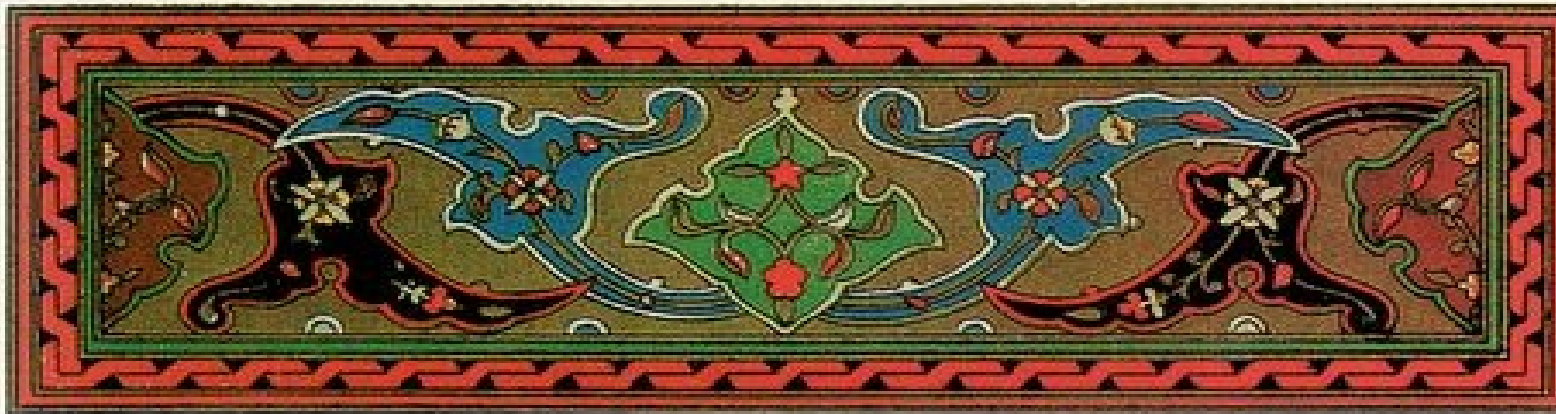


A PERSIAN REQUIEM



A NOVEL BY

“A superb insight into the Iranian past and the reason why it turned into the Iranian present.”

John Simpson, BBC World Affairs

SIMIN DANESHVAR

A Persian Requiem is a powerful and evocative novel. Set in the southern Persian town of Shiraz in the last years of World War II, when the British army occupied the south of Persia, the novel chronicles the life of Zari, a traditional, anxious and superstitious woman whose husband, Yusef, is an idealistic feudal landlord. The occupying army upsets the balance of traditional life and throws the local people into conflict. Yusef is anxious to protect those who depend upon him and will stop at nothing to do so. His brother, on the other hand, thinks nothing of exploiting his kinsmen to further his own political ambitions. Thus a web of political intrigue and hostilities is created, which slowly destroys families. In the background, tribal leaders are in open rebellion against the government, and a picture of a society torn apart by unrest emerges.

In the midst of this turbulence, normal life carries on in the beautiful courtyard of Zari's house, with the rituals she imposes upon herself and in her attempt to keep the family safe from external events. But the corruption engendered by occupation is pervasive – some try to profit as much as possible from it, others look towards communism for hope, whilst yet others resort to opium. Finally even Zari's attempts to maintain normal family life are shattered as disaster strikes.

An immensely moving story, *A Persian Requiem* is also a powerful indictment of the corrupting effects of colonization.

A Persian Requiem (first published in 1969 in Iran under the title *Savushun*), was the first novel written by an Iranian woman and, sixteen reprints and half a million copies later, it remains the most widely read Persian novel. In Iran it has helped shape the ideas and attitudes of a generation in its revelation of the factors that contributed to the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Simin Daneshvar's *A Persian Requiem* ... goes a long way towards deepening our understanding of Islam and the events leading up to the 1979 Revolution ... The central characters adroitly reflect different Persian attitudes of the time, attitudes that were eventually to harden into support for either the Ayatollah and his Islamic fundamentalism or, alternatively, for the corrupting Westernisation of the Shah. The value of the book lies in its ability to present these emergent struggles in human terms in the day-to-day realities of small-town life ... Complex and delicately crafted, this subtle and ironic book unites reader and writer in the knowledge that human weakness, fanaticism, love and terror are not confined to any one creed.

The Financial Times

A Persian Requiem is not just a great Iranian novel, but a world classic.

The Independent on Sunday

... it would be no exaggeration to say that all of Iranian life is there.

Spare Rib

For an English reader, there is almost an embarrassment of new settings, themes and ideas ... Under the guise of something resembling a family saga – although the period covered is only a few months – *A Persian Requiem* teaches many lessons about a society little understood in the West.

Rachel Billington, *The Tablet*

This very human novel avoids ideological cant while revealing complex political insights, particularly in light of the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Publishers Weekly

A Persian Requiem, originally published [in Iran] in 1969, was a first novel by Iran's first woman novelist. It has seen sixteen reprints, sold over half a million copies, and achieved the status of a classic, literally shaping the ideas of a generation. Yet when asked about the specific appeal of the novel, most readers are at a loss to pinpoint a single, or even prominent aspect to account for the phenomenal success. Is it the uniquely feminine perspective, allowing the reader to travel freely between the microcosm of the family and the larger framework of society? Is it the actual plot which mimics so presciently the events of the Islamic Revolution? Or does it lie in the deftly woven anecdotes and fragments which add up to a descriptive whole? It is each and all of these, and perhaps more.

Feminist Review

Daneshvar offers a fascinating, detailed view of what seems to Western eyes the complicated, rarified world of Iranian culture.

Belles Lettres

In addition to being an important literary document of historical events, [*A Persian Requiem*] represents a pioneering attempt to probe the multi-faceted aspects of Iranian womanhood in a period of great social and political upheaval.

San Francisco Review of Books

Daneshvar combines creative vision with an exceptional talent for conveying atmosphere to give a powerful portrait of the struggles and dilemmas of ordinary individuals caught in the maelstrom of war and occupation.

Middle East International

This is a colourful and accurate portrayal of Persian character and spirit, a beautifully evoked picture of traditional life in times of upheaval. Its popularity in Iran is eloquent of Persian perceptions not only of themselves but also of the role of the British in their country. Roxane Zand is to be thanked for giving the English reader the chance to enjoy this sensitive and important novel.

British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies

A powerful portrait of a bygone era of Iranian social history.

The Jerusalem Post

“...a revelation of freshness and vivacity...”

Anita Desai

“Not to be missed.”

Shusha Guppy

“Beautifully translated, and many-layered, *A Persian Requiem* challenges convention, of east and west.”

