May heavenly music welcome my lord,’ said the beauty, her gazelle eyes shining. ‘And may he live for as long as the world shall stand. May all our heads rest on his threshold and may fortune grant all his desires.’

After this prayer for divine blessing the princess told the king:

THE TALE OF UNFULFILLED DESIRE

When I was still a child in my home country much was spoken in our family about a lady who used to pay us a visit once a month. Beautiful, kindly and devout, she was always covered from head to foot in a black silk gown. We were puzzled by this.

‘Tell us: what is the meaning of this?’ my family at last asked her. ‘Are you in mourning? Are you worried or frightened that you always go about covered in black? Why will you not tell us? Would it not be better if you shared your sorrow with us?’

The words took her by surprise and she searched for excuses not to answer. However her confusion only drove her to tell the truth, and this is what she said:

‘You have disturbed a secret in its small hiding place and will not let it rest in peace. So, listen to my tale and believe what I say.

I was once the slave of a mighty king, and though he is now dead and beyond praise or blame, I nevertheless wish only to speak well of him. He, who possessed everything, was also a just man like no other, and always shielded the poor from the powerful, the lamb from the wolf. He did this in spite of the terrible fate ordained by the stars, so awful that even the heavens cried out and named him: King of the Black Robe... later that is, after what I am about to tell you happened.

And it came about like this: our King, you see, was gripped by a single obsession, to know everything and to hear from everybody what experiences were to be had in the world. For this special purpose he built a guesthouse bigger and lovelier than you can imagine. Carpets covered every room, meals were kept in readiness and many servants waited to attend to the needs of all foreign visitors. Whenever a traveller, no matter who or from where, came to town he would be invited by the king to stay. The king treated each one as a prince and after the guest had refreshed himself and relaxed, the king himself would come as a visitor, asking countless questions about his homeland, journeys, plans and adventures and could not be satisfied until he had stitched together every detail of the traveller’s life and stored it in the chamber of his memory.

In this way the king spent his days and years. He collected in himself all these different lives as though they were rare and unique jewels. He knew more than any

other man on this earth. In spite of this knowledge he hungered always for more and to discover something new.

And then it happened, all of a sudden, what none of us could understand: the king disappeared. One day he left. No one had the slightest notion where. He left no word, no message, not the smallest trace. Like the magic bird Simorgh of the Long Neck, he had silently spread his wings and flown from us all – and who has heard since of the Simorgh?

We waited. What else could we do? We waited and the days passed, so many that we gave up counting. Then he returned. As though he had never been absent he ascended his throne. It was he, our king, and yet a different man. He was dressed from head to toe in black: his gloves, his robes, shirt, all black. He ruled as before, a good and just king, but continued to dress like a mourner, but for no apparent reason, and his lips that used to smile so merrily had forgotten how to laugh.

This puzzled everyone, and yet no one dared ask: ‘Why this? Why such grief?’ No one, that is, until finally I found the courage: something he had been longing and waiting for.

It happened one night when I was alone with him, my heart full of love and compassion. He lay there and while I gently and lovingly stroked his feet he began to complain about his fate.

‘Just see,’ he cried, ‘how the stars and the heavens have robbed me, a king, and make fun of me. They expelled me from the fields of paradise where I once lived and threw me into the ink black world, a victim of gossip. But I have to remain silent. No one asks me: where did you lose this paradise? Why do you wear black?’

When I heard the king speak like this I pressed my face lovingly against the soles of his feet and after considering my words with care I answered: ‘O you who are the greatest and best of all rulers, a help to the oppressed, which of us has the courage to

take an axe and tear the heavens, to ask you, your majesty, about your secret? This secret belongs only to you and when the time is ripe, when you wish it, you will reveal...' I spoke, and this is what the king confided in me:

You know of course, he began, my old custom to take in travellers, look after them and discover their different life stories. The reason for my disappearance is connected. Listen!

One day a stranger was brought to me different from any other I had ever met. His clothes, his turban, his shoes, in short everything about him was black, just as you are now used to seeing me. And just as you were struck by my appearance so was I on that day with the traveller in black, and of course I also wished to find out what had made him choose black, because I had a feeling this was no accident and that a secret lay behind it all. I ordered this guest to be very specially served and as soon as he had eaten and rested I came to him, sat down and said:

'My friend, would you do me the kindness of opening the book of your adventures for me, so I may find the reason for your sorrow and understand the meaning of your clothing?'

To my surprise the stranger in a passion refused to even consider my question.

'Stop!' he cried, upset. 'Not a word more! What you wish to know I can reveal to no one.'

This only made me press him more:

'Tell me! Do not avoid my question. What is the meaning of your black clothes?'

The stranger composed himself.

'Forgive me,' he answered sadly. 'You are asking the impossible. There is no answer to your question, for no one other than for those who themselves dress like this.'

His words baffled me, and the more he avoided my questions, the stronger grew my desire to extract a clue to this riddle. I forgot the dignity of my position as king and

begged, grovelled and implored him so long until the stranger, shamed by my impatience and unable to resist my pressure at last, much against his will, confessed:

‘There is a city in China, as lovely as paradise, and yet it is called the City of the Cursed, a city in mourning, where the people, though as lovely as the moon yet all go about dressed in black and whoever visits this city and stays long enough, eventually becomes like them... why? Do not ask me! You will not force another word out of me, even if you have to kill me!’

With these words the stranger took leave, mounted his horse and continued his journey. What could I do? Day and night the riddle of the man in black plagued me. It was as though I knew, like in a game of chess, a single move can checkmate an opponent and I could not find this move in spite of all my efforts. Meanwhile what did I not try? In how many books did I search, how many learned men did I consult: in vain. I found an answer nowhere and with no one.

Then I decided to forget the whole affair like a bad dream, to bind myself with patience, and so perhaps once more to find peace of mind. But the harder I resisted and the longer I struggled, even in this I could not succeed. The thorn had penetrated too deep. On the contrary I became ever more anxious. Yes, I was like a rider in a narrow pass: he can move neither forward nor backward, and I was moreover haunted by the fear of losing my mind. This could not carry on.

I did the only thing left open to me: I abandoned throne and kingdom, took several trusted servants and enough gold and jewels with me that might suffice an uncertain length of journey and set off in complete secrecy to find the city of secrets described by the stranger. I had to accomplish this mission successfully!

And lo and behold, I found the city. My strange guest had not lied. The city was in China, like a heavenly garden, and its people were as beautiful as pictures, but

pictures with ebony frames – because all the people wore identical pitch black robes out of which the faces looked at me, pale and tragic like the moon in the sea of night.

So I found the city; what was its secret? I found lodgings and having settled myself I went to work.

I told myself it should not be hard to discover the secret that everyone but me knew.

But I was wrong. No matter who I asked or talked to, everyone pretended not to understand my question. No one wanted to tell me.

A year passed and I was no wiser than on my first day. Then, just as I was about to lose all courage, fate threw me in the way of a man to whom I felt powerfully drawn from the moment we met. I have in my lifetime experience of every kind of man.

Name and rank never concerned me. He was a butcher, but in spite of his profession a man full of goodness and kindness. He did not have a bad word to say about anyone.

I felt that I must get to know this man whatever the cost, and win his friendship. I did everything to achieve this end. How I surprised him! I sought his company day after day, praised, honoured and gave him presents under every pretext, but only when fitting. So I caught his unwitting heart in my web. He confided in me and at the same time the shower of gifts embarrassed him.

Then one day he invited me to his house. There I found a meal prepared, sumptuous and delicious beyond measure. There was not a tasty dish that he did not set before me. After we had eaten of all these marvels and at the same time discoursed about God and the world, only not about the one thing most important to me, he stood up and returned to me all the gifts I had given him since the beginning of our friendship. He laid the whole mountain before me: gold, jewels, fabrics, to which he had added some of his own and shocked me with these words:

‘Forgive me, but you must please understand that I am used to getting along nicely with less. What should I do with all these riches? Why have you given them to me?’

How can I possibly ever repay you? But if you want something from me and I can be of help to you, please just tell me! Even had I a thousand lives and you wanted them all of me I would sacrifice them gladly for you, and it would still be too little!

‘My dear sir,’ I replied, ‘what are you saying? Are you in my debt? No, no, I won’t allow that. This is ridiculous.’

And, pointing at the heap of gifts I went on: ‘What is the value of this little booty between men like us?’

With that I gave a sign to my servants, who were standing in attendance behind me and they went and brought from the treasure which I still possessed such a heap of gold pieces that my earlier gifts seemed insignificant and the man, who still could not guess the secret reason for my generosity, almost lost his mind with shame and astonishment.

‘You are putting me in your debt for ever!’ he cried in distress. ‘Here you are again, shaming and piling on the presents as though I had only invited you here to increase their number. I wanted you here for the opposite reason, to stop taking from you... and now this! But nothing will come of it, I insist, however much pleasure it gives you. Either you tell me here and now what you want from me, so that I can help you, or else you take all these things away with you, the old as well as the new...’

Here came my moment, I had to seize it. Hearing the man’s words and knowing what an honest friend he was, I decided to hide the truth no longer from him. I then told him my whole story, and revealing that I was a king explained the reason for abandoning my throne and kingdom and for my journey here to the City of the Cursed. ‘And then,’ I concluded, ‘I still can not find the truth. Tell me! Tell me what is the cause of your mourning? Why do you all wear black? Why are you all grieving when there seems to be no reason? And why do you keep it all secret?’

As soon as he heard these words an extraordinary transformation came over him. What was wrong? What happened? He trembled like a lamb caught by a wolf. For a while he uttered no sound and shaking with terror kept his eyes tightly closed as he stood in front of me.

Then he said: 'You had no right to ask me that. Better if you had left well alone. But wait - till darkness falls. Then I will give you an answer – the only one possible.'

When night had come and people were asleep in their homes my friend said: 'Come! Now is the hour for our purpose. I will show you what you long to know, and the secret will be unveiled before your eyes.'

We left the house together and he walked ahead of me, a long distance through the darkness. We met not a soul on our way. I felt like a ghost in a world where all were dead. At last we arrived at a half ruined wall, whose height and appearance I could not judge in the darkness.

My friend stood still, then, followed by me, crept through a hole in the wall, into the inner courtyard of the ruin. What next? Not far from me in a corner I saw a basket of woven twigs swinging at the end of a rope. My companion had seized it, pushed it towards me and said:

'If you really want to discover the reason for our silence and our black clothing, then you must sit for a while in this basket and allow it to carry you up between heaven and earth.'

Was I afraid? Certainly! At that moment the basket seemed to be full of snakes and my imagination transformed the thick rope which held and wrapped round it into a dragon. But I thought of how near I had come to my goal. I would trust the butcher, though I did not know his purpose and quickly climbed into the basket.

Then – what happened? I had barely settled down than the rope moved and lifted me skywards away from the earth. Was it magic? Was my carriage put in motion by some

secret mechanism known to my companion and activated by him to pull me up? How was I to know? Helplessly crouching in my small cage, prisoner of the rope above on which my life also depended, we swung ever upwards until suddenly the rope was held fast by a metal ring and the basket came to a halt next to the flat surface at the top of the pillar. I stepped out but had only exchanged one prison for another, because there were no steps to take me down from this dizzy height back to earth.

What was the use of wailing and shouting – my fury at the butcher whom I believed had just betrayed me? Around me stretched the empty abyss of the heavens to which my miserable self had fallen victim. Afraid, I dared not look up or down. I closed my eyes with dread and felt faint, trying to submit to my fate; in vain. How I regretted what I had done: the obsession of my curiosity. I was gripped by homesickness and the most intense desire never to have left home; too late. Only one could help me now: God.

So I began to pray, and after a while a bird suddenly appeared, enormous like a mountain and settled next to me on the platform. Its feathers were like the branches of a tree, claws like the legs of a throne and when it opened its beak I looked into a deep cavern. I was surprised the pillar did not give way under its weight, and once again my heart was seized with panic and fear at the sight of my neighbour. The monster paid no attention to me. It began to preen itself, to scratch and, to my astonishment, together with the feathers that fell off scattered many pearls and the scent of musk. No, this was no ordinary bird.

After a while it fell asleep. Because there was too little room for us both, it covered me with part of its wing and I lay beneath like a drowning man struggling for air. Suddenly a thought came to me.

Why not? I considered. If I were to cling on to one of its legs I could allow myself to be taken away like prey. Naturally this would be dangerous, but not so dangerous as

to stay on the platform where I belonged neither to heaven nor earth and where danger threatened all round. A villain had betrayed me, but why? Perhaps my riches tempted him. Was that why he wished my death? I could not believe this, but whatever the cause, I had to escape with help from the bird. This was my one and only chance of rescue.

Having made this decision I calmed down. The heavens turned pink as the hour of cockcrow approached and the bird covering me awoke. It flapped its wings impatiently and I had scarcely time to wrap myself round one of its feet, hurling a final prayer to the Almighty, than it took off from the pillar's edge and carried me along with the rushing force of a hurricane into the sky. Where to? How could I know, and I gave no thought to it. I could do no more than keep a tight hold with all my strength while the bird shot through the air hour after hour while the sun rose steeply until midday when it burned directly above.

Then at length my travelling companion became too hot under its feather coat, the wings beating more and more slowly, we drifted ever nearer to the earth and I noticed it was searching for shadow. I too looked down and see: we were gliding only a spear's length from the ground that lay here like a green silk carpet and the fragrance from a thousand flowers rose and filled me with delight. Why not stay here? Could there be a better resting place? While I spoke in my heart a hundred blessings on my rescuer I let go of its foot and fell on a pillow of green grass. I lay there a full hour and recovered from the nocturnal adventure and the stress of my journey through the sky. Grey thoughts began to take hold of me: where was I and what would be the end of my story? Finally I shook off such clouds from my soul and felt just grateful that now at least I was better off than before and raised myself to take in the view of my surroundings.

In truth I had reason to be content! The place where I found myself was like a piece of heaven fallen to earth: so pure and utterly unspoilt, as though no man had set foot there. Flowers and more flowers for as far the eye could see in all shapes and colours, bedded in green, lovely and radiant as life itself, and in between springs gathering here and there into little sleepy pools, dream mirrors in which the beauty lived twice over.

Hyacinths embraced carnations, jasmine blossoms mingled with rose leaves and the love tree spread its purple glory over the meadow; even the grains of sand were gold dust and the stones glistened like jewels. In the ponds fish flicked about like silver coins passing each other, and beyond lay a range of mountains the colour of emerald, covered with poplars, cypress and teak trees. From there the fragrance of aloes and sandalwood wafted over to where I lay.

Who but those in paradise could dream up this landscape? The longer I enjoyed the view the happier I became. My heart revived and I felt like someone who has found buried treasure and is measuring the weight on scales.

‘Praise be to God!’ I said aloud to myself, wandered about for a while, discovering new delights that appeared to belong to no one and had been created entirely for my pleasure. I feasted my eyes on flowers and my lips now and then on fruit.

How far away seemed all my fear and anxiety! What? Did I even think about the city of the cursed, and its secret that I had set out to uncover? If only I had! The magic of this single hour quite erased all that from the book of my memory. What have happy people to do with past trouble?

At last, after I had explored with amazement and enjoyed myself, I sat in the shade of a cypress tree to sleep till the sun had set in its scarlet cloak and then the night fell with the evening star blossom in a cloak of dark blue. A soft breeze woke me with its caress and out of the accompanying spring cloud sprinkled a brief rain, cool as pearls

on grass and leaves. It had scarcely passed when I was surprised by something new. I saw lights in the distance that came quickly nearer and soon I was to find what they were about. I became aware of a long procession, young women, lots of women and each one of such radiant beauty that I forgot the world and myself. They were like an infinite variety of magical blossoms in silken veils, gold clasped round their arms, ears and necks dripping with jewels and behind the light of candles that they held high with henna painted fingers, lips smiled and beckoned... Who could describe them? How can one compare them with rubies, tulip buds and all the sweetmeats of Chuzistan? Several of these paradise children who came first carried carpets and a throne, costlier than any to be found on earth, and having almost reached where I hid in the darkness, calming my impatience with great effort, they spread the carpets and set the throne down. What was going to happen now? I wondered.

Not long after, surrounded by her retinue came the one for whom all these preparations had been made: this queen of the fairies and most beautiful of the beautiful, as she sat down and lifted the veil from her face I was sure the moon had fallen from the heavens or that the sun had risen in the middle of the night and thousands on thousands of stars paled before her. Yes – was it possible? Whether in reality or in dream, could it be?

Meanwhile the queen of the fairies who had sat with bowed head deep in thought called one of the young women to her and while pressing her gently to her breast I heard her say: ‘I have the feeling that someone is here – a stranger, a mortal; go and look and bring him here when you have found him.’ The little fairy obeyed straight away. I watched her peering under the trees all round me and since I was not running away but on the contrary was hoping most ardently to be found, she came across me and stood astonished. She took my hand and how gladly did I become her prisoner! ‘Come quickly,’ she whispered. ‘It is the queen’s command!’

Did I myself have a greater wish?

I contradicted her with not a word, allowed myself to be led by the lovely being and felt like a crow beside a peacock. Her mistress sat on her throne looking out for us. I fell on my knees before her and humbly kissed the dust by her feet, but she would have none of that.

‘Stand up!’ she cried. ‘Your place is not where the servants belong – no. See – I treasure the guest and it is fitting that his place of honour should be next to me, particularly as he is as beautiful, clever and well formed as you. Sit by me on the throne; the seven stars belong to the moon.’

‘O angelic queen,’ I replied. ‘Do not speak in this way to one who is only your humblest slave. Only Solomon may sit next to the Queen of Sheba – and how can I be he, I a poor devil who has stumbled out of the desert into paradise?’

‘No more of these excuses,’ the lady answered. ‘You cannot deceive someone like me. I possess magic powers. Now listen: everything here belongs to you and all obey your commands, on one condition: that you never contradict me. You must do what I do, desire what I desire – always – because only then will you discover my secret and find complete happiness in my love. Is this your wish too?’

‘How can your partner be anything but your shadow?’ I replied, ‘and his crown more than the dust at the foot of your throne?’

With that the queen made me swear on my body and soul and told me to sit beside her.

‘You are my guest, dearest man,’ she said, ‘a guest whom one cannot fail to love.’

My senses were confused; I did not know what was happening to me. As she insisted - and only because she insisted - I raised myself from the ground. A servant took my arm, led me carefully up the steps and soon I was sitting beside the queen of the

moon. In my excitement I could hardly think or speak, but listened to her voice as to music, and she delighted my ear with a thousand sweet confidences.

Meanwhile the women prepared a meal at her orders and what I saw of delicacies exceeded anything imaginable. The odours alone: musk, sandalwood, rosewater, their fragrance hung like clouds around the mountain of food on tables of Turkish marble and around goblets encrusted inside and out with rubies. This was an hors-d'oeuvres for the eye and nose even before I began to eat. They set before us such succulent dishes and cooling drinks that no master chef had ever dreamed of preparing, and when we had satisfied ourselves to our hearts' content, musicians began to play.

Flute, harp and violins sounded, the meadow awakened and the song and dance of the fairies began. O lost happiness! Will I never see you again, with my own eyes, the airy beings, the lights... now, again, as once I did... then!

Soon they were flying through the air and waving their feet like wings, then they tripped on tiptoe and placed lights on their brows, though they themselves were large glowing candles. Finally they returned thirsty and exhausted after these playful exertions, and passed round once again the fragrant wine.

Did I still know who I was? Hours, days, nights – did they exist? Was not time itself standing still? The queen herself filled my glass ... whoever had a wine pourer like this?

Feeling the night air too hot for her she pulled the veil and cloak of gold brocade away from her face and hair. This was too much for me. Her face! I was helpless, overwhelmed with love and wine, intoxicated I stammered my desire. And my neighbour encouraged me. More than this, her smile returned my love! I could bear it no longer and for a second time fell on my knees before her, kissed the tips of her hair and her feet over and again and the more she cried: 'Stop! Stop!' all the more, and now with real passion I kissed her.

With this a new curtain between us fell away. Our words and our souls sought each other out and the bird of hope built its nest above us both.

‘You... I need to know more... what is your pleasure?’ I cried. ‘You who deserve the world’s fame and whose name is still a mystery to me, tell me your name.’

‘Torktaz - it means booty - my father called me,’ she said laughing. ‘He was thinking of the hearts of those who fall in love!’