Fred Halliday

“...a great work by a great Persian writer.”

Han Suy

A PERSIAN REQUIEM

A Novel by
Simin Daneshvar



Translated by
Roxane Zand

ph
PETER HALBAN
LONDON

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About the translator

Roxane Zand was born in Tehran. She studied Comparative Literature at Harvard University, and Social History at Oxford University. She takes a strong interest in women's issues.

Acknowledgements

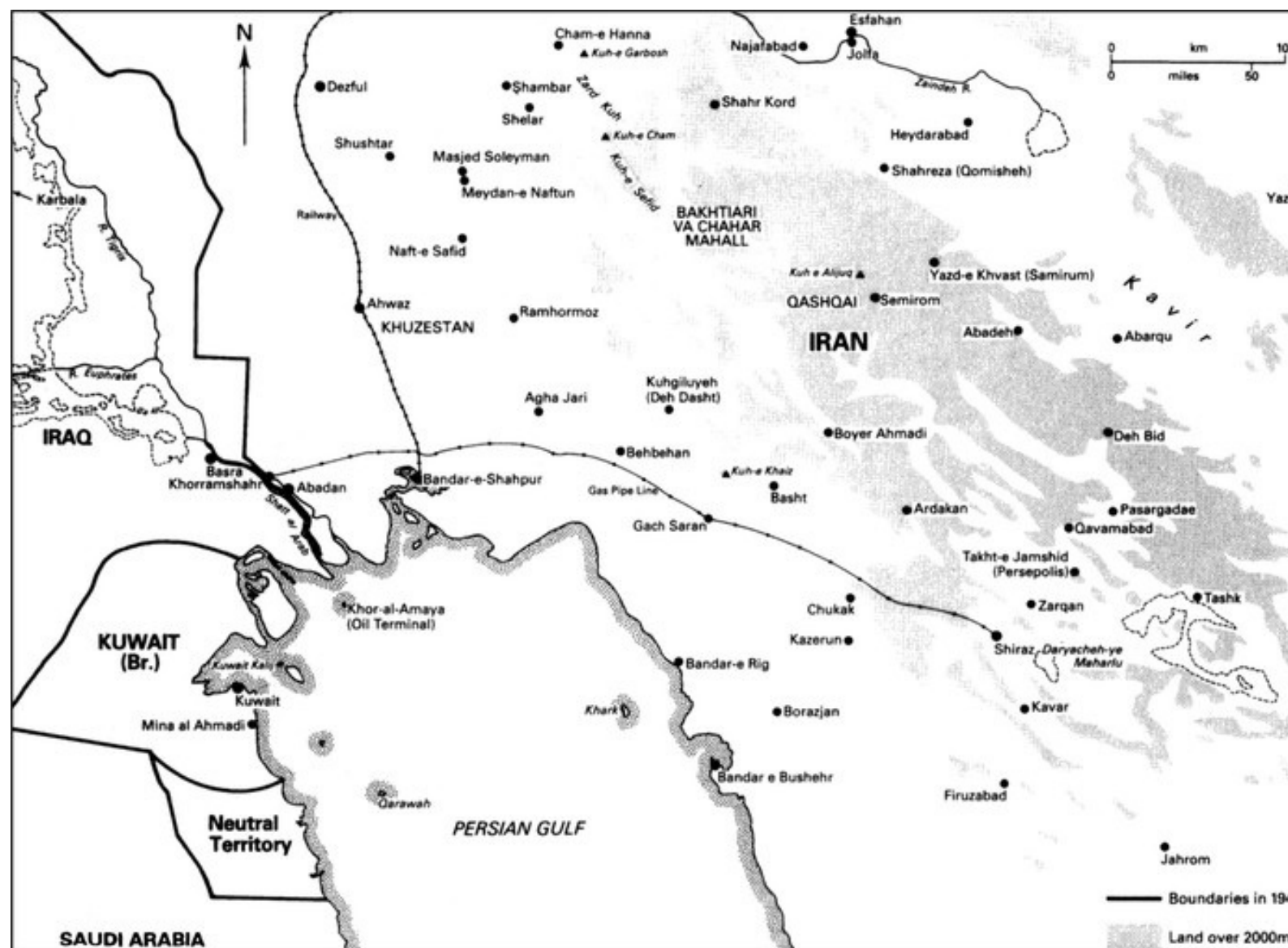
I would like to thank the following for their generous help and involvement with this translation, ever since it was first undertaken, and throughout the many years it collected dust or met with misadventure: Dr. John Gurney, Keyvan Mahjour, Mohsen Ashtiani, the late Dr. Hamid Enayati, Amer Hussein, Iradj Bagherzade and Ali Gheissari.

A special thanks to Simin Daneshvar whose place in our hearts extends beyond that of artist and humanist to a particular kind of inspiration. My gratitude for her patience and loyal support.

Finally, my love and thanks to Hamid who has journeyed with me through this book, and to my sons, Vahid and Karim.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of Amou Sarrafi, who first introduced me to it in 1969.

Roxane Zar



It was the wedding day of the Governor's daughter. The Shirazi bakers had got together to bake an impressive sangak loaf, the likes of which had never been seen before.

Groups of guests filed into the marriage room just to admire the bread. Zari Khanom and Yusef Khan also managed to see it close up. The minute Yusef set eyes on it, he blurted out loud: "Those fools! Licking the boots that kick them! And to waste so much at a time like this ..."

The guests nearby who overheard Yusef first edged away and then left the room. Zari, suppressing her admiration, caught Yusef's hand and implored him, "For God's sake, Yusef, don't talk like that not tonight."

Yusef laughed at his wife. He always tried to laugh her off. His full, well-defined lips parted to reveal teeth which had once sparkled, but were now yellow from pipe-smoking. Then he left, but Zari stayed behind to gaze at the bread. Bending over, she lifted the hand-printed calico tablecloth to reveal an improvised table made of two old doors. All around the table were trays of wild rue arranged in flowery patterns and pairs of lovers. And in the centre was the bread, baked the colour of burnished copper. A poppy-seed inscription read: "Presented by the Bakers' Guild to our honourable Governor with 'congratulations' written all around the edge.

"Where on earth did they find an oven big enough to bake it?" Zari wondered silently. "How much flour did it take? Yusef's right—what a time for all this! A time when a loaf like that would make supper for a whole family, when getting bread from the bakery is a major feat. Only recently there was a rumour in town that the Governor had threatened to throw a baker into his own oven as an example to others because everyone who had eaten his bread had come down with stomach cramps and vomiting. They said the bread was black as ink from all the dirt and scraps mixed in it. But then, Yusef says, how can you blame the bakers? All the town's provisions—from wheat to onions—have been bought up by the occupying army. And now ... how on earth do I cover up for what Yusef has just said?"