Astonished I replied:

‘How strange! My friends call me Torktaz too! Perhaps our beings are related like our names? Let us be each other’s booty, prepare food for the soul out of magical wine, let us together taste of the sweet and bitter at the feast of love.’

My queen did not answer my boldness with words, but the sly slant of her eyes that brought the distance close meant: the time is right and fortune is with you.

And her smile, that gave courage, said:

‘Take the kiss because the moment is here and the friend is well disposed!’

With that I embraced and kissed her and when she had taken one kiss from me she returned it a thousand times. Then I became drunk as from no wine, my desire unbolted and the blood thundered in my heart so wildly that Torktaz found her voice, turned away from me and said:

‘Tonight, my love, be content with the kissing and scratch no more from the heavenly blue! Because this “more” would not be good. We will play together so long as you control yourself, but if you cannot any longer, because nature tears your lock open, then choose one of my women. They are all beautiful; just the right rosy dawn for a night with her lover. The one you like best – tell me – and I will give her to you as servant and beloved so she can comfort you and extinguish your fire.

If on the next night you would like another or even two, whoever you choose is yours.’

So said my fairy queen and kissed me gently. Since I was silent with confusion she took a surreptitious look around the girls, then called one over who seemed to her particularly beautiful, entrusted her to me and said encouragingly:

‘Go now and do what you will...’

How could I reply? The woman took hold of my arm straight away and led me to the door of a little palace with a roof of gold tiles; allowed me to enter first and followed after.

We came to a room and there lay a carpet with a mound of colourful silk pillows; tall candles shone around with hyacinth tinged flames and the fragrance of amber. I determined not to be surprised by anything; why should I be? A great tiredness calmed the turbulent ocean of my soul; the world became still and enveloped us both – as bass and soprano sing in harmony, face to face, breast to breast, on the cushions.

In the tresses of her hair I found rose petals, so delicate, soft and warm! Then I opened the closed shell of her lips and also undid the lock of her other jewel. She lay beside me till the first rays of dawn awoke us; then she rose and stood before me, the glory of my good fortune. In the next room she prepared a bath for me and I washed that morning in rose water from jugs and bowls sparkling with the red of rubies and yellow of gold.

When I had dressed I noticed my companion had disappeared and I went out to look for her. It was dawn but the pearly chains of stars had not paled. I sent a morning prayer up to God. Then I searched everywhere. But the meadows between the pools and trees lay deserted in the half light. Far and wide I saw not a living soul. Where had the queen taken her crowd of fairies? Why was I left behind – alone?

My head was still heavy from the wine, my mood darkened the solitude, so I lay my limbs to rest on the fading flower wreaths from the night before and fell asleep, while fate kept watch over me and sweet dreams whispered to me.

When I awoke, the gazelle of night had opened the sack of dark musk beneath the shell of heaven. I sat up and again there came as on the previous night that soft wind with the spring cloud floating behind, sprinkling pearls and bringing the scent of roses, jasmine and violets. And see there! As though time and passing did not exist here, the fairies swept along with shouts and laughter, built the throne of jewels and gold and prepared their princely banquet on silk carpets.

Again the ground fell away from me when I saw Torktaz among the women, mistress of the night and yet radiant as the first day of Spring. She took my eyes and heart prisoner and I could not move a muscle without her will. She sat on the throne and only when I heard her calling me and sending people to find me did I rush out of the darkness and again, as the night before, she asked me to sit beside her.

It all happened again: the delicious food that nevertheless did not make the belly heavy and the spirit murky, the songs and the playing of the lute, like honeyed webs of blissful sweetness, the dance under the stars and the magic potion of wine that poured fire into love and gave the soul wings.

Only this time the queen was even kinder to me, her slave, and after a while, with a wink of her eyelash she sent the women away. I was alone under the dome of night with such a companion! My heart burned and soon my blood raced in my head and my thoughts were a rain of sparks. With trembling fingers I seized the silk of tresses and my hands stroked down towards the golden girdle along the perfection of her body.

How could I contain myself? Only permitted to touch the walls of paradise from the outside with the hands of a beggar? Who could survive that? I embraced her with both arms and drew her to me in my overwhelming desire to pass away on her, to drown in her... but again the beloved chained my passion and held me back in the forecourt.

‘Have you forgotten our agreement?’ she said. ‘This is not the night to break it! Be satisfied! Kiss me with lips, teeth and let us play around the fire – but ask no more for now. He who knows the boundaries and his happiness within them, he will be able to hold them for a lifetime. But whoever follows the will o’ the wisp of his desire from one to the other – he will fail at the end – into nothingness.’

I heard these words, but did not yet understand their meaning.

‘Help me!’ I begged, beside myself. ‘For God’s sake help me so I do not drown in this wave and pass away on the poisoned thorn! See: I am out of my mind, a prisoner in the chains of your tresses: free me, or take my life and cut off my head with this sword, and lay it at your feet. Why all this suffering? Are you not the rose and am I not the rain for you? Or better: you are the stream and I am the thirsty man at your bank! You do not need me, poor mortal that I am; whether you take my date to your milk, or my needle to your silk, or whether you let me die – it is the same. I am your victim either way.’

‘Have patience,’ replied my fairy queen. ‘What is one night, when you are searching for light from the eternal candle? Or would you sell a whole spring of water for just one drop? All pleasure for the one desire? Honey for the sting? Take kisses, play with my hair and my girls, and be content with what you had last night – because at the end, my friend, you will find beside the little fish also the face of the moon in the pool... only with patience...’

Hearing her words my senses returned. I felt ashamed and sorry; but for how long? The day was still far away and the moment my lips touched her, the fever shook my body again and fanned the flames in my blood.

Again the queen called one of the beauties from her following and sent us both away. Certainly I could not wish for a prettier woman, and yet...! Her embraces could

not quench my thirst, and her kisses failed to heal my wound and put my desire to rest...

When the night had broken her pitcher of colours and the day had put on her bleached cloak, my partner left me.

I sat under a cypress tree and as my glance wandered over this landscape where the giant bird had brought me two days before, I contemplated how this heavenly garden had enchanted me then, and now I found it bleak and deserted. My soul froze. It was as though all joy and colour had been taken away by the night and I cursed the sunlight which bathed the world, and closed my eyes to shut it out.

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This continued for twenty nine days and nights. I waited impatiently for the sun to set and the return of the queen and her fairies without whom my life had no interest. In their absence, in sleeping and waking I dreamed only of them; and what did I care about the world? I would have given it all away, with a light heart, for just one of my nightly feasts. Was I not ruler in the kingdom of happiness? Was not my dwelling paradise and was not my every wish immediately granted? Every wish that is except for the one, the most important! Every night my moon queen always comforted me and when my desire broke all bounds sent me with one of her women to the little palace with the roof of golden tiles.

How ungrateful I was! Just because this one desire remained unfulfilled I thought only of her and despised all else which I was given each night in superfluity.

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When the thirtieth night had cast its amber tresses over the earth, it was darker than ever because this time the sky held the moon concealed. The fairies arrived as before, surrounded with candles. Their queen came too, more beautiful than ever, and ascended the throne.

She called me again, affectionately offered me a place beside her, on her right, and as before, we ate together, drank joyfully the purple wine, watched the women dance and listened to songs and harps. But the longer this carried on, the more destructively burned my passion inside me. It was as though in this one hour, all memories of the desires and longings of the last days and nights had come together at once. Did madness take over? Yes – what else? The demons I had chained so carefully broke through on this moonless night and imprisoned me instead, their plaything and helpless victim.

Certainly I was crazy like a starving donkey that sees corn, or like an epileptic on the night of the new moon. Like lovesick spiders my fingers clutched wildly at the tresses of my beloved, stroked her silver limbs and grasped at her body like thieves eager for treasure. Her withdrawal only made my desire stronger and my fever wilder.

The queen noticed this and full of compassion took my hand, kissed it and spoke:

‘Don’t grasp after locked treasures! Whoever wants to take that which is not given freely will never attain his goal, and how can you break the seal to this treasure? Be patient! Soon the date tree will be yours and you will eat the fruit, just wait.’

‘You are the light of my eyes, my sun!’ I replied. ‘How can I do other, poor lamb that I am, I pale away before the radiance of your glance.’

You show the thirsty man sweet water and say “keep your lips closed, do not drink!” but my mind is crazed at the sight of you and I have no more strength to fight any longer the temptation which you have become for me. How can I deprive myself of such happiness? Although you are a spirit and I am but a mortal, we are still made of earth! How much longer must I destroy myself, bite my lips and swallow the blood that fills my mouth? End my pain at last and fulfil my great longing! Do not keep saying: “Cease complaining, I am your friend” but prove to me today that you really are! Else for how long, my slim-hipped beauty, must I sleep away my time and

happiness like the hare of legend. I fear that fate will betray me finally: it is as grisly as a wolf, cunning like a fox and strikes its victim as surely as a lion or panther...

Belong to me tonight, because if you refuse, I will die. Like a queen that you are, be kind to your guest.'

I spoke and pressed her wildly to my body. But once again she withdrew and promised: 'I will do all, all that you wish, only desist for now! Believe me, I am your slave, and I have nothing to give, not even my life, valuable enough for such a guest as you. What you demand belongs to you, but you demand too soon! Wait, I will fashion a paradise for you out of a thorn and you will smell the fragrance of aloes in a weed. Just wait! Take from me all but this one and only fruit that is not yet ripe. Take my lips, my breast – but not the hidden pearl. If you keep patience for this one and only night, you will not regret it in a thousand nights to come. Look, I will let you have one of my followers again, a woman as beautiful as the full moon, so that the denial is easier to bear!'

She tried to bring me to sanity with such words, but though my ears listened, I did not hear them inside my seething surging senses and soul. Of course I dimly knew the queen was right, that I should be ashamed of myself and calm my senses – but alas! The other voice in me was stronger: I could not avoid the fate that wished my undoing and I followed its beckoning call that came to me through clouds from far away:

'You fool! Seize the hour – it will not return. Whatever happens afterwards let it be...'

So I answered my beautiful beloved:

'Indeed you make it hard for me; are you not satisfied that you have robbed me of all peace of mind? Thousands on thousands have already lost their lives in search for such treasure, and now that I have found it, should I deny myself? Why should I be concerned with what I might suffer afterwards? No, as long as I have life in me, I will

not let you go – so, give yourself to me or spill my blood, because I have fallen in love with you, body and soul, and what is death in comparison to possessing you? Let me burn with love like a candle for this night. Light me, since I only exist through your fire, as the yearly seasons live through the sun. See, I was dreaming until now. Yes, I was dead. Is not sleep the twin brother of death? And my dream was you... how could I have dreamed of you if you did not exist in reality? Awake me from sleep now, awake me to life, or kill me, quickly and finally...’

As I said this I fell on her again, a third time; her pleas against my feverish, insane passion and her prayers for patience were of no more use.

‘I swear,’ she cried, ‘that you will find fulfilment tomorrow, if only you can hold back today, just today – listen – just this one last night.’

What was the use? The thunder in my blood was louder than her words, and her contrariness strengthened my longing a hundred times. I held her like prey and my hand already slit like a sharp knife through her clothes to her body, I was on the threshold of her treasure chamber, fully resolved to force an entry and blend her ruby with my cornelian, when she cried out, knowing that nothing could stop me:

‘Close your eyes for a moment, and I will unveil my treasure for your delight and you may take possession!’

I thought the queen had at last surrendered and would fulfil my desire and quench my thirst. My heart rejoiced and immediately I did what she asked. It lasted only a short while; then I heard her voice say:

‘Open your eyes!’

I opened them ready to lock my paradise angel in my arms, but instead, what did I see? Around me was utter darkness, and I hung, quite alone again in the basket with the rope, like the time before I arrived at the platform on the pillar from which the monstrous bird had later carried me away.

Only this time the carriage was on its way down and there on the ground waited my black clothed friend. He embraced me, and weeping, begged my forgiveness.

‘If I had spent a hundred years telling you what you have now experienced, you would never have believed me,’ he said. ‘But now you know the secret. How can you explain it to anyone? Now you understand our silence and why we go about in dumb grief dressed only in black.’

‘Oh!’ I cried, ‘You, my brother in black, how true... please, fetch me one of your black robes.’

He did this and the same night I departed for home and my city which I had once left to solve the riddle, and where I now, having found the answer, have returned as Shah of the Black Cloak and my grief will forever call through the heavens like thunder from black storm clouds and as long as I live I will never cease mourning for the happiness I lost through my own doing...

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This story, which the lady in black shared with us, was told to her by the king, and ever after, out of love for him, she herself dressed only in the colour of night.

She, the night, gives majesty to the moon which is why the silk of the royal canopy is black, the canopy with the gold falcon at its peak. No colour is better than black. Is not the black backed body of the fish better than its white skeleton? Is not black hair the sign of youth? Dirt does not gather on black, and through its black pupil the eye sees the world in light! What cradle is worthier for the moon than the black silk of night?

Seven colours are the seven heavens and among them none is higher than black.

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The princess from India brought her tale to a close and gave praise to King Beram, who clasped her in his arms and both slept happily together.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM GREECE

ON SUNDAY

IN THE YELLOW SUN DOME

On Sunday, when the morning sun threw gold over hills and valleys, King Beram, reflecting the glory, dressed from head to foot in yellow, wore a gold crown, took a goblet and placed on his finger a saffron yellow amber ring. So dressed he went to the yellow dome, scattering gold pieces on the way, to increase his own pleasure among the people. Enjoying wine and music all day he sat together with the princess, and as dusk, the veil of lovers, sank over the world, the king asked the beauty to tell a story and fill the dome with her melodious voice. Since the wishes of kings are commands which cannot be refused, the lovely Greek princess said:

‘Oh most generous of kings, prince of princes, may all perish who do not wish to serve you!’

With that she began:

THE TALE OF THE KING WHO DID NOT WISH TO MARRY

In Mesopotamia there once ruled a mighty king. He radiated over the world like the sun, beautiful as the first day of spring and master of every art. Only one shadow darkened the life of this king. He refused to marry. You see, he had read in his horoscope that he would only experience unpleasantness with wives, and so the decision matured in his mind not to set out on this perilous path in the first place.

For a while he remained single. But is solitude like this good for a king? He was aware how sadly and monotonously life without love passed by – no, that was not the answer. So he sent out people to search high and low for beautiful slaves who might be able to give joy and comfort to the king.

Was not this wish easy to grant? Were there not more than enough such girls? Certainly many were brought to the palace and presented to the king, but how strange, none remained for long. After a week, sometimes a little later, sometimes a little earlier, a striking change came over the girls. Once mild and obedient as lambs, they soon crossed the boundaries of their position. Modestly bowed heads suddenly tossed with pride and haughtiness, the slaves turned unexpectedly into princesses, humility into presumption, and instead of being grateful for the honour and gifts heaped on them by their lord and master, these ladies turned up their noses and demanded more and better.

What was the cause of this sudden change for the worse? Listen! Among the servants of the royal palace was a hunchbacked old lady who concealed envy and malice beneath a mask of sickly sweet hypocrisy. She was foolish, but her victims even more so. Whenever a new beauty was brought before the master, the old lady fastened on to her, cosseting and pampering her, and dripped honey concealing poison into her ear.

‘Truly you are a princess from head to toe!’ went the gist of her whispering. ‘What a shame that one such as yourself should only be a servant...’

In this manner she spoiled the girls who sadly were only too happy to listen to her, believed all she said and the more they did so, the more they neglected their duties.

Pity the man who has such a mischief maker under his roof, who disturbs the peace of his home and whom he cannot recognise.

So it was with our king. He found the prophecy in his horoscope confirmed time and again that women would cause him trouble, and since each girl who at first pleased him had soon to be banished from his presence because of her impertinence, this strengthened his resolve never to marry. In this way he continued to throw the worm-infected fruit away, unaware of the evil at the tree's root.

Naturally he could not avoid mockery. The story of the king's slaves spread among the people and since, as usual, most judged only from the appearance of things, they pronounced the prince insatiable and called him, secretly amongst themselves, 'the girl dealer'.

All this disillusionment made the ruler bitter and dispirited. He withdrew more and more into his solitary self and dreamed of a pure beloved who he believed could never really exist in this world of betrayal and inconstancy.

Such was the situation when one day the king heard of a merchant from the far-off kingdom of China who had arrived with a caravan of a thousand virgins, one more beautiful than the other. However, there was one amongst them not created as a child of man but as a fairy daughter. She shone as though she had stolen the brilliance of the morning star, and her beauty was the wonder of the world. Even so she caused distress in all who met her because she rebuffed everybody, and however sweet her smile, just as bitter were her words. Despite this flaw, even old slave dealers made cynical by their profession were struck by her beauty and had never seen anyone like her anywhere.

When the king heard this news he immediately ordered the merchant from China be brought to him with the girls. And in truth among all the moon-lovely faces, that one was queen. Even more beautiful than had been described to the king, he could not take his eyes off her. And yet! Would she turn out any better than her predecessors?

Was there not waiting for the king the same annihilation, the same disappointment as ever before? This one would be even more painful, bitterer than all the others.

‘Tell me,’ he turned to the merchant, ‘What is her nature? You should know that if this pleases me too I will pay any price for her.’

‘Well,’ replied the Chinaman, ‘This girl would indeed be perfect were it not for one blemish, just one. But it is a large and hideous blemish: this beauty is unable to give love. Whoever I sold her to, that man brought her back to me straight away, because her icy coldness kills love. A man’s heart would freeze in contact with her ice were he not to separate from her as quickly as possible. People tell me the same about you, your majesty. You also, I hear, are seldom if ever content in love. Therefore, if I may advise you, do not touch her! You would only bring her quickly back to me, and what is the point of that? Tear yourself away from her and choose one from among the rest: whoever you want is yours, free of charge; you may take her as a gift.’

So spoke the merchant from China. Was he right? Wrong? The king was in two minds. He could neither tear his heart away from this dangerous beauty, nor could he risk throwing the warnings of the merchant to the winds because he sensed that they were not without reason. What was he to do? Tentatively he glanced at the other girls, one after the other, but there was no comparison! No, another choice was out of the question; his eyes returned to this one only, impatiently, irresistibly. Finally love triumphed over sense and caution.

He thought to himself, could not even the grimmest disillusion be as painful as a renunciation he would regret for the rest of his life? So he bought the slender limbed beauty for silver, and made a firm decision to remain patient and to suppress the dragon of passion, to ward against any loss of control.

So the girl Periru, fairy face, came to the king’s court and soon everyone observed how different she was from all the previous favourites who had once found pleasure

there. She did her work with scrupulous care, was always friendly; never complained; no task too menial for her. Above all she kept herself to herself, avoided all gossip and trouble-makers. The king's growing trust, which she secretly observed, made her neither conceited nor presumptuous. More than this, she remained as modest as a shadow at his feet when in his presence, and even though she hid her inner self like a flower bud from him, he nevertheless sensed her unspoken affection.

What about the hunchbacked old woman? Of course she did her best to ruin this girl also with flattery and sweetened poison pills to bend the straight quill – but for the first time she failed. Periru would have nothing to do with her, ignored the gossip and ordered the woman to leave her in peace. Nevertheless the old woman never ceased in her attempt, but the girl gave her no answer and behaved as though she heard and saw nothing.

Thwarted in her plans the old woman became careless; the king overheard her talking. Then he realised who had turned the heads of all the young ladies and in a rage threw the evil woman out of the palace. Finally this wicked spirit had found her match and fallen herself into the trap she had so cunningly laid for the others.

Day by day the king fell deeper in love with this special girl. Outwardly she was the slave; in reality it was the other way round: love bound him in chains – her prisoner.

Nevertheless he controlled his urges, remembered the words of the Chinaman and his own resolution, and kept silent about that which so powerfully gripped his heart and roused all his senses.

What about Periru, the girl with the fairy face? Was she really as cold as she seemed? Or was she just testing his patience? How about that? Did he not realise that she too was pretending. But why, and for how much longer? These were questions which occupied the king's mind constantly. He had to find the answer; he had to hear it from her, and one evening an opportunity presented itself.

The beauty came to keep the king company. She talked about this and that, and sat clothed in fur and silk next to where he lay, his feet resting in her lap. Was not this the music of tenderness? Could he not read love in her eyes? Was there not the same fire burning in her veins as in his?