Suddenly a voice broke into her thoughts.

"Salaam."

She looked up and saw the English missionary doctor, Khanom Hakim, standing in front of her with Captain Singer. They shook hands with her. Both spoke only broken Persian.

"How are being the twins?" Khanom Hakim asked, adding to Captain Singer in the same clumsy language, "All of her three children being delivered by me."

"I did not doubt it," replied Captain Singer.

Turning back to Zari, she asked, "The babies' dummy still being used?" Struggling through a few more sentences in Persian, she finally tired of it and carried on in English. But Zari was too distracted to understand, even though she had studied at the English school and her late father was considered the best English teacher in town.

It was really Singer who captured her attention, and although Zari had heard about his transformation, she refused to believe it until she saw him with her own eyes. The present Captain Singer was none other than Mr Singer, the sewing machine salesman who had come to Shiraz

seventeen years ago, and who treated anyone buying his sewing machines to ten free sewing lessons delivered by himself in his barely understandable Persian. He would squeeze his enormous bulk behind the sewing machine and teach the girls of Shiraz embroidery, lattice-work and pleating. It was a wonder he didn't laugh at the ridiculous figure he cut. But the girls, including Zari, learned well.

Zari had been told that overnight, as soon as war broke out, Mr Singer had donned a military uniform, complete with badges of rank. Now she could see that it really suited him. It must have taken a lot, she thought, to live as an impostor for seventeen years. To have a fake job, fake clothes—to be a fraud in every respect. But what an expert he had been! How cunningly he had persuaded Zari's mother to buy a sewing machine—Zari's mother, whose sole fortune was her husband's modest pension. Mr Singer had told her that all a young woman needed for her dowry was a Singer sewing machine. He had claimed that the owner of a sewing machine could always earn her own living, and he had said that all the leading families in town had bought one from him for their daughters' dowry; as proof, he had produced a notebook containing a list of his influential customers.

At this moment, three Scottish officers, wearing kilts and what seemed like women's knee-length socks, broke Zari's train of thoughts as they came forward to join them. Behind them came McMahan, the Irishman, who was Yusef's friend. McMahan was a war correspondent and always carried a camera. He greeted Zari and asked her to tell him all about the wedding ceremony. Willingly she described all the details of the vase, the candlesticks, the silver mirror, and the reasons for the shawl, the ring wrapped in silk brocade and the symbolic meaning of the bread and cheese, the herbs and the wild rue.

Two large sugar cones, made at the Marvdasht Sugar Refinery especially for the wedding, were placed one at either end of the ceremonial table. One cone was decorated as a bride and the other as a groom, complete with top hat. In one corner of the room stood a baby's pram lined in pink satin and piled high with coins and sugar-plums. Zari pulled back the silk brocade cloth covering the traditional saddle and explained to McMahan, "The bride sits on this so she can dominate her husband forever."

A few people around them chuckled loudly and McMahan clicked away busily with his camera.

Just then, Zari's glance fell on Gilan Taj, the Governor's younger daughter, who seemed to be beckoning to her. She excused herself and went over to the young girl. Gilan Taj was no more than ten or eleven, the same age as Zari's own son, with honey-coloured eyes and sleek, brown shoulder-length hair. She was wearing ankle socks and a short skirt.

"Mother says would you please lend her your earrings," Gilan Taj asked Zari. "She wants the bride to wear them just for tonight. They'll be returned to you first thing tomorrow morning. It's Khanom Ezzat-ud-Dowleh's fault for bringing a length of green silk for the bride to put around her shoulder. She says it will bring good luck, but my sister isn't wearing anything green to match it." The young girl could have been repeating a lesson by heart.

Zari was dumb-struck. When had they spotted her emerald earrings, let alone made plans for getting their clutches on them? In all the bustle, who could have spared the time to fuss over such minor details of the bride's dress? She said to herself, "I bet it was that woman Ezzat-ud-Dowleh doing. Those beady eyes of hers constantly keep track of what everyone has." Aloud she replied nervously, "Those were a wedding present—a special gift from Yusef's poor mother."

Her mind flashed back to that night in the bridal chamber when Yusef had put the earrings on her himself. He was sweating profusely, and in all the hustle and bustle he had groped nervously under the women's scrutiny to find the small holes in her earlobes.

"They're playing the wedding tune," Gilan Taj prompted. "Please hurry. Tomorrow morning the ..."

Zari took off the earrings.

“Be very careful,” she warned, “make sure the drops don’t come off.” In her heart she knew that the likelihood of ever seeing those earrings again was very remote indeed. Yet how could she refuse?

At this point the bride entered on Ezzat-ud-Dowleh’s arm. “Yes,” thought Zari, “that woman is never slow to become confidante and busybody to every new governor of the town.” The bride was followed by five little girls each carrying a posy of flowers and wearing frilly dresses, and five boys in suits and ties. The room was now full, and the ladies started to clap. The British officers who were standing there quickly followed suit. Clearly all the pomp and formality was for their benefit, but to Zari the wedding march seemed more like a mournful procession out of a Tazieh passion play.

The bride sat on the saddle, in front of the silver mirror and Ezzat-ud-Dowleh rubbed the sugar cones together over her head to ensure sweetness in the marriage. Then a woman holding a needle and red thread pretended to sew up the tongues of the groom’s relatives. This raised a loud guffaw from the British officers. Next, a black nursemaid carrying a brazier of smoking incense suddenly appeared out of nowhere like a genie.

“All the villains of the Ta’zieh are here,” Zari mused to herself. “Marhab, Shemr and Yazid, the farangi, the unwanted Zeynab, the rapacious Hend, Aysheh, and last but not least Fezza!” And for a moment it occurred to her that she was thinking just like Yusef.

The crowded room was noisy and stifling. The smell of incense mixed with the strong scent of tuberose, carnations and gladioli which were displayed in large silver vases around the room but glimpsed only from time to time between the whirl of the ladies’ dresses.

Zari missed the moment when the bride gave her consent. Suddenly she felt a hand on her arm.

“Mother is very grateful,” whispered Gilan Taj; “they really suit her ...”

The rest of her sentence was drowned in the commotion and blare of military music which followed the wedding tune. A booming which pulsed like the beating of battle drums ...

Now it was Ferdows, the wife of Ezzat-ud-Dowleh’s manservant, who came in, threading her way past the guests to give her mistress her handbag. Ezzat-ud-Dowleh took out a pouch full of sugar plums and coins which she showered over the bride’s head. To save the foreign officers the trouble of scrambling for a coin, she handed one to each of them and one to Khanom Hakim. Until that moment Zari had not seen Ezzat-ud-Dowleh’s son, Hamid Khan, in the wedding room, but she noticed him now speaking to the British officers.