‘Eye of my soul and soul of my eye,’ began the king, ‘your body is the shell of the moon and next to you the cypress is but grass, such is your beauty. Would you please give me an answer to one question, but a straight answer? You have to know my happiness depends on it!’

And before the girl could reply he hurried on:

‘I will tell you a little story before I put the question, and it will give you courage to speak truthfully. So listen: once upon a time when Venus in heaven meant happiness in love, King Solomon sat together with his wife Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, as we are doing now. They had only one child, a small son, lame in arms and legs. “Oh God’s chosen envoy,” Bilqis spoke that evening to Solomon, “We are both in complete health, why not our son also? Is there no cure for his illness? Let us go in search of it and please ask Angel Gabriel when he next brings you a message, to read the secret for you from the divine tablets of destiny. Perhaps there is hope for the child to become whole, who knows?” King Solomon agreed and when Angel Gabriel appeared several days later he asked of him this special favour. Gabriel disappeared immediately but returned shortly after bringing the king a greeting... can you guess from whom? Yes, from the creator of the blue universe himself. He said: “Hear this! Two things are necessary for your child to be cured, and both are most rare and costly in this world: that is to say the husband and wife should speak the truth to each other...” When Bilqis heard this from Solomon she was overjoyed and immediately said: “Now ask of me, so I may answer according to God’s will!” Solomon pondered

a while and then said: “Your beauty is the object of every eye. But as for you, have you ever felt passion for anyone but me?”

“May the evil eye never come near you!” replied Bilqis. ‘You are more radiant to me than the sun and are better in everything than anyone, not only in your youthful beauty, goodness and tenderness! You prepare a paradise on earth for guests, and are yourself guardian of this paradise, and everything below whether seen or unseen belongs to you, because the seal of your prophecies protects the world... And yet! In spite of your beauty and youth, your majesty and graciousness, it is true that when I look at this or that youth, I am not entirely free from desire...’

Scarcely had this confession passed Bilqis’ lips than – a miracle – the child next to her lifted his once lame arms, stretched them out to her and cried out: “Mummy, look! They move... Look!” Overjoyed Bilqis turned to Solomon and said:

“My good wise master of demons and spirits, now answer me too, if it does not offend you, a question for the child’s sake, so his legs will heal as his arms did through me. You possess more treasure on this earth than anyone in the past; tell me now if you nevertheless have ever felt a desire for someone else’s goods and property?”

The prophet king answered:

“You are right. No man ever possessed such treasures and such power between heaven and earth than I. And yet – I have to admit – I am eager for more and secretly look at the hands of those who visit me to see what presents they are bringing...” The words had scarcely died away than life streamed into the tiny legs of the little boy and he began to crawl and stamp his feet. He had been healed by the grace of God because his parents had not concealed the truth from each other...’

When he had told the lovely Periru this story the king added:

‘It seems only right and fitting that we too speak the truth. Why then are you, all beauty and grace, so cold in loving? Why do you hold yourself back from me and leave me to suffer? What is the reason for this?’

When the king had held a mirror up to her in this manner of questions she spurned excuses and answered:

‘You need to know that my family suffers an ancient curse: it is the fate of every woman member, having given her heart to her husband, to die in childbirth. Who gives themselves gladly to death? Is one desire worth the whole of life? Does one eat poison knowing it to be well coated with honey? No – at least for me life is dearer, dearer even than love! That is my secret. I have revealed it to you, and now that you know it, leave or sell me just as you wish. But before you decide, I hope you will allow me a question as King Solomon did Bilqis. I have heard that many beautiful girls were brought to you year after year, and every time scarcely before you allowed time to know them, you tired of them. Why so? Why does your heart last no more than a month with any of them? Why do you change your beautiful lovers so often and so quickly? You lift them high to heaven with gifts and tenderness, only to drop them back to earth in misery. What is the reason for this?’

‘I will tell you,’ said the king full of bitterness.

‘Not one of these girls felt even a wisp of love for me. They only thought of themselves. They were outwardly beautiful, I agree, but inside they were ugly. As soon as things went well for them, they immediately demanded more and better, and every favour soon became too much trouble for them. You see, every man has his own way of walking and can do no other way, and rich food is not daily nourishment for every stomach. We all know that. Women can not be trusted. They seek out men with generous natures and think only of their own advantage. Women are light as spray and a single puff of wind blows them in any direction. Fruit is good when ripe,

but with women the opposite is true. They are pure and good as long as they are unripe. As they ripen they turn rotten. Woman is like the night whose light is the light of man shining in her sky like the moon. Enough of that! In all the girls you asked me about I found nothing but egotism. You are different, however! You always do your duty and more. I can say this even though I found no happiness with you; yes, even if you refuse to fulfil my desire I am only unhappy when we are apart...’

Such and similar words did the king speak on that night, and many more; but what was the use? The beauty remained unmoved; the arrow fell far from its mark.

Had not the Chinaman spoken the truth? Was there a harsher fate for a lover? Days and nights came and went; the king felt his self-denial becoming harder as time passed and he thought of himself as a wanderer trapped in a ravine with no beginning or end. Time passed and he remained an observer on the shore, shut out, never able to quench his thirst. He felt despair. What was the use of patience? And yet – what choice did he have? With all his royal might, what could he do against her, this one weak slave, because love had made him her slave, and she held him ransom in the palm of her delicate hands?

Then something happened which nobody, not even the king, could have foreseen. That old hunchback woman whose treachery Periru had uncovered and who as a result the king had thrown out of the palace, by devious means learned of the grief and unhappy love of the king, a fact impossible to hide for long from the servants and courtiers.

Counsel will come with time, thought the mischievous old woman, most pleased. Only wait, my little child, I will soon teach you to dance to my tune; I will warm you, but properly this time; I will rock you in your sunny cradle, my little babe, and life in your moon palace will soon turn sour! Perhaps you will think twice before you beat my hunchback again...

With that the old woman with a display of hypocritical humility begged for a private audience with the king. Granted this, and seeing and recognising the signs of grief in the king's features, bearing out the truth of the rumours, she wasted no time and said:

‘You well know, your majesty, how the tamer manages to handle wild foals. If you have such a one in your stable which is shrewish and refuses to take the bit and saddle, then you first of all get another nicely tamed colt, ride on it, petting it affectionately before the eyes of the first one, so long till she surrenders her spite and selfishness.’

The king understood the meaning of her words immediately. He considered them and found the advice congenial. The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. Finally he purchased a sweet-lipped doll, the kind who, from the moment they are born, devote themselves to be irresistible to men by all manner of artful devices and physical charms. She was experienced in an infinite number of sex games. But was it this that the ruler wanted? Now he really knew how entangled he was in the net of love. The slinky kitten left him cold and, worse, bored him. Then he remembered the advice of the sly old woman and forced himself into the game for which he had no desire.

To win Periru he pretended to love the doll. Moreover he would seek out the company of Periru, now as before, day and evening, talking, playing, eating and drinking with her, who was a companion to him in everything, and just as the girl was permitted to go to her bed, he would call the doll for company in his own. But even then, in the darkness, he thought only of Periru. She on the other hand – jealousy is clear-eyed – discovered soon enough the role this new girl played in the king's life; suffered secretly and sadness clouded her moonlike face. But what could she do?

The king and Periru were now both equally unhappy, but out of pure vanity and spite neither allowed the other to see it. Periru fulfilled her tasks in the palace, and as

companion to the king she was more dutiful than ever and moreover she acted as though aware of nothing. This was by no means easy for her, because all day and especially at night, her senses and emotions were bound by the king and her pretty rival: what were they doing together? Periru knew perfectly well, but the thought was like a knife that she was forever stabbing into her flesh.

The old witch is behind all this, she thought to herself; nobody else could have hatched such devilry! But I will be patient and wait. This doll will soon upset the king, just like the others before...

Oh patience – bad comfort for lovers! One evening, when Periru was alone with the king, her pain suddenly overwhelmed her. She had suppressed it bravely for so long – now her soul flowed over with it.

‘Angelic prince,’ she began, ‘who protects faith and justice in your kingdom, who speaks the truth and is righteous in all things: do me the same honour! Though I know night follows day, I do not understand why you first gave me dawn-clear honey and afterwards now night-dark vinegar – why? Have I deserved it? I see you are tired of me, but why do you not kill me quickly and kindly? Use your sword. Why do you fill me with grief instead? You throw me to the lion’s rage; allow me to see a dragon, a serpent, so that I die slowly of fear? What brought you to this? Who led you and who advised such a game? Answer me, my soul will fly away – it has become light and already lifts its wings. But if you speak and open the truth to me I swear by God and my soul I will allow you full access to my treasure!’

When the king heard this and realized how honestly she meant her words and oath, he hid nothing from her and replied:

‘It was you who kindled the fire of passion deep in me, and it is consuming me! But you never helped me extinguish it and the flames have grown, and my suffering worsened every day; I became ill and lost all strength. Then that old woman, the one

with the hunchback, appeared and offered me a healing balsam, the one you know. What else could I have done? God knows. I loved only you from the moment I set eyes on you, but you were as cold as I was hot! How could I bring your water to simmering, your ice to melt? You judge! I had to make you suffer in order to get better. I needed your pain, because it was the only medicine for my illness... Forget it as I forget! In our spring let us not think of winter! The old woman wished to harm us, and in fact helped us. Her malice and cunning led us to union, and instead of separating us, which was her intent, she sealed our bond!’

So spoke the king and so it happened. Both the king who never wished to marry, and the girl who would not love came together. They realized that fear of fate and anxiety about an old curse, were nothing but signs on the way to shared happiness.

No longer did the beloved keep her garden of bliss locked from the lover. What happened? Can you guess? A nightingale settled suddenly on the throne of the bud, the bud burst open and the nightingale became drunk. The king’s parrot saw a table without flies and yet the table was covered in sweetmeats – so he sprayed sugar on sugar. A fish dived into a pool, a date in milk, and sweetness blended with sweetness. When the king lifted the silk veil from the picture and opened the golden lock of the treasure chest, he found a hidden jewel worthy of him in glory, and decorated it yellow with gold.

Because joy comes from gold, the taste of saffron comes with prepared halva. Is not saffron yellow? What else could it be? It is enough to see the smile of delight on the one who eats it! The light of the candle burns through a yellow veil. Yellow is gold that spreads so much contentment, and even the calf of Moses had its value; the costliest mineral is yellow.

Now the Greek princess fell silent and the king folded her in his arms to blissful sleep.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM MOROCCO
ON MONDAY
IN THE GREEN MOON DOME

On Monday King Beram hurried to the Green Dome, dressed completely in green like an angel that keeps guard over the garden of paradise, radiant as a green light. He spent the day there with the princess from Morocco, his heart full of merriment. When the evening had crossed the emerald coloured dome of heaven and scattered the stars like white petals, the ruler longed to hear a story from the wise beauty. Having paid him homage she blew away the veil of secrecy and answered:

‘You whose life gives pleasure to our own and for whom we are all ready to die, wherever you pitch your tent there is the seat of royalty and your threshold guards throne and crown. But it is only through you that the crown has value and by you the throne possesses its rank, because you yourself are the chief jewel in the crown and the hope and refuge of the whole world.’

Having praised the king in this manner, the princess let him hear:

THE TALE OF LOVE-SICK BISHR

Once upon a time there lived in a city in Asia Minor a man called Bishr. He was a dear and good man with a heart as soft as wax, he could not hurt a fly. Because everyone could clearly see that his goodness, cleanliness and fear of God were not hypocritical but on the contrary genuine his friends called him Bishr the Ascetic. They had great respect for him and he was an example and paragon of virtue for all.

But no one can avoid the tricks of fate – neither the wicked nor the saintly. One day, like any other, Bishr took his usual walk.

While this good unsuspecting man went his way, at peace with himself and the world, a figure approached him, evidently a woman veiled and wrapped completely in a dark coloured cloth made of coarse material. What happened? There was nothing special about that, and Bishr was about to look away when a sudden breath of wind tore away the veil of the walker and uncovered her face.

Only for the flick of an eyelash! But it was enough; what became visible for that instant, just as from behind black clouds the full moon, was a countenance of such beauty that Bishr, as though struck by an arrow and permanently transfixed on its point, stood stock still and stared at the vision. Was not that perfectly understandable? It would not have gone differently for any of us!

The narcissus glance that met Bishr would have awakened a thousand sleepers to love by its magic power. He saw a face as beautiful as a bouquet of flowers, framed by curls of hair and with a pair of lips like sugar-coated dew-fresh rose-petals... the miracle of this vision, so unexpected and so close, was too much for Bishr. His limbs froze and he almost fainted. Involuntarily he let out a cry of surprise and shock, and it sounded like the cry for help from a smitten child. When the lady heard this she grasped after her veil in terror and as though she had committed a crime, wrapped it tightly round her face and hurried away as fast as she could.

Meanwhile Bishr stood rooted to the spot, like a sleepwalker. He was just that. What else? Was it a second, an hour or an eternity before the spell fell away from him?

He could not have answered for certain, not then; it was all the same to him – but for the one matter. His eyes sought after her immediately, flying along the street, up and down, and – yes, there! – he could just make out a dark wrapped shape some distance away disappearing quickly round a corner.

Was she running away from him like a thief? Yes indeed, and the house, stripped empty by this burglar, was Bishr himself! He felt and realized it to his very depths. Just one look – the accidental gift of a puff of breeze – had been enough to rob his soul of peace and to plunge his whole being in turmoil. Passion blinded him and a wild desire compelled him to follow the stranger. Even so, he hesitated; a voice warned him:

‘What you intend to do is wrong,’ it said.

‘Right or wrong, I can do nothing else,’ his passion replied. ‘I must! Where then can I find patience?’

‘Yet patience is the only cure,’ warned the voice again. ‘The other way leads you into guilt and shame; passion is misleading you – pay no attention to it. Bear the pain. You are a man and will not die from this disease! Take note, triumph over ones own desires is a sign of true faith...’

The battle raged in Bishr – this way and that. Finally his clear-eyed self overcame the dark; he renounced his intention to pursue the woman and returned home. But what next? How would he recover his lost peace of mind? Day and night he thought constantly of the beautiful stranger, of her and his love for her; the world seemed empty without her, his own life seemed to him as a desert without radiance and green. No, this could not and must not continue! At last he pulled himself together and made a resolution:

I will leave this city for a while, he thought, and go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I will pray there to God, who knows good and evil, so he may help and show me a way out of this misery.

After the thought, action! Having accomplished the journey and safely arrived at the Holy City, Bishr resorted to the Almighty and begged him in confidence for support against the demons deep inside him.

He then left Jerusalem and journeyed home. On the way he met a man who turned out to be from the same town as Bishr and they decided to travel on together, without knowing anything about each other. How soon Bishr was to regret this! The more he came to know his fellow citizen the less pleased he became with his company. He was one of those eternal complainers and know-alls: a garrulous vain boaster; one of those who know everything but know nothing, and never keep their mouths shut, precisely because they have nothing to say. In short he was an irritating bore.

How could Bishr shake him off? He was far too polite and good hearted for that. So they went their way side by side and – at it always is on long journeys – the talk soon fell now on this and now on that.

The stranger spoke most of the time and Bishr, who was used to pondering a great deal and speaking little, listened to the chatter of the impudent, nimble tongue with half an ear, hoping to stop the flow with his silence; in vain, because now and then his companion would ask questions.

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Bishr. And yours?’

‘Well Bishr,’ the other went on, ‘My name is Melika and now pay attention! Who are you compared to me? An ignorant worm next to a professor of humanity! There is nothing between heaven and earth, nothing sacred or forbidden, no thought and no judgement which I do not know about in the smallest detail. I have mastered every art from fundamentals and every science. Whatever exists under the blue heavens: mountains, woods, seas, deserts, rivers, I know everything about them, what it is made of and how it came to be. And that is not all! By no means! Even invisible things are known to me – for instance the inside of heaven and the perils that lurk in any corner. If a kingdom is about to collapse my acute learning will have known this years in advance, and also a bad harvest or a famine. Besides, I am a skilled doctor. I can

diagnose by the pulse and urine and cure every fever. As an alchemist I can change amber to rubies, stones into jewels, clay into gold, and with a puff of my magic breath I can transform a double coloured string into a mottled snake. There is not in all God's creation a single hidden treasure that I cannot find and whose spell I cannot render harmless. Yes, my dear sir, you are astonished! But whatever you may ask, I will have the answer; you will not find a wiser teacher anywhere!'

So spoke Melika, and Bishr was astonished at such arrogance; but he made no comment, feeling his words would not make any difference.

Shortly afterwards a black cloud appeared on the horizon and when Melika had noticed it he asked:

'Do you know actually why one cloud is black and another white as milk?'

'Because it is Gods will,' Bishr replied. 'But you know that as well as I.'

'Nonsense, that is just evasion,' Melika retorted, 'If you go on like this you will never learn anything and achieve nothing! The black cloud is more likely to be made of smoke, a sign of fire, whereas the white one contains just moisture. That, in my opinion, should be obvious to any rational person!'

And when shortly after this a wind blew up, the chatterbox continued:

'Tell me, what is the moving wind? Just consider that for a while. People should not live in ignorance and stupidity like cows or donkeys!'

Bishr thought about the puff of wind that had once revealed to him that countenance behind the veil... and he answered:

'The wind blows because God wills it; nothing occurs without his direction.'

'How long are you going to believe these superstitions?' cried Melika angrily. 'Be guided by science for once! Wind occurs whenever air is brought into motion by the evaporation from the earth... Now look at that mountain peak! Why is it higher than the rest? – tell me!'

‘God ordered it so, that the one is higher and the other is lower,’ Bishr replied patiently.

‘What sort of explanation or description is that?’ mocked his companion. ‘Are you always going to burden God with everything? No! The lower mountain has been worn down by bad weather whereas the higher has been spared that. That is the answer!’

Eventually these teachings were too much for the good Bishr. He drew himself up.

‘Do you really believe you can take all things away from the Creator?’ he said. ‘I myself understand something about science – certainly more than you; but I also know that one may never fathom the secret of creation with one’s own paltry thoughts. What we see is only the outer veil. That alone we recognise and know... what lies behind remains hidden from us. What avail is all this discipline and effort if the way in which you look is wrong; if your conclusions cannot earn trust? When at last the veil falls away from the riddles of the world I fear you false professors will be as shabbily treated as you treat your pupils! And believe me: it would be better if everyman’s hand should not reach for fruit he cannot digest...’

So warned Bishr; meanwhile his words, as we can well imagine, had not the slightest effect on Melika, who spoke and behaved in the following days even more presumptuously and oppressively than before.

Meanwhile they both reached a desert that they had to cross. Not a blade of grass far and wide, no shimmering drop of water and the sand burnt under the fiery sun. It was so hot that one could neither sleep, nor eat nor think properly. The tongue fixed itself drily to the gums, every breath was a groan and even such a tireless chatterer as Melika had to allow his mouth a pause. Step by step the men crawled on through this oven of a desert and were almost in despair when at last their efforts were rewarded.

They reached an oasis where a silkily green meadow carpeted the ground in the shadow of wide branching and densely foliated trees – appearing like bliss itself to eyes raw from flying sand.

A basin had been scooped out of the ground and was full of the cleanest, clearest water about which the parched can only dream.

When the two wanderers had drunk to their heart's content and revived their spirits it was also the end of Melika's silence. He turned to Bishr and spoke:

'A question my fortunate friend! How is it that this basin finds itself sunk to its brim in the earth? Who did this and why? And where does the water come from in an area around which is but a bowl-smooth desert?'

In reality the basin was a spring that came from a well beneath the earth, but no one could tell by looking from above, so Bishr who like his companion was an inexperienced city dweller and no nomad replied: 'Perhaps men brought this water here to honour God and so save people like you and me from dying of thirst? Who knows? And to ensure a safe place they sank the basin here in the earth.'

'Rubbish!' mocked Melika. 'Whoever heard such nonsense? Who would haul water on his back through miles of desert just for a stranger to drink? No. Listen. I know the answer. This place is a hide for hunters. They laid out the basin of water, certainly, but as a trap for wild animals. They exist here, antelopes and wild donkeys, and when they come to drink here, the hunters lie concealed in wait, shoot them and make a savoury roast out of the flesh! That is the correct explanation, and of course I knew it straight away. Learn from me!'

'Say what you like,' replied Bishr. 'We both judge from our own point of view and take for granted that others behave the same way in the same circumstances. So, don't always think the worst, because as the thought so is the fact... and how precious is

this water to the thirsty! Why should there be any other explanation other than it is there to quench the thirst of those in need?’

But Melika would have none of it.

‘Stop drivelling!’ he said contemptuously. ‘And, what is more, I intend to bathe in the pool, because I am covered in sweat and grime. Before we carry on I will wash myself thoroughly then destroy this waterhole with stones so the poor beasts may be saved from this trap. Yes indeed, that is what I will do.’

When Bishr heard this and recognized the contempt in the other’s voice he was deeply frightened, but pulled himself together and begged:

‘Don’t do this my good man! Having refreshed yourself with this water, surely you are not going to want to dirty it? You do not spit into the cup out of which you have just drunk; you do not darken the clean mirror having seen your own image. Don’t do it – think of all the others who will be following us here!’

What was the use?

Melika took no notice of these imploring words and began to undress. Bishr angrily and sorrowfully turned his back, hurried away and sat at some distance under a tree, because he was beginning to wonder whether his companion was not only an idle chatterer but also evil, and the thought confused his mind and made his heart heavy.

All this was of no concern to Melika. He threw his clothes and possessions to one side in a pile and sprang from the edge into the pool. That was not wise! Because of its clarity and transparency the water appeared shallow but was in fact as deep as any well. Instead of finding the bottom immediately with his feet, as he expected, Melika sank underneath. He could not swim. Fright and the sudden cold gave him cramp and when he wanted to cry out only a gurgle appeared on the surface and the water blocked his mouth, nose and ears; the blue before his eyes turned black.

Meanwhile Bishr sat leaning against his tree, aware of nothing, wept with worry and thought to himself:

‘How can I continue friendship with such a wicked man? Not only does he pollute the clean water with his filth, but he is also full of filth inside. Afterwards he will begin to destroy the basin. Only the lowest of low could do such a thing! No, I have had enough! I would not wish such a companion on anybody. If he were to drown he would have deserved no better!’

Such and similar thoughts passed through Bishr’s mind while he waited for Melika to call or fetch him. And then what would he do? How could he be rid of him?

But Bishr waited in vain. No one came; not a step or word broke the silence. Bishr felt he was alone on this island in the middle of the desert. Had something happened? A strange unease suddenly seized him, he could not explain it. He jumped up quickly, hurried over to the spring and there he saw an unpleasant sight: Melika floated in the water, drowned, dead.

The sight shook Bishr.

He stood without moving a long while and stared at the corpse. Only now did he realize the depth of the basin and worked out the origin of the spring.

He then pulled the dead man onto the ground, buried him, and having finished this task sat for a while longer on the funeral mound. Silence reigned, a heavy sadness weighed on his heart and half aloud he spoke as if the dead man in his earthly bed could still hear:

‘Where is it now, your cleverness? What use was all your boasting and knowing everything in your final hour? And did you not say yourself tht you knew all that was hidden and the future? And yet poor fellow did not even see the spring which was right before your nose! This is the truth: we all deceive ourselves as long as we live and fate’s strings cannot be untied by any hand, and yet none will fall from us so long

as we do not lose sight of the origin of all these strings: the Almighty. What we both believed about the basin was wrong. And yet it was you who drowned while I escaped? Why? Perhaps because I was grateful and thought of the good, so I was safe; while you who thought and wished evil also received and suffered evil.’

With these thoughts Bishr stood up and began to gather the dead man’s possessions. He first of all folded the clothes and as he lifted the travelling bag a fat pouch fell on the ground. He opened it, emptied the contents on the ground and stood amazed. A mass of gold pieces had rolled out, a whole glittering heap of them, and when he had counted them there were one thousand pieces.

Never in his life had Bishr seen, let alone possessed, so much gold. This treasure came as a surprise. He had not been prepared for such a discovery and it awoke in him a desire for gold.

However he overcame this desire, quickly put the coins back into the pouch, closed it and packed it away securely, thinking to himself:

‘Since I cannot help the poor fellow, at least I will take good care of his goods. Because I know his name and that he comes from my home town, it should not be too difficult for me to find his relatives and together with the tragic news, bring them these things. It is important I do this. It is my duty.’

As soon as Bishr had made this decision he set off on his journey, reached the other end of the desert in safety and shortly afterwards his home town. How happy he was to see it again! After he had rested himself briefly from his exertions he went quickly on the search for Melika’s family, since he would not find peace until he had fulfilled his duty.

So he took with him the dead man’s possessions and from amongst them he showed people on the street an expensive turban, in case someone recognized it, asking:

‘Do you know a man called Melika to whom this belongs? Where does he live? Does he have a wife?’

A respectable looking man was able to give him information.

‘Certainly!’ he said, and gave him the name of a street quite close by. ‘He lives there with his wife, and you can’t miss the house because it excels in height and splendour and is a palace worthy of a king...’

Indeed it was. Bishr found the building and when he knocked at the entrance to a courtyard a pretty girl, a maid, opened the door and asked what he wanted.

Such a message, Bishr thought, will have to be delivered by myself with great care, and he said aloud:

‘There is something I would like to deliver personally to the lady of the house. It is to do with her husband Melika. May I speak to her?’

With that the girl led Bishr into a chamber where very shortly a heavily veiled woman appeared. She begged her guest to take a seat on a cushion at the edge of the carpet, sat down too and spoke:

‘Tell me the whole truth!’

Bishr could not resist the tone of her voice. Even if out of respect, intending to keep silent about this or that, he could no longer do so.

And so he told the whole story from beginning to end, all that he knew about Melika. He described their meeting, their conversations, the boasts and the pride of his companion, his mania for finding an ugly purpose behind everything good, finally the spring in the desert, which the ungrateful man wanted to dirty and spoil and in which, through his own fault, he drowned.

‘He died,’ Bishr concluded, ‘But may you have long life! I buried the body and let us hope that the fatal water also cleansed and washed away his sins. Everything he carried with him I bring you here... look!’

With that, Bishr laid the dead man's clothes, his travelling bag and the pouch full of gold pieces on the carpet in front of the woman.

For a while the veiled woman remained silent. She seemed deeply moved, a soft sob sounded, but she suppressed it quickly and her voice did not tremble when she spoke:

'Praise to you because you have been honourable and kind, as God demands of the children of men! Who can compare with you? Nothing tempted you - not beauty, not words, not gold... Melika is dead then! What you have told me about Melika is a thousand times true. How should I not know, I, his wife? He lied and deceived me, and I realized this too late. For years he treated me badly, and many others, men and women too, because betrayal and oppression was his business in this world, and it was hatred that drove him. Behind everything he did and said lurked this serpent. Let us forget him! It is not good to speak ill of the dead – and we are not his judges. His body now belongs to the earth, and where his soul is we do not know. But I know you Bishr, just as you know me, and I believe God meant us for each other. Do you not recognize me? Look!... look at me!'

With these words the woman threw back her veil and Bishr saw – whom? I know you guessed already! Before him sat the stranger whose face the wind had revealed on that fatal day, she whose beauty had robbed him of his senses and peace of soul, and on whose account he had taken the journey to Jerusalem in order to pray for help to the Almighty to subdue his overwhelming desire for her.

It was she... she! And God had led him like a blind man. God had shown him the way, so long and hard, that leads through renunciation to fulfilment and which he could never have found alone. How miraculous it all was! Yes, so overwhelming was all this coming together in one moment that with a cry Bishr fainted.

As he returned to the everyday world he saw, bending over him, the most beautiful of faces. This reminded him of what had happened, and his head burned with joy and shame.

‘Believe me, I am not mad,’ he said, ‘Because it was your love now that cast a spell over me! How can I bear this without dying? I have loved you for so long now and my soul has burned with desire for you. Do you know that? Do you remember? That day when the wind robbed you of your veil? You – your veil and me, my own self! I saw you and in the same breath I was your prisoner! And although I have not forgotten you for a single moment since then, I have never spoken to anyone about it. You were my secret, my lips were sealed over my love, and when at last I could stand this desire no longer, I fled to God. And see! What I did not want to take by theft, I was given by right. God in his generosity and compassion has given you to me and me to you...’

When the woman heard Bishr speak like this her own love grew tenfold and freed from darkness the moon shone radiantly once more, the silk gleamed free from dust, and high above the weeds the lily’s chalice was enthroned.

The marriage of this pair was celebrated and after it both were happy together. They were never forgetful of their gratitude to the Almighty, and their love did not grow older with the years. Bishr preferred to see his beloved wife best of all in green because the girls of paradise wear green, as do the angels in heaven.

Green is the colour of the cypress tree and the growing crops in the fields, and of all things the soul hankers more for green which lights up the eye and is the melody of every growing thing and the sign of every thriving.

So spoke the princess from Morocco and with that the king gave her a resting place on his breast.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM RUSSIA
ON TUESDAY
IN THE RED MARS DOME

On a day in the winter month of December, short as a summer's night, King Beram put on red robes and jewels and visited the red dome. It was Tuesday, and is not Tuesday the middle and nub of the week, best of all days? This day of Mars with his colour, that of courage in war, was also the name-day of the king, because Beram means Mars.

The king waited for the Slav princess with the rosy cheeks, the colour of fire but kind and as soft as water. She served her royal guest with zeal – how beautiful is the moon honouring the sun!

When night had torn the silk of day from the heavenly canopy with its banner point, the king begged to hear a diverting story from this honey red apple. She did not argue but scattered pearls at his feet from her ruby lips.

‘Oh you, the heaven is at your threshold and the crescent moon your tent; you who are elevated beyond all words of praise and with whom no one on earth can compare – may he be struck blind who refuses to acknowledge your greatness!’

After such an introduction the princess confided in the king:

THE TALE OF THE RIDDLES OF TURANDOT

Once upon a time a king ruled in Russia who had a daughter as wise as she was beautiful. Her name was Turandot and when I tell you her body was like a cypress tree in paradise and her countenance like the sweetest rose you can imagine, then I

would still not be correct, because what is a cypress or a rose in comparison with her? Who could describe the delicacy of her lips and what could be narrower or more fragile than her waist. On whomever she cast her dreamy narcissus eyes, but for a moment, he would become her prisoner for life, and those remaining free would envy him his chains.

But the princess was also a wonder of the world in the extent of her knowledge. There was no form of art she had not practised, no science that she had not learned with ease as others play games, and when conventional wisdom eventually failed to interest her, Turandot turned to necromancy. She had studied all the secret books and found entry to those mysteries which masters do not share with the ignorant.

Who can be surprised that the fame of the princess spread far beyond the borders of the kingdom and reached all countries until everyone had heard of her? 'This Turandot is no ordinary child of man,' the rumour went. It is as if the sun and moon were her parents, or as if she has inherited her beauty from mother Venus and her wisdom from father Mercury. There never has been one to compare with her.'

And soon there came many suitors from every corner of the world: one was ostentatious with his piles of gold; others with their strength and courage, and all longed to marry the king's daughter.

She, however, wished to know neither one nor the other. She felt nothing but contempt for all these suitors, and the very thought of marriage with any of them filled her with disgust.

Which of these boys, thought the proud girl, is remotely worthy to be my husband?

She even said this to her father, whenever he tried to persuade her to make a choice, and the poor king was at a loss because among the suitors were a number of brave knights and distinguished princes with more following behind, pressing him and clamouring from all sides.

What was to be done? He had a problem and where was help to be found?

Far from the city a mountain peak in a wild area towered high in the sky. When Turandot at last saw that the suitors increased day by day, that they swarmed around the palace like bees round the honeycomb, she made a resolution, went to the king and said:

‘Dear father, forgive me, but I must leave you! Let me build a secure castle on that mountain whose peak tops the clouds. I will live there so that we will at last be spared this plague of troublesome suitors.’

The king loved his daughter, the apple of his eye, but however painful he felt the separation, there was no other choice considering the situation, and he gave his consent. And so a castle was built on that distant peak, with towers and walls so powerful that it looked as though they had, with massive effort, constructed a second rock mountain on top of the first one.

Turandot retired to this inaccessible castle away from the ardour of her suitors. The treasure was now locked away behind stone and steel – and what thief could take it away from there?

The people named the princess: Lady of the Mountain Castle, and not even in our dreams have any of us set eyes on such a lady of the castle.

Turandot had always loved solitude, but now in her eagle’s nest she set her sights far beyond her fellow humans. What need had she of them? And above all, what need had she of any man? She was Turandot who in herself possessed a masculine spirit in a feminine body!

Around her castle the princess observed the planets circling; she knew each star, its movement and its virtues, and she also understood the influence of nature and human destiny. Princess Turandot – at least so it appeared to her – saw through this nature and this human destiny; she wished to have nothing to do with either, she had fled

from them here on to the highest peak and behind the securest walls. But would that alone be enough? Was she really protected here for ever and ever from everyone?

While the princess pondered these questions she conceived the idea to make her fortress even more inaccessible and impregnable. What better use could she have for the secrets and knowledge of magic she possessed?

Turandot felt a great longing to test her powers! She created talismans, strange figures of stone and iron, each one of which held a sword in its hand. She hid these artefacts to be guards activated by invisible mechanisms along the road that led up the mountain. Anyone ignorant of the secret, and therefore ignorant of the precise way to count his steps, would eventually be killed by one or other of the concealed swordsmen.

But even if one were lucky enough to reach the top of the peak safe and whole, he would be nevertheless nowhere near being in the inner courtyard of the castle, because the king's daughter had put, instead of a doorway, an entrance which no one could see because it was unrecognizable from the outside.

Having done all this, Turandot was certain that in the future no mortal would be able to visit her without permission.

The princess was also a painter, the like of which are few in this world. Like oysters which condense water into pearls, so she transformed colours into pictures, in which the radiant faces in the shadow of their locks of hair were like girls of paradise. Yes, her paintings were as fine as those of the greatest Chinese masters.

This time when she took her brushes she painted her own portrait on silk, life size, and above in letters of the finest artistry these words:

'He who desires to be my husband should not languish for me from a distance, but should come to my castle to look upon me like the moth drawn to light! For this a real man is called for, and no coward. He will need a thousand lives, not just one, and in

order to win me there are four conditions: first he has to be distinguished and beautiful; secondly he needs to solve the magic of the swordsmen who guard the way; thirdly – if he succeeds in that – he must find the door that leads him to me, since I refuse to see anybody who climbs over the roof to find me; fourthly and lastly, when he has achieved all this, he needs to answer a riddle that I will put to him in the presence of my father in his palace. If he should solve this he shall win my hand and with it the elixir of happiness. But if he should answer my riddle incorrectly, he shall lose his life.’

With that the princess entrusted her picture with this inscription to a messenger, ordering him:

‘Take this to the city and hang it above the main gateway that every man who wishes to win me can see and read – do you understand?’

The messenger did as he was ordered and so the inevitable came to pass. The news spread with the speed of wind from city to city, country to country.

And now the suitors came in earnest. Yes, they arrived in multitudes, knights, princes and even kings, to see the picture of Turandot over the city gateway. Several would have been warned by friends and said to themselves before setting out on the journey: ‘O well, I will only look at the portrait and leave! I will gladly do without this cruel princess...’

But of what use was this good intention? The first glimpse of the picture wiped all such intention away. So first one then another tried his luck – many royal and courageous men – and one after another lost their lives. Not a single one succeeded in reaching the mountain peak. They were all killed on the way by the magic swords, if not by the first, then by the second and third. They ran blindly and ignorantly to their destruction and earned nothing but shame because Turandot, who was so much cleverer than all her unfortunate suitors, laughed contemptuously at them.

She had the heads of these victims hung up next to her picture on the city gateway and it was not long before there hung long rows of skulls bleaching in the sun, one after the other, with new ones constantly added. Just as other towns have battlements to decorate and fortify their walls, so were these adorned with human skulls!

Now it happened one day that a young prince, who till then had not heard of Turandot, riding out to hunt came by chance on this city and to the gate framed by all the heads: in the middle of all these skulls was a radiant face like that of a fairy.

The prince, who was not only very beautiful but also unusually intelligent, looked at both and read the test. He too, whether he wanted to or not, fell in love with Turandot on the spot, seized as if by an incurable sickness, so that it seemed he could not exist for another hour without her. But at the same time he shuddered at the skulls of the many who had gone before him and said to himself:

‘This jewel hangs round the neck of a dragon! How can I survive where so many have perished? I cannot live without her, but if I so much as stretch my hand out to her, she kills me, even before I have touched her, because beneath the silk brocade of this picture there lurks a coiled poisonous snake. No one has reached her yet, and what good will it do for my head to hang here also? But this is my fate, I know; if I do not free myself from the noose which ensnares me. I am brave enough to dare my life – but merely to throw it away; how could I do that? What use would it be to anybody?’

So continued the fight between a heart confused by passion and an even more alert intelligence in the young man, and he thought further:

‘The woman who has hung her picture here in order to beguile customers, she possesses magic powers and whoever does not have these is no measure for her. That much I gather. If I give into my love now and continue without considering the consequences, I am lost. Therefore I must think long and well about it and then only

when I have a precise plan carry it out swiftly and without hesitation – but how will I manage this? My thoughts are disturbed, my heart even more so, and my senses burn! What can I do? How can I think in peace?’

Tears came into his eyes, he groaned and felt like one sentenced to death, for whom the blood cloth has been spread, and it takes all of his strength not to lay his head on the block...

At last he gained control of himself. He took lodgings in the city and concealed his passion from everybody. But day and night he could only think of the beautiful Turandot, and early each morning he went to the city gate to look at the portrait that was bliss to him, and all round the skulls that threatened death. How to undo the knot? What key would open this fortress?

However much he considered, how many thousand plans he made only to throw them away, he still found no solution. If there was indeed a solution he could not discover it and must find help, but from whom? The young man began his search.

In his quest for wise and holy men he sought out lodgings and inns where travellers from all over the world came to stay. One day a pilgrim told him of a wise man, the image of an angel and incarnation of the miraculous bird Simorgh. This sage knew how to exorcise demons and understood all the secrets of the world. If anyone could help the prince, this was the man.

Immediately the young man set off. He crawled through ravines, crossed deserts, climbed mountains and at last found the world-wise man. But where was he? Guess! Not in a town, nor a palace, not even in a hut, but solitary in a dilapidated cave in the mountainside. This did not alarm the young prince. He showed his reverence for the hermit and stayed with him as a servant and pupil for a long, long time. At length having learnt patience and much wisdom, he took the opportunity of telling the enlightened one about Princess Turandot and his love for her. He described her

picture, her magic powers and the four conditions with which she had already thrown so my suitors into shame and destruction.

When the old man had heard it all and considered well, he shared with the prince his most secret knowledge and entrusted him with the answers to the most difficult riddles.

The youth thanked him a thousand times, then took leave of his teacher and returned to the city where Turandot's father was king. Circumspectly he prepared his way to the princess. He first consulted the stars, set the horoscope and fixed the best day for his plan. After that he considered the method, which he had learnt during his time with the hermit, to find the lethal magic swords and to incapacitate them one after the other. He also sought out all the ascetics and holy men of whom he knew and begged them to support him with the spiritual strength of their thoughts and prayers.

As the time for his journey approached the youth put on a blood red cloak. He did this as a sign of mourning and grief for the horrible fate of so many honourable men who had been allowed to die in their own blood for the sake of the lovely princess. The king's son wept now for them all, set aside all desire and said:

'It is not for me that I set out, because I have conquered the passion in me, but there has to be an end to this bloodshed. Either I succeed or my own head will hang over the gate!'

After the king had given his blessing, the red cloaked youth set out, accompanied by the good wishes of the whole community protecting him from all sides like an invisible panther. When he had reached the foot of the mountain and the mule track that led to the peak, he made a split in the earth and spoke a conjuration over it, just as the sage had taught him. This crippled the mechanism of the first magic sword. And in like manner he went, step by step, ever higher, meanwhile at certain places using the right magic spell he rendered the artificial guards, one after the other, harmless.

At length he reached the peak and before him the walls of the mighty fortress rose up to the sky. But there was nowhere a door! How was he to find it? But the red prince did not ponder for long. He took out a drum and beat a powerful drum roll upon it. He listened, and at the place where an echo sounded he dug a little and found a hidden door and behind this an underground passage which led further into the castle. The third condition had now also been fulfilled.