“My dear mother has the Midas touch!” she heard him saying. Turning to her abruptly, he said, “Zari Khanom, please translate for them.”

Zari ignored him.

“Not on your life!” she retorted silently. “My former suitor! I had more than enough of you and your ways that time when our history teacher took us sixteen-year-old girls to your home on the pretext of visiting an eighteenth-century house. You looked us over with your lecherous eyes supposedly showing us the baths and the Zurkhaneh, boasting that your ancestor, the famous Sherif, built the hall of mirrors and that Lutf-Ali Khan had done the painting on the mirrors. And then your mother had the nerve to come to the Shapuri public baths on our usual bath-day and barge her way into our cubicle just so she could size up my naked body. It was lucky Yusef had already asked for my hand, otherwise my mother and brother might well have been taken in by your extravagant life-style.”

The ceremony over, celebrations got under way in the garden and on the front verandah. All the cypresses, palms and orange trees had been strung with light bulbs—each tree a different colour. Large bulbs lit the larger trees, while small ones had been used for the smaller, twinkling like so many stars. Water flowed from two directions in a terraced stream into a pool, cascading over the red glo-

of rose-shaped lamps set inside each step. The main part of the garden had been spread with carpets for dancing. Zari assumed the wiring for the waterfall lights ran under the carpets. Around the edge of the pool they had alternated bowls full of different kinds of fruit, three-branched candelabra and baskets of flowers. If a gust of wind blew out one of the candles, a servant would instantly relight it with a short-stemmed taper.

The Governor, a tall, heavy-set man with white hair and a white moustache, was standing by the pool welcoming even more guests. An English Colonel with a squint, walking arm in arm with Zari's former headmistress, was the last to arrive. Behind them came two Indian soldiers carrying a basket of carnations in the shape of a ship. When they reached the Governor, they placed it at his feet. At first the Governor didn't notice the flowers as he was busy kissing the English-woman's hand. But the headmistress must have drawn his attention to them because the Governor shook hands with the Colonel again before extending his hand to the Indian soldiers. They, for their part, merely clicked their heels together, saluted, about-turned, and withdrew.

Then came the hired musicians. One played the zither, while his plump friend accompanied him on the tar and an attractive young boy sang a song. When the song was over, there was a dance followed by another song. The musicians then changed to a rhythmic beat and a group of men and women dressed as Qashqais did a sort of tribal dance. Zari had seen a lot of fake things in her time, but never fake Qashqais!

Now it was the turn of the hired musicians brought over especially from Tehran. The noise sounded confused to Zari; even the sight of all those dishes piled high with sweets and dried fruit and nuts nauseated her. The sweets had probably been sent by the Confectioners' Guild and the fruit and the nuts by the Grocers' Guild, she thought cynically. The five-tiered wedding cake flown in by air had, she knew, been presented by the Supreme Command of the foreign armed forces. They had displayed it on a table on the verandah. On the top tier stood a bride and groom hand in hand, with a British flag behind them, each crafted skilfully out of icing.

To Zari it felt like watching a film. Especially with the foreign army in full regalia: Scottish officers in kilts, Indian officers in turbans ... If she hadn't lost her earrings, thought Zari, it would have been possible to sit back and enjoy the show.

The bride and groom led the dancing. The bride's long train with its glittering rhinestones, sequins and pearls swept over the carpet like a trail of shooting stars. She was no longer wearing the length of green silk or her bridal veil, but the earrings were still there. The British Colonel had one dance with the bride; so did Captain Singer, in whose large arms the bride skipped about like a grasshopper. He even trod on her toes several times.

Then the foreign officers sought out the other ladies. The Shirazi women in their colourful dresses danced in the arms of strangers while their men, perched on the edge of their seats, kept a nervous eye on them. Some of the men seemed particularly restless and agitated. Was it the light-hearted tempo of the music, or an inner fire kindled at the sight of strangers holding their wives so closely? It was impossible to know. At the end of the dance the officers carefully returned the ladies to their chairs, as if they were incapable of finding their own way back. They clicked their heels and kissed the lady's hand, at which the woman's own escort would nearly jump out of his seat and then settle back to try to compose himself. Not unlike a jack-in-the-box. The only person who didn't dance was McMahon. He took pictures instead.

Captain Singer came over to Zari. He clicked his heels smartly and said with a bow: "Shall we dance?"

She excused herself. Singer shrugged and moved on to ask Khanom Hakim. Zari looked over

Yusef who was sitting a few chairs away. His eyes were fixed on her, those eyes that seemed to be deeper in colour than the azure of spring skies. He winked at her, and she felt a pang in her heart. A faint teardrop always seemed to lurk in the depths of Yusef's eyes, making them glisten like two moist jewels—like the emeralds of her earrings.

Now the Colonel and Singer, either together or singly, began to accompany some of the men on a brief walk to the bottom of the garden. After a few minutes they would return and head straight for the bar, where they drank each other's health. Zari saw Singer whisper something in Yusef's ear, at which Yusef rose and set off with him down the garden path, with its border of illuminated cypresses and orange trees. But they were back almost immediately. This time they did not visit the bar. Zari saw Captain Singer make a sign to the Colonel, whose expression reflected his annoyance. Yusef came and sat next to Zari, his face flushed and his fair moustache trembling.

"Let's get up and leave quietly," he said.

Flicking her hair forward to cover her bare ears, Zari said: "As you like."

She was getting up to leave when McMahon appeared, drink in hand, and sat down next to them. He had drunk so much gin he could barely keep his eyes open. He spoke in English:

"You're at loggerheads with the big tailor again, Yusef?" he asked. "I must admit, it's even more difficult for you Persians to deal with the British than it is for us Irish ... Did you like my poem that I recited for you earlier tonight? You did, didn't you? Now I'm thinking of composing a poem for your town ..."

Pointing to the slice of lime in his drink, he said: "The lime with its light green delicate peel, its fragrance combining all the perfumes of the plain, and the cypress tree with its strength and restraint—these are the things which grow in this region. People usually resemble the nature surrounding them; in this case, delicate and restrained. They've sent me to ask why you're not delicate and restrained, Yusef. I'm doing well you know, even though I'm blind drunk. Look how easily I've accomplished my mission!" He turned to Zari. "Cheers!" he said, draining his glass and putting it on the table.

"Let's go and sit on the bench near that ship of flowers," he suggested. "Zari, you come too—the presence of a lovely woman is always inspiring. That warship laden with flowers is a gift from our Supreme Command." They moved across to the bench. "That's better. Where's my glass? Zari, please pour us another drink.