Meanwhile Turandot had discovered what was happening and quickly sent a slave girl to the youth with the following message:

‘Good fortune has attended you who have found a path and made a breach, who first discovered the secret of the swords and now also the door to the treasure chamber. Now return to the city. Be patient there for two days, if you can. Then I will come and at my father’s court I will test you thoroughly. Four riddles I will put to you and if you answer correctly I will marry you.’

With that the prince returned. Once in the city he went to the gate and accompanied by the rejoicing of the people he took down the silk portrait of Turandot, rolled up what had brought so much misfortune to so many, and handed it to a servant to keep.

Then he approached the skulls, row on row. The youth cut them all down from the ropes on which they were hanging – and had them buried next to the bodies of their unfortunate owners.

The whole city meanwhile had been seized by a whirlwind of joy. People sang and crowded into the streets, musicians played dances, gold and silver pieces were scattered all over the place, carpets decked doors and roofs.

What about the fourth condition? It had not yet been fulfilled! Supposing the youth was to give the wrong answer? What then? Everyone thought of this possibility with terror, but also with rage, and the citizens gathered in secret, shaking their fists, putting their heads together and whispered one to another:

‘If the king refuses to give his daughter to this youth then, we swear, we will put an end to his rule and instead place our young hero on the throne, since he delivered us from the suffering to which Turandot with the assent of her father brought us.’

So spoke the people – but what they did not know was that Turandot the sorceress had secretly watched the youth from her castle, found him pleasing and was even silently hoping that he would find the key to her riddles.

When night had covered the earth with musk the beautiful princess left her castle and was carried to the residence of her father’s palace by the light of the rising moon, accompanying the radiance with its own reflection.

How happy was the king with this reunion! Turandot told him what had happened; she spoke of the many suitors who had come to reach her and who, as she put it, had only themselves to blame for their deaths. Finally she praised the youth in red, his courage and cunning and said:

‘He has fulfilled three conditions, how will he fare with the fourth?’

‘Why a fourth?’ asked the king, who loved his daughter above all else and only because of that had always given in to her. ‘One would have been enough; be content!’

Turandot smiled. Her lips were sweet but what they spoke sounded inexorable:

‘I will put four riddles to the youth, and they will be hard, so hard that good fortune must be with him solving them. If he is successful I will be his prize; if not, he knows what awaits him. Invite him then tomorrow before your throne! I will also be there concealed behind a curtain.’

‘So be it,’ sighed the king. ‘Let it be as you ask. That which you intend to do I must take on my shoulders.’

Having agreed this both father and daughter went their ways to bed.

On the next day as the ruby sun once again climbed the heavenly path and lighted the world with its rays, the youth was called to the court of the king where the great and powerful of the kingdom had already gathered. A feast awaited the guest and gold dishes bent with the weight of delicacies. The king and his court showed the brave prince highest honour and after all the people had eaten and drunk to their hearts' content, the ruler ordered that the test should begin in the palace hall. He concealed himself with his daughter behind a curtain and left the youth to sit on the throne.

Everybody waited with bated breath for the first question. But not a sound disturbed the silence. The beautiful Turandot held her peace. Instead she quietly took off her earrings, extracted out of this ornament two perfect, identical pearls and giving them to a maidservant standing in readiness told her:

'Take these to our guest and await his reply.'

The youth received the pearls; looked at them and having asked for scales he weighed them; added three more exactly the same and sent all five back to the princess. She weighed these herself, crushed them with a heavy stone to dust and stirred in some sugar. The mixture was brought before the prince who immediately understood its purpose; asked for a glass of milk, which, having sprinkled the sugar dust into it, he sent over to Turandot.

She drank the milk with the sugar; weighed the pearl powder that remained at the bottom of the glass and found it neither heavier nor lighter than before. With that she drew off her ring and gave it to the messenger. The prince received it from her hand, looked tenderly upon it and put it on his finger.

He then sent Turandot a marvellous pearl, as bright as a torch in the night. The princess laid it on the palm of her hand; tore her necklace apart and found there a single pearl, similar to the other in size and colour. She tied the two together with a single thread, and sent them to the youth.

He took them and studied them with great care – but which was which? He could not tell them apart, however hard he tried. Because a third such would not be found anywhere he asked of the guards nearby for a small blue glass marble. He clasped this to the two wondrous pearls and sent them over to the princess. When she saw the marble she kissed it and attached it with a happy smile to her bracelet, the two pearls clipped to her ears.

‘Prepare our wedding, father,’ she cried, ‘and witness my happiness! I have found my husband, and there is not another like him on earth. I know and understand much, but his wisdom is higher than mine.’

‘My angel,’ replied the old king, overjoyed at her words. ‘That is all well and good, but you must first explain to me what passed between you both. You must realize that I have understood nothing, neither your questions nor his answers.’

‘Listen,’ Turandot replied. ‘When I gave the youth at the beginning two little pearls from my earrings I was saying: “Man’s life is short like two days, hurry!” When he added three more pearls he was replying: “Even if there were five days it passes just as quickly.” With that, as I mixed the pearl dust with sugar: “Who is in possession of the stone of wisdom which is able to differentiate the eternal from the transient in this life of sorrows?” Over which the youth poured milk and so was replying: “A drop of milk is enough to separate the sugar from the pearl dust!” But I drank the milk as a sign that against his wisdom I am but a child and sent him my ring as intent of my willingness to marry him. With that he sent me the pearl which meant: “Just as hard as finding an equal to such a jewel will it be for me to find a worthy partner!” But I found the twin pearl in my treasure, tied the two together which meant: “I am this partner!” He had to give in because a third pearl of such quality does not exist on this earth – so he added a blue glass marble to the pair of pearls as protection against the evil eye and the seal of his love on my own bodily treasure...’

When the king understood the explanation and realized with joy that his daughter had now been won and found her equal partner, he ordered the marriage feast to be celebrated with pomp and splendour.

After this he spread a paradise carpet, fragrant with musk and aloe, for his two stars, and the two remained alone on it.

The youth covered the face of his beloved with kisses, caressed her pomegranate breasts and again tasted the sweetness of dates from her lips. Finally the diamond gained the upper hand over the pearl in the battle of love and the falcon sat enthroned on the pheasant's breast. He saw beneath him a pair of eyes drunk with love for him and his blue marble sparkled on her wrist. He then lifted the seal from the hidden treasure.

This time blood was to him a sign of blessing, and he clothed himself in red again, as on the day when he approached the magic mountain. Only this time red was the colour of his happiness. Because he had escaped the black of death to gain life's redness so he wore red ever after and came to be called by all King of the Red Robe.

Some jewels are valuable for their red and the alchemists call gold 'red sulphur'. Red is also the soul of life and blood gains colour and richness from it, so red is the fount of all beauty: just like the red rose, what would the queen of the garden be without her crimson robe?

The princess from Russia ended her story and it was as if her words themselves floated in the room like the fragrance of red roses. The countenance of King Beram reflected radiance like claret wine and he reached out his hand for the crimson rose and drew her to sweet slumber on his breast.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM EGYPT
ON WEDNESDAY
IN THE BLUE MERCURY DOME

On Wednesday when the sun blossom had illuminated the night-black of the sky with blue, the king also dressed himself in blue and hurried to visit the blue dome. The hours there flew by with the beautiful princess and when night bound its locks with a veil of musk, the king begged the beauty for a story worthy of pleasing his heart and to rouse the senses to love-play.

‘Oh you whom the heaven aids and on whom the star of fortune bestows your value,’ said the rose-lipped beauty. ‘I and a thousand girls like me only feel our significance once we have kissed the ground at your feet! How could my story be worthy of you? Since you order it, so I must obey.’

And the princess told the king:

THE TALE OF THE ADVENTURES OF BEAUTIFUL MAHAN

In Cairo there once lived a young merchant called Mahan who was so beautiful that the new full moon itself had to envy him. He had many friends who loved and made a fuss of him. They organized big parties in his honour, and the youth found that he became the centre round which everything turned. So life flew by in a most agreeable way. He knew only pleasure and no sorrow; he was protected and no one hated him; all his wishes were granted even before he had uttered them. Could this go on for ever?

One day Mahan and his companions were guests of a wealthy man who lived in a palace set in a magnificent park on the banks of the River Nile. The young people enjoyed themselves while the sun above made its long journey from east to west. They ate fruit, drank wine and at every new dish they raised their spirits with jokes and entertainment. When the shadow of evening had thrown its fan over river and garden and darkened the silver heavens with its silky brush, the mood of our company became even more relaxed; wine foamed higher in the goblets, songs, laughter and the sounds of lute blended with the magic of dusk and bound the hearts of the guests with invisible threads. No one thought of going home. Why should they? The sun had barely set when the moon peered from behind the silk curtain of the heavens, and clothed the world in its different softer light. It was one of those nights when even the flowers and birds forget to sleep.

But what was happening to our beautiful Mahan? Today he was again the darling of all. Everybody curried favour, from the master of the house to the servants, and the guests surpassed themselves paying him compliments. The youth was used to that; but the praise also tired him. The day had been hot, the pleasure loud and long and Mahan had drunk the wine like water without noticing. He had drunk too much! Now, as the moonlight trickled softly through the branches and leafy shadows and night breezes playfully caressed the flushed faces, a wish to be alone and silent grew in him. An opportunity arose and he slipped away like a thief from the terrace where the guests were sitting together. On the last step he hesitated and tried to think clearly, but the thoughts in his wine-soaked head were like bees which, when disturbed, swarm excitedly together. A little walk would do him good.

Mahan was just about to cross a stretch of meadow when he noticed a figure on the other side, moving between the trunks of several date palms, and who seemed to be waiting for him. Who was it? He walked a little quicker, as did the other who seemed

to have caught sight of him at the same time, stepped under the trees and faced him so that the moon shone full on his face.

Mahan recognized the stranger. He was an old acquaintance, a merchant too, and several transactions had passed successfully between them. This colleague lived in a city far away and Mahan was surprised to meet him at this hour and in this place. It was most strange.

‘How did you get here?’ he cried out. ‘Alone! – where are your friends and servants?’

‘A long way!’ nodded the friend. ‘I only arrived tonight, late, and since the gate was closed I had to lodge my caravan in a guesthouse by the city walls. There I was told you were spending time as a guest in this country house. My heart was most impatient to see you; because you need to know that I have a surprise with me: goods that could bring us profit as never before – in short, a deal that deserves your gratitude ... so come now! Come back with me to the town straight away, because you should be there now. Let us waste no more time here. We need to discuss matters. Tonight is important. Maybe, who knows, we will find ways and means of getting these goods on the market and avoid paying tax on part of them.’

When beautiful Mahan heard this he was extremely pleased – it was as if the tempting transaction had already been agreed upon and his pockets filled with gold and jewels. Why not? Could there be a better ending to this happy day? Was not his life one long chain of successes and pleasant experiences; an unbroken chain? And was he not, Mahan, the most blessed man in the world?

Nevertheless he would have preferred to ask more questions and also take leave of his host; but his friend seemed to be in a hurry. He had already turned away, calling over his shoulder with lowered voice: ‘Come! Be quick and silent; it is better if nobody sees us! Let us keep the deal to ourselves!’

With that he hurried straight through the palm wood towards a gateway that stood wide open and beyond lay the boundless wastes shimmering obscurely in the moonlight. The youth followed obediently. He assumed there would be a servant outside waiting with horses, but to his surprise his friend was alone and had come on foot, running out into the night without looking to the left or right. Further and further they ran. What else could Mahan do but try and keep up? Soon he found it heavy going. His feet burned, he was gasping, the sweat poured from his face like rain, and the more exhausted he became the faster, it seemed to him, ran his leader. Eventually doubts gripped poor Mahan. He knew that the country house on the Nile was only about a mile from Cairo, and yet it felt as though they had been underway for hours, and had already put ten or twelve times this distance behind them.

They should have reached the city ages ago! But the place they were hurrying through seemed always the same, deserted and god-forsaken, and nowhere was a house or even a living being to be seen. At last Mahan could bear it no longer. He gathered all his strength and cried out:

‘My dear friend, what is this? Where are you leading me? I fear we are lost and have left our goal behind!’

But the other did not answer, did not even turn his head but continued to run without stopping. Then Mahan felt ashamed of his weakness and lack of courage.

Who knows, he thought, I may well be drunk and am confused about time and distance. For sure, that is the reason. My friend, he has come this way once before on foot, he must know it and I will certainly soon be repaid a hundredfold for all this effort.

These considerations gave the youth new confidence. He pulled himself together and the fast pace continued further, uphill, downhill, the tireless leader always a little

ahead, and whenever beautiful Mahan fell back a little, gasping for air like a fish on dry land, and wanted to rest, the shouts of his friend drove him on.

How long already and for how much longer? Then all at once the black wall in the east split and a ray of light appeared indicating the sun could not be far off from the horizon. The moon began to pale. A bird called from somewhere and was answered by a second. No doubt, the day approached, the great liberator, who sweeps away spirits from the eyes and hearts of people.

Mahan too, the unfortunate, still stumbling with swollen feet over stones and through shrubs, half walking, half crawling – he too saw the new light and he sensed evil. Had he been betrayed, shamefully deceived?

But in the same instant that he thought this, the figure of his supposed friend vanished. Without trace! Sunk into the ground, or spirited away into the air – who could tell? The youth was left alone in a desolate unknown place, lost, taken in, half crazed with disappointment and exhaustion. He threw himself on the ground, wept bitter tears like a spluttering candle burning itself out, and soon fell asleep.

Around midday he was awakened by the full heat of the sun. Its rays beat straight onto his head and the anxiety in his spirit could not have burned more fiercely. He stood up and looked around; but what he saw was bleak indeed. He had secretly hoped this evil adventure was just a dream. He was horribly disappointed. Instead of the rose garden by the Nile, his eye saw all around only pathless desert, steppe and rocks – nothing else. But yes! In the rocks were caves and in the darkness of these holes Mahan could see huge dragon-like snakes. O horror! Some showed just their heads, others slithered about in the open; lay curled up in the sun or hissed at him with hideous gaping jaws. Their eyes, like fixed drops of green poison made him shudder with disgust and terror.

He fled. He ran again; though his feet bled and could scarcely bear him up. Only away, away from these monsters! So he wandered lost and aimlessly about, hour after hour, till the evening caught up with him and Mahan's heart began to tremble like a caged bird afraid of its own shadow that grows ever more threatening, and at every step he was alert with terror. He felt like one sentenced to death, for whom a dark majesty was holding bloody judgement, and when the wave of night at last closed all round him, his legs refused to bear him up and he fell down in a heap by the entrance to a cave. In his condition he mistook branches and twigs, which his hand touched, for snakes and fell into a faint out of fright and exhaustion. But shortly after he was awake.

Had not a human voice reached his ear? Or had he been dreaming? But no, when he opened his eyes he saw two human shapes in the moonlight standing in front of him, a man and a woman, and both were carrying heavy loads on their shoulders, under the weight of which they could only move slowly, bent double. They had, it seemed, just discovered the man lying there apparently blocking their way. While the woman held back, the man stepped closer. With effort, but enlivened by new hope, the youth raised himself up.

'Who are you?' cried the stranger. 'Where are you from? Is anyone with you?'

'I'm a stranger here,' he replied. 'I am persecuted by evil.'

'What fate brought you here?' the other wanted to know. 'This is a desert. Demons live here and when they are disturbed the lions roar out of fear.'

'O excellent man!' begged the unfortunate youth, 'For God's sake have pity on me! Believe me: I never chose this place myself, and I am no demon, but a child of man. Yesterday evening I was a guest in a paradise garden, happy and pampered by everybody... a man came pretending to be my business partner, took me with him and brought me here to this place of terror and when dawn broke he vanished. He

deceived me. Or was he himself deceived? You see, I don't know. But please help me in the name of the Compassionate – help me, a lost man, and lead me on to the right way!’

When the man heard this he cried out:

‘Well well, my handsome fellow, you have indeed been lucky! You were only a hair's breadth from destruction; because, you should know that the one you took for a friend is in truth no human being but a demon called Ha'il, Terror of the Desert, and in the past he has led hundreds from the way and hurled them in darkest night into an abyss... but now cheer up! My wife and I will stand by you and protect you from all the dangers of this night.’

Relieved at these words Mahan felt himself safe from danger. The two took him by the arms between them and off they went, on and on in the same way, mile after mile. At last the youth became uneasy, but because his companions neither stopped nor spoke a single word along the way, he dared not speak either. So he walked on squeezed between the extraordinary pair through the night, as helpless as a blind man or a newborn child – till at last the dawn of the sun on the horizon announced the new day. Then the two let go of him and vanished into thin air, and Mahan once again found himself betrayed and deserted, alone between rocky precipices this time, the lair only of beasts of prey, and behind rose mountains one behind the other into the cloudy heights. Who could have felt any hope in such a place? But worse, more painful than the disappointment was the hunger. For two nights and one day the beautiful Mahan had not eaten a thing – tears, fear and worry had been his only nourishment. What would he not have given for a piece of bread! But here between the rocks and stones in the sand only a few straggly blades of grass grew with roots worn away by the heat. Nevertheless he collected both and chewed the wretched fare slowly, bit by bit.

Then, in case he could find escape, he dragged himself up and down the mountainside – in vain. He found no path, no hut, not a living soul far and wide and when night pulled its velvet veil over the world again he became weary of himself and of the world, crept into the first cave without thinking about snakes or wild beasts and immediately fell asleep.

Let happen what may!

But this peace lasted only a short time. Suddenly, awakened by a pounding of hooves approaching ever near, he staggered to the cave entrance, peered and made out the shape of a rider in full gallop who held in his free hand the reins of a second riderless horse. The rider himself must have noticed the face in the cleft of the rocks, because he came straight towards it and came to a sudden stop just in front of Mahan. The rider stared menacingly at the youth.

‘Hey!’ he shouted, and his voice threatened. ‘You filthy beggar! What are you doing here? Answer me straight away or I will beat your head right off your neck!’ At these words beautiful Mahan began to tremble and shudder. What price was his life now? He quickly opened his lips, scattering flattery like a farmer his seed, and told the stranger, who listened attentively, his whole story from beginning to end. When he had heard and taken it all in the rider bit his hand in amazement and cried out!

‘Say, there is no power and no strength great than God that you were able to escape with your life from these two terrors! They were ghouls, man-eating demons, who drag their prey off the beaten track, push them into a hole, slaughter and devour them, then flee at the first bird call at dawn. The little man is called Gheila, his little wife Heila, and their intent is only evil. Thank heaven for the miracle that saved you! And now hurry, if you still have life in you. Jump on my horse, take the reins and follow me as fast as the wind. Call God in your heart for protection and speak no other word, neither good nor bad....’

The much-tested youth did as he was told and was scarcely in the saddle than they were off and away as on wings, and no hurricane could have overtaken them. Gradually the landscape lost its wildness, the peaks and the crags were left behind, and after they had ridden a while they could see from the last lower mountaintop out onto a vast plateau, as flat as a stretched out hand. And suddenly music sounded, a tumult from all sides, the sounds of harp and song broken by shouts, some here, some there: 'Come join us!' and 'May the drink reach your lips!' And Mahan saw the whole plateau as far as the eye could see covered not with flowers and trees but with thousands on thousands of demonic beings. Ghoul next to ghoul, one fatter than the other - they agitated like a whirlwind over the ground, spinning in and out of the dance like giant black leeches. The air resounded with 'Hoi' and 'Hui' and their shrieks echoed through the valley and over the desert so that the youth, seeing and hearing all this from afar, felt his head begin to reel.

The noise grew louder from moment to moment, the shouts and howls more deafening. This carried on for some time. Then in the distance appeared all at once a weird procession. At first it was just a slow swaying of torches, a sea of lights beyond counting. But who was carrying them? What were the figures beneath? Monsters, so horrible no one could dream the like! They wore clothes of tar and caps of pitch and their enormous black lower lips hung grotesquely below elephant tusks and cattle horns. They carried torches in their claws and blew spurts of flame from their throats. They looked hideous and terrifying, like drunken devils out of hell. As they approached they roared songs, beat rhythm with bones on cymbals and drums while the rest danced.