"We are related, aren't we?" he carried on, with a faraway look in his eyes. "Iran and Ireland. Both lands of the Aryans. You the ancestors and we the descendants. O ancient, ancient ancestors, console us! Here am I a Catholic Irishman, a patriarch, a drunkard, bound to end up dying in a ditch one foul rain-sodden day, or wandering around poor houses looking for some old woman to claim as my mother. I can see her now, knitting woollen socks with little patterns for her son at the front... like the ones I'm wearing. You see, my father was on air-raid duty; he knew that the planes were bombing our area, he knew that at any moment they would wipe out our home, and he knew that mother was the one knitting patterned socks for her son at the front. When they pulled her out from underneath the rubble she was still clutching the knitting needles—and now my father has written me a letter. He has written to me to say he's sorry ... he's sorry that ..."

McMahon's speech was becoming slurred and he broke off for a moment. Then he raised his hand in a grandly drunken gesture:

"Why did you, you home-loving Catholic family, wrapped in your traditions, with your confessions and such nonsense ... why did you uproot yourselves and move to London? If you had stayed to help put right and free your own poor, blighted Ireland you wouldn't have had to pay so dearly for the

move.

“Away from home,” he paused, “I remember making up tales of Ireland, boasting to others of her countless poets, and sighing for my impoverished land. I remember saying that in our land the young were innocent, uncorrupted, and people would ask me if I thought they were corrupt in London. We were all fooling ourselves. We’d forgotten Ireland’s alcoholics. We’d forgotten the ships which arrived every week and loaded up their cargo—the youth of Ireland—and set sail for America. We ignored the fact that the convicts among them would be sent to the colonies—like our tailor here. The big tailor has surely got it in for you, Yusef. He can’t stand the sight of you; nor me, for that matter. I told the Consul yesterday to count you out. But the big tailor won’t let him....”

He half-drained his glass, then continued:

“Some people are like rare flowers; others resent their existence. They imagine that such a flower will use up all the earth’s strength, all the sunshine and moisture in the air, taking up their space and leaving them no sunlight or oxygen. They envy it and wish it didn’t exist. Either be like us, or don’t be at all—that’s what they say. You Persians have the occasional rare flower among you, but also a lot of oleander to keep mosquitoes away, and then some plain grass which is only good for the sheep. Well, he rambled on, smiling, “there’s always a branch on every tree which is taller and leafier than others. And this taller branch has its eyes and ears open and can see everything clearly. But no one likes that way. So they send the drunken Irish poet, the war correspondent, to mollify you, Yusef, and the reporter carries his father’s letter here in his coat pocket; his father who’d written to say he’s sorry that ... well, if you give in, Yusef, it’s all over.” He took a long gulp. His eyes were barely open. Then he continued sorrowfully:

“O Ireland, O land of Aryan descent, I have composed a poem for a certain tree which must grow on your soil. The name of this tree is the ‘Tree of Independence’. You must nurture it with blood, not with water. Yes, Yusef, you were right. If independence is good for me, it’s good for you too. And the story you told me turned out to be so useful when I began to write. You said that in your folklore there was talk of a tree whose leaves, when dried and put on the eyes, make you invisible, allowing you to do whatever you want. I wish there was one of these trees in Ireland and one here in your town.”

McMahon fell silent. After a while he lit a cigarette and continued:

“All this mumbo-jumbo was just to keep you listening. When my father’s letter arrived with the news ... I sat and wrote a story for your Mina—for your twins. Where’s my story?” He searched in his pockets. “I thought I put it with my father’s letter ... you see, I want to build an airplane which drops toys for children ... or else pretty stories. Ah, here it is!”

He took out a notebook and began to read.

“Once upon a time there was a little girl called Mina. She always cried for the stars when she couldn’t see them in the sky. When she was smaller, her mother would pick her up in her arms, show her the sky and say: ‘Little little moon, pretty pretty stars, come to Mina’ or something like that, which is why Mina fell in love with the stars. Now whenever it’s cloudy at night, Mina cries for the stars. If only the maid would sweep the sky—she’s slapdash and brushes the dust away here and there, so on the nights she sweeps, at least some of the stars can be seen. But alas, if mother sweeps, she polishes the sky clean and gathers up all the stars and the moon and puts them in a sack. Then she sews up the sack, puts it in the cupboard and locks the door. But Mina found out what to do. She plotted with her sister to steal their mother’s keys and now they sleep hugging the keys tightly. If they don’t have the keys, they don’t sleep a wink. I’ve never seen a little girl so in love with the stars, and I’ve never seen a town like yours where you can hide stars in its cupboards ...”

He took another sip of his drink and said: “That’s the end of Mina’s story. Say bravo, Yusef! See

what a yarn I've spun from odds and ends you've told me about your twins. You say the people of your town are born poets: well, the Irish are like that too ..."

Then he became silent.

Zari was deep in thought when she noticed her brother-in-law, Abol-Ghassem Khan, approaching. McMahon stood up, picked up his glass and left. Abol-Ghassem Khan took his seat.

"Is that whisky?" he asked.

"No, it's gin," Zari answered. "Shall I pour you a glass?"

Abol-Ghassem Khan said quietly to Yusef: "Listen brother, you're being as stubborn as a mule. After all they're guests in our country. They won't be staying here forever, you know. And if we don't give them what they want, they'll take it by force. They won't be put off by the locks and bolts of your store-rooms either. Besides, you know they'll pay. I sold the entire contents of my store-rooms to one go ... I've already taken a down payment for the wheat before it's even sprouted. After all, they're the bosses."

"I'm all too well aware that they're unwelcome guests," Yusef told his brother dryly. "But the worst thing is the feeling of inferiority that's taken hold of everyone; overnight they've turned all of you into their lackeys, go-betweens, and errand-boys. Why don't you let at least one person stand up to them so they can say to themselves that they've finally come across a man?"

Before Abol-Ghassem Khan could reply, dinner was announced. The guests filed inside the house. Zari, her husband and her brother-in-law pretended to be on their way too, but lingered.

"Sister, say something," said Abol-Ghassem Khan, turning to Zari. "Your husband is downright insulting to his elder brother."

"What can I say?" Zari challenged.

Turning back to Yusef, Abol-Ghassem Khan said: "Now listen, brother, you're young and you don't understand. You're gambling with your life with this stubbornness of yours, and creating trouble for all of us as well. These foreigners have to feed a whole army. You know very well an army that big can't be kept hungry."

"But our own people can be!" Yusef replied sharply. "The peasants who have been expecting to survive on the provisions from my store-rooms can be kept hungry!"

"Listen, last year and the year before you got away with not giving them anything and somehow we covered up for you and made up the amount. But this year it just won't work. Right now provisions and petrol are even more valuable to them than guns and ammunition."

They were still arguing when Gilan Taj came up to them and said: "Mother says please come in for dinner."

As they walked in, Abol-Ghassem Khan whispered in Zari's ear: "I hope he doesn't take it into his head not to come to their party tomorrow evening. They've even invited Khosrow. I'll pick you all up myself."

"But tomorrow's Thursday; it's a holy evening and I have a lot to do. You know the vow I made."

"Sister, I'm counting on you!" Abol-Ghassem Khan pleaded.

When they reached home, Zari sat on the bed. She only took off her shoes. Yusef was straightening out his trousers on the bed, ready for the hanger. When he had put on his night-clothes he went into the children's room next door. Zari could see him from where she was sitting, standing by the twins' bed watching them. Then he moved forward out of sight, but Zari knew he would be smoothing out the pillows, taking the keychain which they liked to hold at bedtime. She knew he would be kissing them and murmuring endearments to them. Then she heard a door open, and knew he had gone into their son's

Khosrow's room. He would be tucking him in, and whispering a few words of prayer for his future.

Yusef came back to their bedroom. Zari had not moved from the bed.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" Yusef asked, handing her the keychain, adding with a laugh, "The little twins are so funny!"

He sat down next to his wife. "I suppose you want me to undo your buttons. I'm sorry I didn't remember."

Without turning her back, Zari said: "McMahon wrote such a pretty story about them."

"Did you understand all of it?"

"Yes, I've got used to his Irish accent by now."

"Do you know what Mina told me today when I tossed her in the air and hugged her? She asked 'Daddy, did mummy give you two stars? I can see them in your eyes'."

Zari laughed. "The child is right. There always seem to be stars twinkling in your eyes."

Yusef began to undo the buttons of his wife's dress.

"My goodness, what are all these buttons for?" he said. "Early this evening I said some things about McMahon, and if ever Singer gets to hear about them I'm done for." He undid the buttons and Zari's dress fell around her waist. He began to unhook her bra.

"I told McMahon that the people of this town were born poets but their poetry has been stifled. Their heroes have been castrated. There's no room left for them to fight back, so at least there could be some glory, or the honour of an open challenge. They've made this into a land with no heroes and the town into a graveyard; the liveliest neighbourhood is the Mordestan district."

Yusef unhooked Zari's bra, and putting his hands over her breasts, said: "I feel sorry for your breasts; you bind them so tightly."

Zari felt her breasts responding. Her nipples gradually hardened. Yusef put his lips on his wife's shoulder. His lips were warm.

"Didn't he ask what the Mordestan district was?" Zari asked.

"Yes, he did. I told him it's the neighbourhood where the residents are mainly pathetic women who earn a livelihood from painting up their faces, and whom those Indian soldiers are sent to. The officers are much better off in that respect. I told him, 'You've killed the poetry, but instead the cab-drivers, prostitutes and go-betweens have picked up a few words of English.' McMahon said there was no need to tell him any of this, he was heartily sick of the war himself."

Yusef reached forward and stroked his wife's hair. He was about to kiss the back of her neck when Zari turned around and, throwing her arms about his neck, began to cry. Yusef asked in surprise: "Are you crying because of me? You know I can't be like the others. I can't see our people go hungry. Someone has to be man enough to stand up ..."

"Let them do whatever they want, but please don't let them bring this war into my home. What do I care if the whole town has turned into a red-light district? My town, my country is this household. But they're going to drag this war to my doorstep too."

Yusef held his wife's face in his hands and kissed away her tears.

"Go and wash your face," he said soothingly. "It's not the time for this sort of talk. I swear to God you're a thousand times prettier without make-up. Your face is like one of those they paint on tiles. Come on, my love. I want you tonight."

Zari undressed, and put out the light. She didn't want Yusef to see the 'geography map' on her stomach, as she called it. Even though Yusef always kissed the scars and said, "You've suffered this for me." It was Khanom Hakim who had disfigured her belly with stitch-marks and puckered scars.

She climbed into bed, and when Yusef's warm, hairy legs touched her cold ones, and his large hand

caressed her breast moving lower and lower down, she forgot everything—the earrings, Captain Singer, Khanom Hakim, the bride, the military music, the drums, and the beady-eyed, squinting, bare-chested wedding guests ... she forgot it all. Instead, in her ears was the sound of water flowing gently over rocks and flowers; and before her stood the image of a ship full of flowers, a ship that was not a warship.

When Zari woke up on Thursday morning it was still half dark. She crept quietly out of the bedroom, and when she had finished washing, she joined her sister-in-law at the breakfast table in the parlour. Ameh Khanom was sitting behind the boiling samovar. The twins, Mina and Marjan, were chattering like two little sparrows as they hung around the breakfast table. It was for their sister's delivery, and also in thanks for the birth of their brother Khosrow, that Zari had vowed to take bread and dates to the prisoners and the patients in the asylum.

Because of her slender build and narrow hips, Zari had had a difficult time at childbirth. With each pregnancy she had hoped for a home birth, making all the necessary arrangements with the best midwife in town, but in the end she found herself resorting to Khanom Hakim and the Missionary Hospital on the one hand, and to vows and prayers on the other. And of course, Khanom Hakim was a great one for the scalpel. She loved to cut and sew. Delirious with pain at the first delivery, Zari had pleaded with God, vowing, as an act of charity, to take home-baked bread and dates every week to the mental patients. Then, when she became pregnant again five years later, she was so frightened, she made a vow in advance to do the same, but this time for prisoners.

Ameh Khanom poured her a glass of tea. "Well, how was last night?" she asked.

"You should have been there! I'm afraid there was yet another quarrel between the two heads of the family."

"I know my brother Abol-Ghassem, I know Yusef too. Abol-Ghassem Khan isn't straightforward. And since he's taken it into his head to become a parliamentary deputy, he's even less so."

"He made me promise faithfully to go to the foreigners' party. I don't know how I'm going to carry out my vow."

"Don't worry about that. I'll ask Haj Mohammad Reza, the dyer, to go to the asylum with Gholam. I'll go to the prison with Hossein Agha, the grocer. Sakineh is here stoking up the oven, and the dough has already risen. I looked in after finishing my prayers. I think the bread is setting. You go to the party, sister. I don't want any more quarrelling between those two."

At that moment Khosrow came into the parlour.

"Here's Khosrow!" Mina shouted gleefully, clapping her hands together. "He'll let me ride his horse, won't you, Khosrow?" Marjan, who was a quarter of an hour younger, imitated and followed her sister in everything. She clung to Khosrow's leg and said to Mina: "First you play with him, then me, all right?"

"No time to play, I have to go to school now," Khosrow said, patting them both on the head hurriedly. Mina pulled at the tablecloth. The samovar tipped and nearly fell over, but Ameh Khanom steadied it just in time.