While Mahan stared transfixed in terror at this theatre of horror he suddenly felt the horse beneath him begin to dance to the rhythm of this hellish music. Concerned he glanced down at the animal and gave a start. What he was riding was no horse

anymore but a dragon with wings and seven heads and - terror of terrors - the monster held Mahan's legs tight in its armpits against its scaly armoured neck. The dance meanwhile became wilder. The monster's feet stamped as though wanting to break the earth in pieces, and like a powerful whip it brandished the tail of its poisonous body to the left and to the right and found more terrifying tricks to frighten the unfortunate rider. Fainting, Mahan felt like a leaf that a storm had torn from its hiding place in the mountains and lifted down to the valley. He was thrown this way and that, sideways, up and down till he could hear and see no longer. At one point the dragon threw him like a ball high into the sky, then a fall to the ground knocked the unfortunate Mahan unconscious and above his head the claws of the monster waved, ready to crush him to dust...

How long did this go on for? – moments, hours – so many! When the rosy dawn's lion's rage had chased the darkness away, the dragon let go of his victim and vanished with the shadows of the night. All round the shrieks died away, the black horrors melted and now that the world dipped in the first rays of the sun, peace and stillness returned.

But Mahan noticed nothing of all this. He was stretched out, unconscious, as though the soul had already left his body. Only in the midday heat did he come to himself. He rubbed sleep and ghosts from his eyes, stood up and for a while gazed intently in all four heavenly directions. What use was that? He could turn and bend for as long as he wanted, all round him lay just wilderness, without beginning, without end. What a desolate sight. As on a carpet thread follows thread, so here sand dune followed sand dune, red hot under the waves of heat that made them look as though an invisible executioner was drenching them with blood.

Just as the last vestige of courage deserted the unfortunate man, and he was about to give up on all thoughts of rescue, prepared to die of thirst or fall prey to wild beasts,

he suddenly discovered, just where he was standing, a little path. Could this be deliverance? Again! As if the air round him was impregnated with poison he began to run, flew like an arrow from its bow and even quicker, pursued by fear and hope that together were stronger than the exhaustion of his body.

And in truth, by nightfall he had reached the edge of the desert. He saw trees, meadows and a stream flowing through. The heart laughed in Mahan's body. He quenched his thirst, washed himself and looked for a place to sleep.

I must rest properly tonight, he thought, instead of allowing my spirit to be confused by ghosts and nightmares as up to now, and I am sure to encounter them if I wander further along this lonely path. No, I will stay here. Sleep is the best for me.

While he searched around he stumbled all at once upon a pit in the ground and examining it more closely, he noticed a shaft with a number of steps leading deep under the earth to a well. Beautiful Mahan did not think twice. He climbed down the slippery steps to the bottom where only shadows had crept till now, and there, where he felt himself safe from danger, like a bird in the nest, he laid his tired limbs to rest and soon fell asleep. But the ground was hard. A short while later the youth woke again, perhaps, he thought, there may be some old leaves to make a pillow. His fingers felt around as if tracing pictures on the black silk of night, and he tried to penetrate with his eyes the darkness that surrounded him. Suddenly he stopped and started: what was that? Was he dreaming? Was he seeing right? But no, he saw a light, only the size of a penny or like a jasmine blossom in the shade by a meadow, and the longer he looked at it the more certain he became that there must be a hole in the wall through which the moonlight was falling, but how, he could not tell.

How strange! Out of sheer curiosity Mahan forgot his tiredness. He had to solve this mystery. He jumped up and approached the tiny opening, put a finger inside, shook it and look! the wall crumbled and soon the breach was big enough for his head, neck

and shoulders to stretch through. And – what a miracle! What he saw was no earthly garden; no, it was paradise, a fairy garden! Quickly he made the opening larger, forced his body through bit by bit and found himself standing in this park of a hundred marvels. He met no guard, neither man nor beast. Instead he saw cypress trees, palms, many shrubs and, in between hedges, fruit trees drooping with the most wonderful fruits. They were so large and heavy that the branches could scarcely bear their weight, pulled down as they were to the ground they looked as though they were bowing.

There were apples like goblets filled with ruby wine, pomegranates like agate treasure chests, quinces were balls stuffed with musk and the pistachios mocked dry lips with their juiciness. First the peaches: red hyacinths on the one side, yellow sun on the other! Near to them bananas, dates, pears and figs – and the vines stood straight under leaf caps, keeping watch over their subjects, the light and the dark... in short, it was splendour beyond compare! In Mahan's mind the memories of the hell of the night before faded away. He strolled around undisturbed, sniffed a rose here, picked an apple there, tasted peaches and opened nuts.

All at once a screech came from a corner of the garden. A voice bellowed:

‘Thief! Stop him! Stop thief...!’

An old man staggered forward foaming with rage and waving a gnarled stick in his hand. ‘You fruit-stealing demon!’ he cried out. ‘Who are you? What have you to do in this garden, creature of the night? In all the years that I have lived here no thief has ever broken in! Where do you come from? What is your name?’

Mahan was so shattered by this outburst that he could not move a muscle out of fright. He stammered:

‘I am a stranger and do not know my way around this place which fate has brought me to. I have been through much suffering; please be kind to me, and heaven will reward you!’

When the old man heard these words his anger turned to sympathy. He threw his stick aside, calmed the youth and invited Mahan to sit next to him.

‘And now,’ he said amicably, ‘tell me of your experiences. What fools and evil people have been tormenting you – tell me!’

Mahan, who had by now put his trust in this old man, told him all the adventures of the last few days and nights, in order, of how he had at last given up all hope of rescue, how he had found the path in the desert, the green oasis, the well shaft and finally the hole in the wall which led to this garden. He missed nothing out and when he had finished the old man was full of astonishment at what he heard.

‘Indeed!’ he said, ‘We all have good reason to be thankful to the Almighty, that he pulled you safe and sound away from such dangers and horrors... but be calm, you are safe here and I will protect you!’

When the youth realized that the garden’s owner meant well and felt genuine relief over his deliverance, he asked:

‘What is this strange land in which I find myself? Its inhabitants... who are they? Yesterday I thought I was in hell, in the middle of so many demons and monsters, abandoned and lost in the darkness. But God showed me the way out of the place of terror to this heavenly garden and to you, a gardener with so much goodness in your heart. How can I make sense of both? How come the night of hell yesterday? And now this paradise?’

‘My dear fellow,’ replied the old man after long consideration, ‘you should know that my garden lies in an oasis surrounded by waterless wilderness, the home of black demons. These lurk in the shape of people to lead wanderers astray and do them harm.

They pretend to be helpful and seem to speak the truth and so lure their prey all the more certainly into a trap. They pretend love and are made only of hate. There are many such demons, even among people: seduced seducers, betrayed betrayers, fools who mock those even more foolish. They clothe lies in truth, poison in honey, but such deceit never lasts long. Only truth remains as time goes by, and this is the key with which you may distinguish the genuine marvel from the supernatural and magical. But because your heart is easily taken in the demons were able to manipulate you. Because you were afraid of them they could play with you. Had you realized what they were in your own spirit they would never have gained control over your spirit.... But enough of that! You escaped – don't look back! Imagine your mother has given birth to you just this night! Forget what is past! Look, this garden is my creation and my only possession. Every flower and tree know it, because I brought them here from other gardens with my own hands; and the fruits that you see I cultivated myself with love. A whole town could live splendidly on what I produce, even in times of poor harvest. But that's not all. Besides that, I possess treasure, much gold, jewellery and the only thing I lack is a son on whom I could hang my heart. You please me – be my son! Beautiful youth: if you agree and are happy to stay with me, I will bequeathe you all I possess. You will never regret this decision. I will also find a bride for you, a woman so lovely she will steal your heart away, and your every wish will be fulfilled. Give me your consent and your hand on it!

Hearing the old man speak like this the youth did not know what to do out of embarrassment and joyful surprise.

‘What are you saying?’ he cried out. ‘When was the thistle worth a cypress? But if you really wish to raise me so high and make me your son, so will I always serve you, my benefactor, as a slave in gratitude!’

Overjoyed he grasped the offered hand and after he had kissed it the bond between the two was sealed.

‘Stand up and come with me,’ said the old man. ‘I will show you something astounding.’

He led Mahan over to the other side of the garden and there between the cypresses, willows and poplars stood a palace, stretching up to heaven and with an arcade of columns, the courtyard in front and the walls all built of marble shimmering like silver in the moonlight. The entrance had been laid with silk carpets and in front of the terrace grew a magnificent sandalwood tree, decorated branch by branch with brocade cloth, and in its summit a throne had been fitted made of beams and pillows and accessible by a rope ladder. The old man stood still.

‘Climb up,’ he said. ‘You will find there everything necessary to eat and to drink. Meanwhile I will go into the house and prepare a more fitting welcome for you. And take good care of what I say! Pull the ladder up after you and whoever and whatever comes to pass, speak to no one and take no notice of anything. Be patient and wait till I return to fetch you and even then, make quite certain it is me. We have sealed a firm bond: my garden is your garden; my palace is your palace. But on this first night the evil eye is fixed on you. You must protect yourself from it... only today for the first and last time, because on all future nights nothing more will happen to you! Be wise and follow my advice!’

The youth promised and after he had climbed to his airy seat and had pulled the ladder behind him, his benefactor disappeared into the palace.

Mahan looked down from the height. How far away lay the earth with all its inhabitants! Was he not safe here from every danger? He breathed in the sandalwood fragrance with delight; a night breeze wafted it in waves and he began to refresh himself with the provisions that filled his tree nest in abundance; because he was

hungry and thirsty. After that he lay back on the pillows satisfied and happy, reflected on his fate, and gradually his heart forgot past sufferings.

But again the peace did not last long. Suddenly Mahan noticed through the branches a shimmer of lights and bending down could see clearer and made out a procession of young women, he counted seventeen, that were making their way straight towards where he was concealed. How beautiful they all were! Each one held a candle and the sweetness of their faces full of joy and happiness threw the light back as in a mirror. The beauties were dressed in clothes of many colours, their jewellery tinkled softly as they moved and when they had reached the open courtyard by the terrace of pillars along the marble palace, they stopped and the party began.

A splendid carpet, embroidered with the tales of a Thousand and One Nights, was spread on the ground, candles placed in a circle on top of it, and at one end a place of honour, piled high with silk cushions. The most beautiful woman took her seat on it, the crown jewel among the seventeen pearls, which the others were happy to serve. Soon songs and lute playing sounded; the voices sounded so harmonious, the harp and flute competed so beguilingly, that the birds woke out of their sleep and flew close to listen. Yes, even the moon was enchanted by such beautiful sounds and halted a few steps in its journey.

And Mahan? He fared no better in his cloudy home. To make the scene more seductive the wind seemed to be in league with the beauties; it puffed out of full cheeks beneath the breast cloth so that the youth, flustered and at the same time delighted, caught a glimpse of the exquisite peachy pair. How sweet it would be to pluck such a pair! In his excitement he bit into a piece of sandalwood; that may well be a cure for headaches but not for this kind of sickness. His throne high above the earth suddenly seemed to him like a prison. He thought hard how he could escape and reach the moon-faced beauties. To lay among the women on the carpet would be

paradise for him. He wanted to enter, and without the long detour of afterlife and the Last Judgement!

While he was frantically considering how to do this, the warning of the old man came to mind just at the right time, and Mahan heard him say again:

‘...and whoever, whatever happens, speak to no one, pay attention to nothing...’

However painful this reminder must have been for the youth at this instant, he did not want to break his promise, called wisdom to his aid and drew the bolt across his passions. With no little difficulty!

Meanwhile the girls had interrupted their song and playing. Out of cloths they had brought with them they took food, and what food! First a meat broth with saffron and sugar, pomegranate soup and fruits in honey, perfumed with musk, aloes and rosewater. Then the main course appeared; roast lamb, a variety of fish and poultry dishes; and finally the desserts – prepared in candy, cakes baked in different ways, looking like slices of sunshine, soft and delicate, like the shoulders and breasts of the beauties who unpacked them.

In short it was a feast prepared so wonderfully that no one could have described it adequately. When everything had been laid out and only hands were missing to grasp it, the queen of the charmers spoke to one of her companions:

‘It appears to me that someone is sitting hidden in the sandalwood tree, who longs to join our company as much as we long for his... I smell his fragrance in the breeze and I desire to see him. Go! Call him down and tell him, if he is afraid to come, the meal is ready and dearer than the meal will be she who invited him, so ask him not to keep me waiting.’

The woman did as she was told; hurried to the tree and as sweet as her little mouth were the irresistible words and pleas that came from her lips. She was, as she beckoned and cajoled, a nightingale and rose in one. And such a double assault had

never been experienced by the poor lover in his branch nest. Why not go? His young blood was on fire. It rushed to his head and drowned the warnings of the old man like boats in a stormy sea. Without knowing what he was doing beautiful Mahan let the rope ladder drop against the tree trunk, climbed down to her and followed the messenger to the table surrounded by candles.

When the moon-faced beauty, surrounded by her stars, saw the youth approach she bowed down as though he were a king, and placed her forehead on the ground at his feet. She then gestured him to sit next to her and showed him every courtesy.

While one of her girls sprinkled him with rosewater she prepared the choicest delicacies for him. Mahan sat as in a dream. He did not turn his gaze away from his neighbour, and when with lute and silver voices the feast came to its end the lady clapped her hands and ordered wine. The ruby drink was brought and after they had toasted several glasses, the youth Mahan found it impossible to suppress the desire welling up inside him. In his drunkenness his passion tore away the veil of shyness, his arms embraced the rose with a hundred petals and he pulled her to his breast. She however slipped away from him like quicksilver, time and again, and turned her face away from him in shame. At which, doubly drunk, he went out of his mind. He held her with force and squeezed her in both his arms. He pressed his seal of love on her rosy mouth. He licked and bit her lips as though they were honey and sugar...

But how dreadful was the horror of the passionate lover when after a long kiss he opened his eyes on the fountain of his joy! Who could describe his horror? His eyes stared not at the moon face of his beloved, but into the grimace of a monster, a terrifying demon. He saw a creature constructed from top to toe as though the Almighty had created him in anger. In comparison the dragon of the previous night had been loveliness itself. This one was a marsh buffalo and at the same time a giant crab with the tusks of a boar and the jaws of a crocodile tearing apart the heavenly

canopy: Satan in his physical form – God protect us all from him! The body’s crooked back was bent like a bow and it stank for miles. The monster had nostrils which steamed and blew fire like the oven of a kiln, and his mouth was indigo blue like a dyer’s vat.

This beast held poor Mahan in a tight grip and covered him – o horror! – with kisses and bites on his head and face and bored his claws into the youth’s flesh and roared:

‘O you who I bite, who I will tear apart! Do you not want to kiss me by any chance? My lips, my chin? Speak! Not embrace me and love – what?! Look at me! I am it, me! These are my teeth and my fingernails that you feel like sword and spear. These are my lips, the same as before; so beg for more of my kisses! My cheeks are the same, so don’t turn your eyes away! Or do you think I will let you go? Do you expect to be freed? You who just now desired me! But I only give what you desired. If I did not, I would not be myself – only that thing which in your folly you imagined I was...’

So mocked the beauty now transformed into a monster, and with every word burnt a kiss with fresh ardour on her prey, slapped, prodded and stamped on the unhappy youth, who could now only cry like a helpless baby. But nobody was there to hear, to stand by him in his hour of need until at last the light of morning took away the veil of darkness from the face of the world and all at once the demon sank into the earth while Mahan fell in a faint on the floor by the gate of the palace through which the old man, owner of the garden, had left him hours before.

He came to when the sun was high in the sky. The well shaft, garden and palace had all disappeared. Instead he was surrounded for as far as his eye could see by wilderness, dried and charred with heat. Where flowers had smiled in their beds there stared thorny briars; the fruit laden branches had changed into snakes; in place of the banquet with moon-beauties on the carpet there stank a carcass rotting in the sun’s

heat, and instead of flutes, harps and violins there remained only the bones of animals from which once skilled craftsmen might have fashioned these instruments.

In the middle of this world of desolation and decay Mahan stood alone, his heart empty and in despair - not a glimmer of hope left in him. Should he stay? Leave? The one seemed as senseless as the other and he thought: How strange is this life that spirits a garden into a desert and desert back into a garden – what for, why? One is shown a rose and beneath lurks the thorn, and when we take the veil away from a beautiful moon a dragon leaps out.... Just lift the curtain and you will realize in truth what we fools have been obsessing over! Make out the delicate writing, and the blackness of its meaning will make you shudder! O you richly embroidered veils concealing deception! But who knows when to be ready at the right moment for the world's cleansing? Who can recognize the world's furnace before he is sitting in it? So many believe they carry the stone of wisdom in their basket, only to finally lift the cover and find nothing but snakes and vermin...

So thought the youth, and suddenly sensed that he was not alone, even here at the world's end and where his solitude seemed without end. In the depths of his heart, still clean and pure, a voice told him that someone whom he could not see was standing by his side. God! Mahan prayed to God, friend of the friendless. From his depths he called to the Almighty, made confession and gave praise while he continued to walk boldly through the pathless wilderness.

It was not long before he came to a spring with cool clean water. He drank and washed himself, fell down and laid his head in the dust to pray full of gratitude to the great Invisible One. He called out, 'You, who loosens the knots and are a signpost to the lost, loosen me, show me also my way. Who else but you? What can you not do!'

When Mahan lifted his head from the ground and rose to walk further he saw to his great surprise that someone was standing next to him, looking like him in form and

face, a twin brother. Only this one was even more beautiful. His face lit up like a sunrise and he was dressed from head to foot in spring green.

‘Who are you?’ asked Mahan, and he could not take his eyes off the stranger.

‘I am Chizr,’ he smiled. ‘And am the messenger of the one we both honour. But don’t you know me? I am you yourself, the best in you, your innermost purpose, and I am come to guide you home. Give me your hand, just as you are standing here. Close your eyes, and after a while open them again!’

The youth did as Chizr asked. He closed his eyes and when he opened them shortly after, his shining other self had disappeared; but he found himself alone in that garden by the Nile, where his wanderings had begun on that day when the first demon had led him astray. In truth, had days or years passed by?

Mahan began to run and shortly after arrived in Cairo and made his way home. There he found all his friends who had gathered together in blue mourning robes to weep for him whom they thought dead. When the youth stepped suddenly among them they were speechless with joy and surprise. He told them the whole story and when he had finished and his friends in blue had taken a good look at him one by one, he too dressed in robes of this colour, which from now on turned from a symbol of mourning to that of joy and friendship.

And is there a better colour than blue? Has not the canopy of heaven chosen blue silk for its clothing? Whoever is as blue as the sky, the sun will sit by him as a guest. He is like the heliotrope, the blue flower which the Indians call sun-worshipper, because it always turns its face to the sun. It conceals in its blue petals a heart of gold, which is a reflection on earth of the heavenly ball of fire.

When the princess had ended her story the king pressed her full of love in his arms.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM CHINA
ON THURSDAY
IN THE SANDALWOOD COLOURED JUPITER DOME

Thursday is a good day, on which Jupiter radiates his happiness! When the dawn had opened its purse of musk and covered the sandalwood earth with the fragrance of aloes King Beram also chose the colour of sandalwood for his clothing and goblet and went from the blue dome to the dome with the colour of sandalwood. There he drank wine contentedly, poured by the princess with the paradise eyes until the oyster-stars lit up in the ocean of the of the night sky. Then the king begged to hear a story from the slant-eyed princess from China.

‘O greatest of all kings!’ exclaimed the honeysweet date lips, ‘like the sun which animates the world and the soul and is as mighty as the desert sands, rocky heights and ocean waves, may your happiness last longer even than your life! But see, my heart is full of anxiety, because how can my stiff tongue please you? How dare I pour my vinegar in place of your balm fragrant wine? But since you wish to mock my stammering, I will open my basket and afterwards join in your laughter!’

Having said this, the princess kissed the king’s hand and began:

THE TALE OF GOOD AND EVIL

Once upon a time two young men left their home town to visit foreign lands. Since they knew the journey would be long and the road difficult, they both took enough food and drink in their provision bags to last for many days. The one was called Cheir, Good, and the other Sharr, Bad, and their hearts were as their names.