"They can really drive you mad with their mischief," she said, as she handed them each a sugar lump.

Khosrow reached for the sugar bowl. "Mother, may I? They're shoeing Sahar this afternoon," he said, taking five lumps and putting them in his pocket. Then he took some tea from his aunt, and reached out for two more lumps. As he put them in his pocket, his aunt said, "Don't you want any more?"

sugar in your tea?"

"No, I'll be late for school."

"Abol-Ghassem has sent Seyyid Moti-ud-Din, the mullah, a sackful of sugar and twenty packets tea belonging to his own peasants and workers," Ameh added to Zari with a laugh. "I've heard my brother stands right behind the mullah when he leads the prayers in the mosque. Abol-Ghassem, who never in his life known which way to face when he prays!"

"Auntie, I've seen Seyyid Moti-ud-Din, the mullah! I saw him the day we went to the bazaar with Gholam to buy Sahar a saddle," Khosrow exclaimed. "He was riding a white donkey. He brought his hand out from his cloak and held it up like this in the air ... like this ..." He waved his hand in imitation of the mullah, sitting astride his chair and rocking himself back and forth as if he were riding a donkey. "Everyone who passed by kissed his hand; Gholam and I kissed it too. He had to bring it lower down for me because I was shorter."

Suddenly there was a knock at the garden gate. Zari's heart leapt. Perhaps they had brought her earrings back from the Governor's house! But so early in the morning? The sun was just rising. She went out to the verandah. There she saw Gholam in his nightshirt, coming out of the stables at the bottom of the garden. As always he was wearing his felt hat to cover his baldness. He opened the gate to let in Abol-Ghassem Khan who walked in with a brisk air. Disappointed, Zari thought to herself, "What if they send them back so late that Yusef is up and finds out ... oh, how silly I am! What about my earrings? Who on earth is going to remember my earrings!"

She returned to the parlour and sat down. When Abol-Ghassem Khan walked in, Ameh said: "Talked to the devil. I was just singing your praises."

"You must have been saying that with all this running about, I'll finally make it as a deputy," he said. "And I will. I've seen the Colonel and the Consul. The Governor has promised, too. Only the mullah is putting his spoke in my wheel. He flatters me in the mosque one day, and takes it all back the next."

"Maybe the sugar and tea you sent him didn't go down too well!" Ameh remarked.

"Sister, what are you talking about? What tea and sugar?" Abol-Ghassem Khan retorted sharply, throwing a look in Khosrow's direction.

"I'm the eldest amongst you, and I'm entitled to give you advice," Ameh said quietly. "You have not chosen the right path, brother. And besides, Khosrow is not a stranger."

"So you think the path your precious brother Yusef has chosen is the right one?" Abol-Ghassem Khan replied angrily. "Taking sugar and clothing coupons from the government with one hand and passing them on to his peasants with the other? Well, what's the young fool getting out of it for himself? Whenever he goes to his village he takes medicine for the peasants. God alone knows that the medicine in the world won't cure our peasants."

As Khosrow stood up to say goodbye, Abol-Ghassem Khan asked, "Where's Yusef now?"

"He's getting up," Zari replied. "He'll be here soon." She busied herself making fresh tea.

"Always sleeping, always sleeping!" Abol-Ghassem Khan complained. "In his village too, he is either asleep or sitting under the mosquito net, reading a book. My heels are cracked, my face is scorched and wrinkled from the sun, but his Lordship keeps himself wrapped up in cotton wool." Then he added emphatically: "Peasants have to be afraid of their landlords. You must stand over them with a whip, like an elephant driver. You have to use the cane and the bastinado. Remember the old saying: peasants must be kept living from hand to mouth." He took some tea from Zari before going on.

"Yusef doesn't know about winter crops or the summer harvest. He can only keep his eyes glued to the sky, watching for rain. And if it doesn't rain he gets really upset; not for himself, of course, but for

the peasants and their sheep. And when you try to set him straight, he only comes up with his favourite saying, ‘What the peasant reaps belongs to him, even if the land doesn’t’.”

Ameh interrupted, “It’s his way of being charitable. If he can’t ensure his lot in this world, he will at least have his salvation hereafter. Besides, brother, why is it any of your business? It’s not your money he’s giving away.”

Zari could hear Sahar, Khosrow’s horse, neighing in the garden. She knew Khosrow must have gone to the stables before leaving for school and set Sahar loose in the garden. When he heard the neighing Abol-Ghassem Khan stood up and looked out of the parlour window. His eyes followed the colt carefully.

“What a beauty he’s become,” he said. “Glitters like gold! Look at him rolling on the cool grass. Now he’s standing again. Wide-set eyes, broad forehead, good ears—a perfect creature! Look at the golden mane and arched tail. He holds his head high too, just like his mother.”

Sahar neighed again, revelling in his freedom. Abol-Ghassem Khan returned to his seat.

“Thank God you approve of one thing in this household,” Ameh Khanom said with a sigh.

Abol-Ghassem Khan laughed: “Everything he does is so fanciful. Who keeps horses nowadays? Apart from my brother, that is, who’s got three in his stables ...” Mimicking Yusef, he said, “I like to go to the village on horseback. I ride the bay mare myself, my steward rides the roan, and the colt belongs to Khosrow.”

At that moment Yusef came in. He was wearing a light cloak over his shoulders. He greeted everyone, and looked with surprise from his brother to his sister. Then he threw Zari an enquiring look, but she merely shook her head.

“Has Khosrow gone?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Where are Mina and Marjan?”

“They’re watching Sakineh bake bread and probably chattering away as usual,” Ameh replied.

Yusef sat down. “Has something happened, God forbid?” he asked his brother.

Abol-Ghassem did not answer. Instead, he took a small book from his pocket and put it solemnly on the table. “Swear on the holy Quran,” he said, “that you’ll come tonight and that you won’t stir up any trouble with your usual comments. Now, if you don’t want to sell the surplus provisions from your village to the foreign army, don’t. But you don’t have to say so to them in so many words. Stall them somehow, until harvest time. You have to go to the lowlands in a few days anyway—tell them you’ll give it to them after the harvest. Who knows what’ll happen tomorrow? Maybe they’ll be defeated by then and good riddance to them. They say Hitler is having a bomb made that will wipe out the world ... now swear!”

Yusef sighed. “I never said I wasn’t coming this evening,” he said. “There’s no need for swearing. But as far as fooling them goes, I’m a straightforward person. I won’t lie to save my skin.”