As they went on their way side by side Sharr devised a way that they both ate out of the other one's bag, so his own remained full. This lasted some time; then they came to the edge of a desert that lay before them under the sun in a heat haze. Yes, it was as hot as in a furnace, where iron turns to wax and even the north wind turns to a fire breathing hamsim. The two wanderers had to cross this hell, but only Sharr knew how much time they would need before reaching the first oasis. What did the wicked man do? He secretly filled a second sluice with water before the journey and hid it under his baggage, letting his unwitting companion believe that they would soon reach the next oasis. He let him believe this from dawn to dawn and from dusk to dusk; but when after seven days Cheir had used up his water there was no green and no spring to be seen for miles. Then he noticed how from time to time his fellow traveller drank from a sluice which he was trying to hide from him. The poor man was frightened. He discovered the deviousness of his companion too late, said nothing though he was burning with a feverish thirst, boldly swallowed complaint and sorrow, ground his teeth and continued to hope that they would soon reach the spring. But with every step his hope grew smaller and the thirst became worse.

Now Cheir possessed two rubies, the colour of fire, and these jewels were his dearest possession. He took these out of his purse and as he looked at them in his thirst-pangs they appeared to him like two great drops of red liquid. If only they had been in reality! But alas their brilliance was for the eye alone and not for the lips. He licked them, but that brought no relief. No! There was only one thing to do. Cheir knew, and as bitter as it was for him, he held the rubies in the palm of his hand in front of Sharr and said:

'I am dying of thirst. Please give me to drink, only one single sip – look, here! If you don't want to give me your water, then at least sell me some. Take these rubies in exchange!'

But Sharr – God’s punishment be on him! – swore on his name:

‘You are scratching in vain for a spring out of a rock,’ he mocked, ‘I am not the kind of man to fall for that trick. Or do you think I don’t know what you have in mind?

Here in the desert you will give your jewels and then ask for them back from me when we reach people again! But you won’t get anywhere with that. You’ve picked the wrong man, you and your sort. If you want to drink my water, I demand other jewels, those you won’t be able to ask back.’

‘And what sort of jewels are they?’ Cheir wanted to know and sensed evil.

‘Your eyes!’ answered the despicable man. ‘You cannot deny they are dearer to you than these rubies. Sell me your eyes for water! If you don’t, forget the drink and leave me in peace.’

When Cheir heard this, the world turned black around him and he cried out:

‘Are you not ashamed before God to speak like that? What use are a hundred springs to me when I have lost my eyes? How can you demand that? But sell me water; take the rubies; take all that I have and my possessions and property back home. By God, ruler of the world, I swear to you on my oath, today and for ever...’

‘Shut your mouth!’ interrupted Sharr. ‘That’s just rubbish, excuses, no more. You know my conditions.’

Cheir now realised that he would not be able to move the other from his grisly purpose, and despair filled him through and through. If he did not have water he would die. He knew that with every fibre of his being, and his thirst had become so great that all the splendour and all the suffering of this world seemed small to him beside a little drop of water. The longing for it confused his thoughts and led him to agree to Sharr’s condition, because, as is always the case, good just cannot believe in evil.

He only wanted to make me afraid, of course, he thought, and when he sees me give in he will have pity. He cannot be as bad as he lets on.

And he said aloud:

‘All right, take what you desire and let me have something to drink at last!’

Scarcely had the words left Cheir’s lips than Sharr had flicked out a knife and like a whirlwind fell on the unfortunate man and in a flash stabbed both eyes with his weapon. He stained the narcissi rose red and took the crown jewel from the diadem! While Cheir, half fainting with pain, collapsed, the wretch robbed him of both rubies and all his remaining goods and without even offering his victim the promised drink, made off with his booty in a cloud of dust.

Cheir remained behind, blind and crazed with pain and thirst, reddening the burning sand in which he was rolling with his blood, and it was probably a mercy in this condition that he could not see himself...

By chance, during all this, a mighty chief of Kurds had pitched camp with his people and herds close by. Desert and steppes were nothing to him, for whom they were his massive homeland. This sheikh possessed a daughter, an only child and so beautiful that anyone seeing her could not help falling in love with her. Her hair was blacker than a raven’s feathers – when loosed it reached the hem of her skirt and had the fragrance, lock by lock, of a garden of violets. She had sorcery in her glance and whoever it rested upon, his fate was sealed.

There was in that place, hidden among sand dunes, a spring with a tiny oasis. Only an initiate would be able to find it. It bubbled close by the place where poor Cheir thirsted in vain for one single drop, and when the beautiful Bedouin girl came there to fill a pitcher with water she suddenly heard a groaning and moaning. She followed the sound and – what did she find? We know of course! At her feet lay a youth covered in

blood and dirt. In his intolerable pain he was throwing arms and kicking legs wildly about and begging God for mercy. How the girl started back in fright at the sight! But because she was not only beautiful but also had a good and brave heart, the Kurdish girl stood there, pulled herself together and asked:

‘Poor fellow! Who are you? Who has made such a horrible mess of you and caused you harm?’

Blind Cheir hearing this voice thought a miracle had occurred and new hope sprang in him.

‘I don’t know if you are an angel from heaven, or a spirit,’ he gasped, ‘ but my story is too long and strange to tell just at this moment... If you have a drop of water, I may yet be saved. If not, leave me here to die.’

With that the girl held the full jug to his lips. Cheir tasted the coolness and drank and drank; it felt as if the sweetest, longest rain was falling drop by drop on his withered soul. Meanwhile his rescuer examined closer the wounds in his eyes. They definitely looked in a bad state; both times the knife had pierced the white and the whole eye was certainly wounded and pushed out of joint, but not totally destroyed.

Carefully the girl moved the two extinguished stars back in place, closed the lids over them, and made a bandage out of a piece of material she tore from her dress. She then took the youth’s hand and with her help he managed to get up and to make the short journey to the girl’s camp. There the Kurd delivered him to a servant while she hurried over to her mother and told her the whole story.

‘Why did you not bring him here straight away?’ scolded the woman when she heard in what an awful state the girl had found the youth. ‘Perhaps we can still do something to help him!’

‘But I have brought him,’ replied the girl, ‘and if his strength hasn’t completely left him, he should be here any moment...’

It was true! While they were speaking the tent flap lifted and Cheir limped in on the arm of a servant. He seemed to be nearly dead with weakness. Immediately the women prepared a bed, laid him exhausted on skins and pillows, brought soup and lamb stew to give him strength. But Cheir could only eat little. His body burnt with fever, his limbs jerked, every breath was a groan and at last his head fell back – compassionate sleep embraced him.

Towards evening the Kurd chief appeared. In a corner of his tent he found the unconscious Cheir; a heap of misery more dead than alive.

‘Who is that?’ the chief wanted to know. ‘What is the matter with him? What made such a mess of him?’

The women and the servant told him what they had done. ‘Someone,’ they suggested, ‘must have blinded him.’

The old Kurd was a wise and experienced man. After his daughter had described the nature of the stranger’s wounds he said:

‘There are special leaves whose juice will heal the eyes of this youth. I have experienced such healings, even of cuts that have gone deep and were serious.’

‘What leaves are those?’ asked the beautiful Kurdish child, and became greatly excited.

‘By the spring where you found him there stands an old tree,’ the father answered thoughtfully, ‘whose sandalwood fragrance does the brain good. The trunk that rises from the mass of roots separates into two different branches that grow wide apart. Whereas the leaves of the one heal epileptics, the others bring light back to blinded eyes.’

Scarcely had the young beauty heard this than she harangued her father with pleas and begged to be allowed to fetch some of these leaves. Who could have been able to deny her a single wish? So the sheikh rose up, left and brought on his return a handful

of leaves. From these the girl squeezed a transparent clear juice. She brought this to Cheir's bed. He had meanwhile woken up and she sprinkled the juice carefully, as her father directed, in both eye sockets. Then she bound the wounds for a second time. At first the youth felt a great pain so that he threw himself all over the bed; but soon fatigue overpowered him. His head became heavy and he fell asleep.

For five days his protectors let the leaf juice do its work and when at the end of the fifth they removed the bandage, what did they find? Can you guess? Like two narcissi that open their buds for the first time in the grey of dawn, so did the youth open his eyes, that were healed and shining and without a trace of damage. Cheir could hardly believe it! Then his happiness knew no bounds, and he thanked his benefactors and Almighty God again and again out of an overflowing heart.

The nomad prince, his wife and all his people, above all the beautiful daughter who had found the youth, rejoiced with him. Who could be surprised at this? She had suffered so much anxiety because of him that love which had woken in her heart now became conscious. And the same happened to Cheir. Of course he could not see the face of his rescuer, because after the sight had returned to his eyes she had to wear a veil according to the custom of women, but her movement and shape were truly enough for him, even had not the gentleness of her voice and her hands that had so often caressed his feverish brow made him fall in love with her with his whole soul: so both were tied in a mutual invisible knot, even before they became aware of it.

For the time being Cheir remained with the Kurds as a guest. He rose early each day and helped efficiently in any work that needed to be done. Nothing was too difficult or menial for him. What he did not already know he learned quickly and with enthusiasm. Whether it was as a camel raiser or shepherd, tent builder, hunter or dairyman – all work suited him and he carried it out with care and dexterity. When his

host and lord saw all that he was pleased and loved the youth more than ever, putting all his trust in him as his deputy.

Now he asked about what happened in the desert and Cheir told him all – how Sharr had deceived him, had refused him water, even in exchange for the two rubies; how instead he had demanded his eyes, and how Cheir had given in, dried out with thirst and half mad; how Charr had blinded, robbed and left him without water.

When the nomad and his family had taken in the story they all thanked God for the miraculous rescue of the youth and quietly vowed to themselves to protect him who had become so dear to all of them, the apple of their eye.

Even though the love between Cheir and the beautiful Kurdish girl remained silent between the two, it grew like a charmed flower, in secrecy, and became stronger day by day. The girl allowed nobody other than the youth to cook and serve her meals, and he on his side went about his work among the herds with greater conscientiousness than ever, in order to serve and please his hosts. Even so he could not believe his good fortune. O no! How could he dare to hope or imagine that this lovely and distinguished Bedouin girl could ever be his wife, that she should love and even marry someone like himself, a passing beggar and stranger from where? One who still ate her father's bread of charity? Cheir's heart became heavy and sadness cast a shadow over his soul.

No, he eventually thought to himself, this cannot continue and because I must leave, a quick goodbye is better than a slow one...

About a week after this decision he came riding home out of the steppe, heart heavy with love and sadness; like a beggar who keeps watch over a treasure, or a thirsty man who sees the spring but cannot reach it – yes he was even more thirsty now than before during the journey with Sharr – but in a different way.

In this mood he entered the tent where the Kurd sheikh, the women and the whole clan were sitting as usual. When Cheir saw them all, and in the centre she whom he loved, he could not hide his suffering any longer. Tears started to his eyes, he turned to them and said:

‘O honourable people, who took a stranger in with so much love! You gave me the light of my eyes, returned my life and the will to live – how can I ever thank you enough? All that I am, inside and out, is yours. If only God would allow me to repay you one day for all you did for me in my wretchedness! But let there be an end to good deeds. Let the debt, which I already owe, not grow more with every hour until the weight oppresses me. And so I ask you: let me go! Look now, it is a long time ago that I left my homeland and I would like to return and continue my work there. Tomorrow I will leave. You should know however that even though my body leaves you, my spirit will stay here forever, and I hope and pray that you will continue to love me and that your thoughts may protect me from afar, and that you may never regret what you have done for me...’

When the youth had uttered these words with supreme effort, it was as though lightning had struck the Kurd household. The tent resounded with wailing, howling and sobbing; the father, the mother cried, the daughter wept even louder, not a single eye remained dry and the silence which followed was no less grief-stricken. Wherever one looked, only bowed heads, a picture of frozen eternal grief!

The old chief was the first to raise his head. He dismissed all present and then, when he and Cheir were alone together, began to speak:

‘I know, dear man, that you are clever, quick and kind. So listen to me before you make your final decision! Think first what you gain and what you have to lose. And if finally you really want to leave us, think that on your way new enemies and dangers will lurk. Who gives up his friends for such a prospect? Have you not all you need

here? - in good days and bad. Look – we love you more than our lives, and if you love us too, I would like to give you my child as wife, and all that I possess in camels, sheep, tents also – all belong to you! It is my one wish to see you both joined and to be able to care for you until the Almighty calls me on my last great journey. That is what I have to say to you. And now – decide!’

So spoke the sheikh, and Cheir, who listened to him without moving, did not know what came over him. Was this real? How could it be? When he realized that no dream was deceiving him he fell at the feet of his benefactor and while earlier he had wept out of sorrow, he now shed tears of joy.

What began in sadness ended in great rejoicing, and everybody returned to peace of mind, until the cries of birds pealed in the new day like the bells of a caravan. The wedding was celebrated, a feast prepared such as you cannot imagine, and then the honey-lipped wine pourer quenched once again the young man’s thirst – only this wine came from no ordinary source, but was wine from the river of paradise itself.

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When, after some time, the Kurds broke up camp to wander into another fertile place, Cheir took a provision of leaves from the sandalwood fragrant tree by the spring. He filled two leather pouches. In the one he put those leaves which had healed him, in the other he put those which were supposed to heal epileptics. Cheir packed the precious cargo carefully in the saddlebags of his camel and told no one of it. Who knows, he thought, who I might be able to help with this?

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Having gone some way along their journey they came to a town deep in mourning. The daughter of the king there suffered from falling sickness, and however many remedies had been tried, none had been able to cure her. Her father had let it be known far and wide:

‘Whoever succeeds in curing my sick daughter, he will be welcome as my stepson, but if he fails, he will have to die, because he will have come face to face with the beauty of the princess.’

After this declaration, many doctors hurried from far and near to try their luck, but they all had to pay for their boldness with their lives. Already hundreds of suitors, natives as well as strangers, had been executed, and still more and more came ready to hurl themselves at death for the sake of the beautiful king’s daughter. In the town and country all round there was endless lamenting.

When our Cheir heard all this, the leaves came to mind and he sent a message to the king with this information:

‘I can remove the thorn and with God’s grace, heal your daughter. But I do this not for gain, but for God’s will, and if I succeed, God alone is to be thanked.’

With that the ruler invited him in. When Cheir had greeted him with respect and kissed his hand, the king asked the youth, who pleased him:

‘What is your name, brave man?’

The visitor gave his name.

‘Cheir, which means Good’ and the king took this for a good omen and promise of the star of good fortune.

‘So, my good man,’ he said in a friendly manner, ‘let your purpose, promised by your name, also succeed.’

With these words he ordered an intimate to lead the youth to the princess. How beautiful she was, and yet also how sad! She was like a tall cypress tree but her affliction shook her like the storm a weeping willow. Her gazelle eyes looked timid and full of fear as though she were staring into the jaws of a lion. The king’s daughter could not sleep either by night or by day. A demon seized her constantly, cramped her limbs and threw her to the ground and she now seemed nearer to death than life.

Quickly the youth brought some of his miracle leaves, rubbed them and prepared a juice for the princess to drink. She took it obediently. She had scarcely emptied the cup when a strange change came over her. The veil of melancholy vanished from her face and her forehead cleared as though a layer of dust had been wiped away. She smiled. Relieved, a few moments later she fell asleep. When Cheir saw this he knew the princess was saved. What more did he wish for? He rejoiced in his heart, left the palace unnoticed and returned to his tent. He never thought of reward. Why should he? He needed none.

But look what happened meanwhile in the palace! The king's daughter slept for three days and three nights all together, and when she finally woke on the fourth, her illness had disappeared. She was brought food which she ate with such an excellent appetite that it was a joy to watch. Immediately the king was told the good news. He, having just had a brief rest, was so excited he forgot to wear his slippers and rushed barefoot to visit the harem. The sight that greeted him was a balsam for his eye and heart. He found his daughter, fresh and pink cheeked among her ladies, being merry in the best of moods, and when the ruler saw her like this, his joy knew no bounds. He threw himself on the spot to the ground and sent a deep felt prayer of thanks up to the Almighty.

'O my daughter,' he cried out, 'how wonderfully changed I find you – let your good health now continue and remain!'

The girl seeing her father in such emotion kneeling in the dust was seized with shame and quickly caught up with her own prayer of thanks to the Almighty. Having done this, and after her father had left, the princess thought about the man whom God had chosen to heal her. But, who was he? Who? Gradually, like the memory of a far distant dream, the picture of the youth rose to her consciousness, took on shape, as though it were a figure swimming under water becoming clearer, and at last Cheir

stood before her inner eye – just as he was before the miraculous potion had drawn her into healing sleep. She knew it now and took a liking to him in the mirror of her memory. Quickly she sent a slave to the king with this message:

‘I hear the ruler made a promise which said that whoever heals the princess should win her as wife – whoever fails must die by the sword. As your majesty has carried out your promise faithfully till now, it seems only right that you prepare for a wedding. Because hundreds have fallen to the sword, now let the crown fall on one. He who healed me, the only one with the key to my palace – I will marry him.’

So said the princess to the king, and he had nothing against her wish or to add. On the contrary he was glad to be rid of his oath and sent people out all over to search out Cheir. At last they found him and brought him, guarded and protected like a costly jewel before the court and king.

‘My illustrious friend,’ he cried, ‘why do you hide your face from good fortune?’

With that he embraced the youth, who did not know what was happening to him, and heaped him with honours and presented him with a cloth of silk, a gold belt studded with jewels that in itself was the value of the whole kingdom inclusive of all and everything. The palace, the street and houses of the city were decorated with mountains of flowers, the most richly decorated carpets; colourful tents were erected in the gardens around the city walls and people were laughing, dancing and toasting the health of the young stranger who had healed their princess. The pair looked indeed like the sun and moon; the wedding was to be celebrated in glory and splendour and Cheir stepped a second time over the threshold of a treasure chamber and broke a seal that no one had touched before him...

The king, like the Kurd chief before him, made Cheir into his deputy and loved him like an only son. So they all lived together in peace and joy; no shadow of misfortune saddened their days.

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It happened one day that the beautiful daughter of the Vizir, a girl with a complexion like blood between raven's plumage on snow, fell ill with smallpox and was suddenly blinded by the illness. With the permission of the king, Cheir healed and married her too. Now he had three wives, visited them all one after the other and loved them all with the same tenderness.

When the old king died, Cheir ascended the throne and was a just ruler, honoured by the good and feared by the bad.

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One day he rode out of town to spend a few pleasant hours in a garden. He saw on the way a man who was haggling over some merchandise, and looking closer he recognized Sharr. Immediately he gave orders for the man to be brought before him in the garden. When Sharr heard that the king wanted to speak to him he was pleased and hoped for a good profit. He arrogantly approached the ruler and kissed the ground at his feet.

‘What is your name?’ asked Cheir. ‘You, who have enough cause to weep over who you are!’ But Sharr did not recognize the king.

‘My name is Mobashir, Messenger of Good Tidings, and I am a traveller, experienced in every art and clever at all things.’

‘I want to know your real name,’ insisted Cheir. ‘Say it and blush for shame!’

‘I have no other name,’ the scoundrel lied. ‘What you intend to do, threaten or welcome me, it's all the same to me!’

Cheir could not control himself any longer.

‘Wretch!’ he cried. ‘In truth, whoever sheds your blood commits no sin. You are called Sharr, Bad, but you are even worse than your name. Or perhaps you are not the one who stabbed the eyes of one so thirsty who only wanted a drink of water? And

even so you never gave a drop? And did you not then rob him, leave him lying in the burning heat of the sun? Look at me! I am that thirsty one, but the scales of fate fell for you while mine rose. You wanted to kill me, but God did not allow it. He gave me throne and crowns, and to you? You thought to murder another, and became your own murderer!’

Only now, when he had heard these words, did the scoundrel, staring in horror at the king’s face, discover who was really sitting before him and a change came over him. He fell at Cheir’s feet, pleading and begging:

‘Be merciful! Forgive me! Forget the evil I did and consider that it was fate that gave us our names: to you Good and to me Bad... My behaviour was as my name prescribed – what could I do about it? You however be as good to me as your name!’

So spoke the evil man, and Cheir, Good, and who was good in his heart, let him go. But Sharr did not get far. The old Kurd chief who followed the king everywhere had overheard the conversation and now that the evil man was going to escape justice a terrible rage seized the old man. No, that should not be allowed to happen, not that! He grasped his sword tightly with both hands and before anybody could stop him, as swift as a young man, in a couple of leaps he caught up with the fleeing man and with a mighty stroke felled the head from his body.

‘Cheir is so good,’ he cried, ‘that he even thinks well about the likes of you! You are nothing but evil through and through and nothing but evil will ever come from you...’

Then he searched the dead man, found the two rubies that Sharr had stolen during that time in the desert, and brought them proudly back to their rightful owner.

‘The jewels belong to the jewel!’ he said. Cheir took and kissed them, then returned them to the Kurd.

‘Take them as a keepsake,’ he said, and smiled as he put the palms of his hands over both eyes. ‘You know – I am grateful to you for these jewels, how much dearer they are than those!’

After which Cheir ruled for many years. People only heard good of him, and by his throne sat peace, happiness and justice. Under his sceptre the thorn became a date, stones turned into gold, iron into silver and sackcloth into silk. With the leaves of his miracle tree he healed the sick and whenever he ran out of provisions he made a journey to that spring in the desert. There he often stood in contemplation, greeted and blessed every inch of ground where stood the old tall tree fragrant with sandalwood, and out of love for it he wore clothes only the colour of sandalwood, washing them only in sandalwood water, because sandalwood perfume is the fragrance of life and gives the soul peace. Sandalwood powder cures fever and aches and lifts sorrow away from the soul.

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When the princess from China had told her story, the king gave her a home in his heart and hid her there from the evil eye of this world.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE PRINCESS FROM PERSIA
ON FRIDAY
IN THE WHITE VENUS DOME

When on Friday morning the sun had painted the heavens white, the king, clothed in white, hurried to the white dome over which Venus gave him greeting. He enjoyed the day with the beautiful princess in a manner to which he had now grown accustomed.

But when the night's dark blue eye-balsam allowed the moon and stars to light up, the king demanded a story from his hostess, bound to him heart and soul, so that the dome should awake with its echo.

The princess prayed for divine blessing on King Beram's throne and told him:

THE TALE OF THE LOVERS' AFFLICTIONS

Though many old women are often wolves, my own mother was, on the contrary, as gentle as a lamb and I heard from her that in her youth she was once invited with other women to a party at a friend's house. Things went splendidly! Many wonderful dishes were produced so that you could not have stopped admiring them and as a result would never have got round to tasting them. The young ladies however were not long in making their minds up; they enjoyed themselves so that it was a delight to see, and after the poultry and roasts followed fruits and cake and finally the wine. This opened hearts and loosened the tongues and now that the pleasures and merriment had reached their climax the women began to tell each other adventures, one after the other, from their own lives or someone else's, experienced or heard. But the most

beautiful of the women, a silver breasted charmer with the appearance of honey, milk and sugar, told, according to my mother, also the most beautiful story and it went like this:

There once lived a young man, as learned as the infant Jesus and as handsome as Joseph in Egypt, who owned, close by the town, a garden of such beauty that one would have believed paradise had fallen to earth. No prince ever possessed such a jewel. There were rose bushes and trellised fruit trees of every kind, soft lawns crossed by streams, calm pools in which were reflected young cypress trees, emerald green and with turtle doves in their branches. Nowhere else could one find so many birds, nowhere else did they sing more sweetly and everyone had to envy their wings because, alas, on all sides this heavenly garden was enclosed by a high wall which kept out thieves and the evil eye.

Is it any wonder that this garden was the pride and joy of its owner? Whenever business in town permitted he would come here to refresh himself, cut back the trees, plant jasmine, narcissi and violets and take regular tours which delighted his heart.

One day, when at about noon the young man wished to visit his flowers he heard from afar singing and lute playing. He listened in surprise. What? Was he mistaken? Were not these sweet tones which might well beguile the fruits off their branches, coming from his garden? He quickened his pace and yes, having reached the wall he found the music to steal the heart away sounding quite near. Yes, inside there was singing and laughter, a tapping and stamping as though the trees themselves were dancing! What and who could it be? The young man rushed quickly to the gate but found it locked and his gardener who usually opened it for him, appeared to have fallen asleep, because however hard he knocked, shook it and shouted no one came.

What now? The young man did not have a key with him, but to turn back and fetch one, no he could not and did not wish to do that, because the voices of invisible

visitors, girlish voices, had quite bound him in a thousand chains. He had to find an entry to the garden, whatever the cost! But how? The young man went out of his mind with impatience and frustration; he stamped, shrieked and lost all self control. In excitement he tore his own jacket, nothing was of any use. Having circled the singing musical garden several times in vain, like a lovesick moth drawn to light behind glass, he suddenly remembered a flimsy portion of the wall that only he knew about. Now why had he not thought of this before?

He immediately hurried there, broke a few stones and cleared away the rubble so that a hole appeared, big enough to allow him entry.

I must see what is going on, he thought, excusing himself from his strange actions. See who is disturbing my garden, and whether the gardener had something to do with it...

Of course this was not the real reason. He wanted to meet the owners of those voices that had touched his heart.

Enough of that! When he had bored the hole he crept into his own garden like a thief. That was not wise of him. He had scarcely found time to pick himself up when from the left and right two young women rushed up and beat him mercilessly with sticks, pulled him up, tied his hands and feet before the astonished man could defend himself, even if he had wanted to.

‘Wretched thief!’ they scolded, and boxed his ears. ‘A pity the master of this garden is not here, he’d do more than just punish you with a little thrashing, and you’d have deserved it too! Whoever came creeping through a wall when there is a door?’

When the young man heard this he had to laugh in spite of the pain.

‘I am the lord of this garden,’ he said, ‘but I deserved punishment nevertheless. One shouldn’t creep into one’s own garden like a fox into the hen run! Whoever does that

has only himself to blame if he gets rough treatment, entering his own possession shiftily; I deserved your blows...'

With that the two guards put him through an interrogation and when they realized that he spoke the truth and that he really was the garden's owner, their rage turned to sympathy and their wrath to love; because by now they had also noticed how young and beautiful their prisoner was, and what woman could resist him? They quickly freed him from his bondage, kissed his hands and feet instead of beating them and begged forgiveness for such an unpleasant welcome. Having sealed up the hole in the wall carefully with thorny briars and stones the beauties said to the youth:

'You should know that today the most beautiful young women in this town - many heart-stealing moon faces, many smokeless candles and paintings without blemish - have gathered in your garden on a whim and for pleasure. Because you are the owner from whom we never gained permission and on the contrary treated really badly, we invite you to be our guest. Whatever woman takes your fancy we will lead you to a secret hiding place!'

The young man, hearing this, was most pleased. Although he had a pious and pure heart, passion dwelt there too, and that, as we have gathered, had already been awakened and he would not be able to resist the new temptation. He followed them both full of anticipation. They led him to a pavilion shaded by trees from the upper gallery of which offered a clear view over the whole garden.

'Climb up!' his companions insisted, 'and have a good look!'

The young man did this, and he peered through a hidden spy hole in the tiled gallery wall so as not to be discovered.

And what did he see there? He could scarcely recognise his own garden! Up to now he was used to seeing between strips of lawn and the copse of cypress trees a pool surrounded by lilies, narcissi and sprays of jasmine, and through the transparent water,

clear as tears, marble tiles and goldfish, undisturbed by any predator. But what was this paradise in comparison to the one he now glimpsed? What was birdsong next to their song? And what were the fish next to their mirrored images in the water? The silver-limbed, the jasmine decorated creatures were not aware of being watched as they stripped off their garments, exhausted from games, hot and full of confidence, diving from the bank into the water naked like shining pearls... To the goldfish came the silver mermaids, and how they splashed, dived, laughed and played! They held hands and danced in the water, embraced and made boats from leaves and fruit.

The young man observed all this from his hiding place. Poor fellow! He almost fainted with desire. He could not tear his eyes away from the display and did not know how much longer he could bear just looking. He was like a drunk who though burnt by his thirst has no strength to drink the water next to him, or like an epileptic who has a fit on the night of the full moon. Yes, his fate was grimmer. The blood boiled in his veins and he panted. Heavenly bliss was before his eyes, and yet because of it he suffered the torments of hell.

In front of his eyes there lay, spread out in the sun, the most wonderful treasures: sugar lips, apple chins, orange breasts and jewelled curves, at which, in the solitude of his hiding place, the pupils of his eyes widened and his throat tightened while the bird of passion spread its wings and the serpent of lust, aroused, searched in vain for an exit out of its narrow lair.

Can any man think of a more painful agony? Meanwhile the bathing beauties tired. They rose out of the water like flowers washed with dew and clothed themselves again in their pink and sky-blue garments. One of them, a lute player, had entangled the senses of our young man, tightened the bow of his desire and occupied his thoughts more than all the others put together. Her smile could seduce a thousand hearts at once and kill her lover with a single glance. Black locks shaded her brow,

and no one had ever tasted the date lips above her crescent moon chin. She was living temptation, and who can blame the young man for being unable to resist such appeal? He would have sold his virtue cheaply, if only a buyer were there.

An hour later the two guards who had shown the gazelles to the panther appeared in the pavilion.

‘Have you decided? Which do you like the best?’

Immediately he named the lute player and he had scarcely finished speaking than they leaped up, rushed out and broke among their companions like beasts of prey attacking a herd of antelope.

He watched through his lucky spy-hole how they took the beauty with the lute between them and, coaxing her with caresses, led her away.

They took a long detour in order to bring the prey unnoticed by the other young women to the shelter and left the couple alone.

Suddenly the young man was face to face with the beautiful fairy! He was not to know that the guards had already described him to her and the lute strings of her love were well tuned, and he did not know that the beauty herself found the silver description now face to face turned to pure gold – and because he had no inkling of all that, desire made the young man embarrassed, and out of shame and shyness his countenance grew dark and his voice sounded stern.

‘Who are you? What is your name?’ he asked.

‘My name is Becht, which means Happiness,’ she answered.

‘Where do you come from and what do you do?’

She smiled: ‘My home is light and my calling is to be a musician.’

‘What else?’

‘To be loving!’

‘And will you kiss me?’

‘As much as you like!’

When the young man heard this all shame and timidity fell away and he shouted:

‘The hour is ripe! Will you really be mine?’

‘At once!’ she promised.

‘You will?’

‘I will!’

What more was there to say? In the same way that beautiful Becht plucked the strings of her lute so the young man’s fingers fondled her hair and with pounding heart he pressed the lovely girl to his breast intending to make her part of his body. He tasted sugar from her mouth, lips and teeth and kisses turned the glow inside him into roaring flames.

What could douse these flames? Only the spring of sweetness could do that, only the sealed water of life. The lion leapt on the antelope; the pair, hunter and prey, fell together and... disaster!

The little hut was old, the walls fragile; they shook and bent, the roof swayed and the floor could not stand the shock; the walls tore apart, tiles and balcony split and as the whole pavilion gradually collapsed the man leapt this way, the woman that, and both only just escaped safely into the open, fled and ran off confused and ashamed in different directions. While the garden’s owner fled under a bush in a quiet corner and pondered sorrowfully on the malicious accident, the beauty hurried to her friends by the pool, sat down with wrinkled brow and bit also on her sadness in silence.

‘What happened? What’s wrong?’ asked her companions; at which she seized her lute and played and sang with such a voice that had her lover heard it he would have lost his mind totally:

Let me through my song’s complaint

Salute all those fallen sick with love.

*Who lives in this world must suffer:
Who does not like pain should avoid love.
Of painful love – o, so much! –
My lute sings loud.
Whoever recovers from this wine,
Will fear nothing more,
Even if his soul must break:
Light will shine round him for ever.
Who regrets love – never loved.
Who loves, death hovers ever near him...*

When the two guards caught the gist, they guessed that some misfortune had fallen their protégé, and they set off at once to find where he had gone missing. At last they found him, anxious and discouraged, and at their insistence he told them about the accident. They consoled him full of compassion, roused his hopes and said:

‘Be happy! You’ll succeed tonight! We will find an excuse to prevent the women going home until you have embraced your beloved to your heart’s content. Be patient until darkness lets its veil down. That will be the right time for and you and the best opportunity!’

With that the couple departed leaving the young man full of new confidence.

When night had later spread its black sable fur over the gold stitched mattress of day, darkness slipped by like the panther and the thousand needle-points of stars lit up. The guards returned to the young man’s hiding place as they had promised, brought the beauty and left them together.

So the thirsty cypress was for a second time united with the flood, and the moon’s countenance joined with the sun! A tryst with such a companion at such an hour in such a place - what man could have hesitated? In all seven departments of his body

the blood began to boil, he stretched his arms out to her full of desire, the longed-for one, the missed one – he wanted to pierce her pearl with his ruby, he wanted to do what everybody knows, and about which everybody is too shy to speak – then it happened: the calamity!

A bird, you see, was sleeping on a branch directly above the lovers. A huge feral tomcat, having just discovered it, had with greatest care and attention climbed nearer from branch to branch and now – just at the moment the lover seized hold of his beloved – jumped full of impatience at his prey, missed by a hair's breadth, somersaulted through the air and fell directly on the boy and his girl.

You can imagine the rest! The feline monster spat out of rage and fright, scratched and bit so that the couple could only believe that some devilish monster had interrupted their dream of bliss. They parted and staggered, knees shaking and hearts pounding, away from the scene.

Love remained unfulfilled, the bread unbaked!

Having turned up yet again among her companions in such a sorry state, and they having all enquired of her in surprise, she again plucked the strings of her lute and accompanied the music with this song:

The Judas tree bleeds, cypresses awake,

Spring came and the rose laughed.

High above sat the nightingale –

O happy day full of rejoicing!

The gardener again left the garden:

A king came to look at it;

He lifted a glass of wine in his hand

There fell from heaven a stone in the glass...

O you, over whom my soul is sorrowful,

I stand before you, who I love, full of shame...

Once again the guards understood the song's meaning and anxiety filled their hearts. Where was the young man? That was their first care, and they searched for him everywhere. But it took a long time before they found him, because the poor boy was well hidden, having crept into a narrow ditch where he sat hunched, like a criminal, between beeches, cypresses, willows and poplars.

The sisterly friends succeeded again in bringing him to terms with his fate, and for the third time they brought him and the lute player together, sending rose to rose water. And indeed! When the lovers discovered each other, their meeting became the best remedy and they quickly forgot past terrors.

Hand in hand they searched for a special nest for their tender love play. And was not the garden big enough? Were not there more than enough secret places? Was there not a tree there rearing up in front of them, whose branches fell like a thick wall down to the ground?

The two slipped into this leafy house, and having made a bed of leaves, softer than any king's, sank into each other arms and stretched limb against limb. The flames licked high and steeply and needed to be extinguished. The young man was about to storm the fortress, although instead of weapons, a rope ladder hung down to help him.... He was about to reach the battlement... then it happened, what neither attacker nor defender could have expected.

Between the branches of this tree the gardener had hung a long row of pumpkins tied to a string and a field-mouse just happened to pass by and bit hungrily into the end of the string – right though. O dear! What happened?

The pumpkins fell like cannonballs one after the other, on to wood, earth, rock, and on the heads and entwined limbs! Why and what for – this terrible assault? There was a noise and din like a drum roll, and at the same time a hail of stones. With a shriek,

out of her mind, the beauty tore away and fled from the dreadful place, as did our young man – forgetting his shoes and covered in bumps and bruises.

This time Becht did not speak for a long time to her friends, she was trembling so much and fear strangled her throat; at length she sang for a third time with her lute:

A lover came to his beloved,

Full of desire drawn to his happiness

Red rose lay by cypress.

The fruit ripened on this day!

His hand reached out for her pearl treasure

And into the door of paradise

There broke a storm wind over both

And chased the moth from the bright flame.

So lamented the beautiful singer, and the guards knew enough! They hurried to find the young man. He had not even hidden himself. His misadventures had made him too weak and desperate, and above all, ashamed. He lay somewhere face down in the grass, still trembling and full of horror at the experience with the pumpkins. The duty of the guards was now more difficult than ever; but with much patience and kind words they at last freed the unhappy lover from his black thoughts and mood.

‘Try again,’ they advised, ‘and be more careful and treat her even more tenderly than before! We will find a nest for you where nothing nasty will happen and we will keep watch close by.’

After searching around for a while the youth found behind a copse in a corner of the park wall, a special hiding place. A jasmine branch in full bloom covered this corner like a great white fan, and at the foot of the wall was a burrow going deep into the earth.

The guards quickly brought the rose-faced beauty to this secret spot and seeing the young man was balsam for her soul and all at once her anxiety fell away. He pulled the beloved onto the soft bed of jasmine blossoms over the entrance to the burrow. Again the presence of the woman robbed him of all patience and almost all sense, and in a fever of lust his shame burnt away.

He hurriedly untied the breast-band of the delicate girl and also the other girdle around her silk skirt and pressed the spray of roses to his panting breast. No – he thought – nothing could possibly tear him away from this splendour...

Unlucky man! He did not know what was going on inside the deep burrow. You see, a family of foxes lived there and their enemy the wolf had that very night broken through another hole in the wall. This was a dreadful calamity for the little foxes. When they recognized the intruder fear seized them all, and they ran for their lives. Only the exit into the young man's garden was open to them. Meanwhile, aware of nothing, he held his jewel treasure in his arms and was about to... how shall we put it? He was just about to dip his nib into her pot of ointment when the foxes came in furious haste followed by the wolf.

The red furs saw quite clearly the fresh obstacle unexpectedly blocking their path over the burrow, but since they had no other choice and did not want to be eaten alive. They leapt against it with the courage of death at their heels and – wham! wham! wham! – one after the other, they climbed, hopped and stumbled in wild chase over the lovers away into the open. Coming right behind them –final horror – the wolf!

But by then the couple had already rushed apart; just as they were, half naked, scratched, covered in earth and dust, grasping flight from this the newest and worst misfortune. They had no idea what had really happened! It was as if hell with all its devils had been let loose and they escaped these more dead than alive. While the

young man tried unsuccessfully to climb over the wall of his own garden, the young woman fled straight into the arms of the guards.

They picked up the distressed woman and now were convinced that pretty Becht was herself to blame for all the events and disasters. They held her, one to the right one to the left, like a pearl between the jaws of a crocodile, and screamed at her:

‘So! What’s all this about then? Has Satan got into you? Why are you tormenting this young man so inhumanely, hating him who loves you? Aren’t you ashamed to be playing such nasty tricks on our host and guest?’

In vain the poor woman swore her innocence. The two guards did not believe her, scolded further and began to punish her.

The young man appeared just in time. He had meanwhile come to his senses. And had decided that the source of all these mishaps and confusion must lie in himself. Now he sought his beloved and arrived just as the accusations, slaps and blows were raining down on the innocent. He stepped in between.

‘Stop at once! Stop hurting the victim!’ he cried out full of shame. ‘She is clean through and through and the guilty person is me. I, her unworthy slave! Know this – all these mishaps were signs from heaven, for which I have to be grateful, because they prevented me from doing wrong. Whoever is able to resist the devil will become good inside, but the one whose heart is tempted by bad deeds will be poisoned by them... Look at this girl! Who could not love such a fairy face? But love must be clean and guiltless like the beloved. If not she will be cursed and her evil eye will wither the loveliest fruit tree, so none will ever be able to eat from it. Beasts of prey lurk in us and the traps are hidden there, not outside! I did not deserve to escape this time, and I do not wish to speak more about it. Enough! I repent and I promised God to make good my error, if he gives me time, and if this beauty, prisoner of my heart, will consent to be my wife...’

When the guards heard this they respected in his words the rule of the Almighty, bowed before him and said:

‘Praise to the pure faith that led you to good and protected you from evil! Such experiences seem torment to us humans when in reality they are leading us to the best; in such torment we often only later recognize the blessing!’

Then as the sun rose high above the horizon and in its sparkling spiders web caught evil and darkness, the owner of the garden hurried on the wings of love to town. There he arranged all things necessary for a wedding, and when he and a thousand friends had celebrated the feast the lovers were all alone in the night.

They embraced each other and see: the house did not collapse, no tomcat went on the prowl after birds, nowhere did pumpkins fall off their string, and the wolf left the foxes in peace! The world was love, from the birds in heaven down to the fishes in the water, and the youth found love in that hour, that was as radiant as the source of the sun, pure as jasmine and silver white.

Daylight is created out of white, and white is also the moon, lighting up the world. Every other colour is mixed – only white remains pure. That is why we who follow Zarathustra wear white.

When the princess from Persia had brought this story to a good end, she spent the night quietly against the heart of the king.

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