“For God’s sake, swear,” Abol-Ghassem implored. “I’ve never said this before, but now I will. Our father Haj Agha, God rest his soul, spent a great deal of money on your education, but not much of mine. When he was dividing his wealth he gave us equal shares even though I’m the older brother. Do I say anything then? Even when it came to marriage, you were the one who ended up winning the hand of Zari Khanom, Razieh Khanom’s attractive daughter. Now that there’s an opportunity for me at last, let me make something of my life too.” He quoted a line from a Hafez poem: “Of strangers I have no complaints. Alas, what I’ve suffered has been at the hands of my own kith and kin ...”

“Brother,” interrupted Ameh, “one thing I know for sure is that neither your father nor his father before him ever begged a favour of anyone. Not from the unclean foreigners, nor from our own society.”

climbers. Haj Agha never once took off his mullah's turban. He remained a recluse all his life. In the assembly—I forget the name ... who cares what it was called, anyway—he didn't vote for the man they'd all been told to vote for. If Yusef was his favourite, it was because they had a similar temperament and believed in the same things."

"Now I'm getting it from you, too!" Abol-Ghassem Khan shouted angrily. "If our Haj Agha had a brain in his head, we would be rolling in money today. He spent everything he had on that Indian dancer, Soudabeh. My mother died heartbroken in a foreign land because of her. If he had had any brains at all he wouldn't have married you off to that imbecile, Mirza Miyur's son, who got himself killed on purpose, and you wouldn't have ended up as a servant in the house of ..."

Zari cut her brother-in-law short. "Abol-Ghassem Khan, Ameh Khanom is the eldest among us and the most respected. If it weren't for her, I could never manage such a large place by myself. Besides, this house is her home."

"Yes, I know," he said. "She manages well enough for herself, and stirs up trouble for everyone else besides." He got up and added in a surprisingly gentle tone: "I hadn't intended to mention the dead and speak badly of our past first thing in the morning. On such a nice day, too. Well, it just happened. Don't take it to heart, sister. Goodbye."

Zari accompanied the two brothers to the garden gate. Sahar was grazing, but the moment he smelled a stranger, he stopped and lifted his head. His pink nostrils flared. Abol-Ghassem Khan stopped in front of him. The colt stepped back and neighed. His mother answered from the stable. When Yusef approached, Sahar nuzzled at his cloak and lifted his head, sniffing the familiar odour. Yusef caressed his neck and mane. Later, when husband and wife returned from seeing Abol-Ghassem Khan out, they found Sahar cantering from one side of the garden to the other.

"Zari, look! He's chasing the butterflies," Yusef said.

Sahar must have been getting hot, because he rolled over several times on the shaded part of the grass. Then he got up, and all of a sudden charged after a brown and yellow butterfly.

When they reached the verandah, Yusef paused and looked at the garden.

"Your town is looking pretty," he said. "It's a pity that it's summer again, and I won't have so much time for you or your town as I'll be at the village."

"My town?" Zari asked.

"Didn't you say last night that this house was your town?"

Zari laughed. "Oh yes," she said dreamily. "This is my town and I love every inch of it. The hill behind the garden, the verandah all around the house, the two streams on either side of the footpath, the two elms, the orange trees you planted with your own hands. That fruit tree to which you grafted a new fruit each year, the scent distillery next door, with its mounds of flowers and herbs in season, flowers and herbs whose very names make you happy ... citron, willow, eglantine; and more than anything the orange blossoms and the scents which waft into our garden from over the wall. The sparrows and starlings and the crows, too, have made this their home. But the sparrows make no cross, you know. They build their nests above the windows, or in the trees, and their eggs are always falling and breaking all over the place. They're so careless, those birds."

"Your voice is as soft as velvet," Yusef said with a smile. "Like a lullaby. Go on."

"What shall I talk about?" Zari said. "About the people in my town? About you? About the children and Ameh and our neighbours?"

"About Haj Mohammad Reza, the dyer ..." Yusef added with a laugh.

"About Haj Mohammad the dyer, with the colourful fabrics he ties on sticks, and leaves in the street to dry in the sun; with his arms dyed purple up to the elbows. About Gholam and Hossein Agha

the grocer around the corner, and Hassan Agha the corn chandler ... about Khadijeh ... that's enough now! You're not letting me get on with my work."

She was interrupted by the sound of tinkling bells. She knew it would be the donkeys arriving at the neighbour's.

"They've bought orange-flower blossoms next door. What a scent!" Yusef exclaimed.

Zari couldn't tear herself away. She waited until the donkeys entered the neighbour's garden and unloaded their perfumed bundles. Only yesterday morning she had taken the twins to see the pile of orange-blossoms. Mina had clapped and said, "Oh look how many stars there are!"

And Marjan had laid her head on the heap of flowers and said, "I want to sleep right here."

Zari meanwhile had been engrossed in the actions of the old distiller and his three sons. The old man had knelt before the orange-blossoms and piled them into baskets that the boys put on their heads to carry into the store-room. The old man had nicknamed Marjan 'Nargessi', and Mina 'Narengi'. Zari had no idea why. And when his work was finished, he made Nargessi and Narengi a toy water-mill from an apple and four pieces of thin wood. He put the water-mill in the stream so that the running water turned it. The children were so happy—as if they owned the greatest water-mill in the world. And Zari kept on wondering why the old man hadn't married his sons off. It was high time they were married.

Then she thought to herself: "Why should people who live with so many beautiful flowers need to get married anyway ..."

When they had cleared the table, Zari brought the hookah for her husband. Khosrow had been restless at lunch and became more so as time passed. It even looked as though there were tears in his eyes which he was fighting back. Zari put the twins to bed for their afternoon rest and then returned to the parlour to take the pipe away. Khosrow was pacing around the room. His father's eyes followed his movements.

"Tell me, why have we gone through all these preparations?" he asked his son.

"So he wouldn't be afraid," Khosrow answered sadly.

"It wasn't only for that," Yusef added.

Khosrow sat down next to his father. "Every time the blacksmith comes, I lift Sahar's foot myself," he said. "In the beginning he was very frightened and he shied, especially when the smith put the nail in. Of course, he hammered very lightly at first but yesterday he hit very hard."

"Well," reassured Yusef, "he did it so that when Sahar is being shod, he won't be frightened or pull away which might cause a nail to go into his foot. Now today, I'll hold up his foot myself, just as I once helped to deliver him." He turned to Zari who had come to sit by them. "You've put the hookah in front of you, as if you wanted to smoke it yourself," he said.

Zari took a puff but gave up the moment she began to cough.

"Father, may I come and watch?" Khosrow asked.

"Of course. Weren't you there when he was born?"

"Yes! Do I remember! Sahar stood up right away. The mare chewed off the cord and began to lick and smell him. You threw your cloak on him so he wouldn't catch cold and you rubbed his body to keep him warm while Gholam fetched a blanket ... But he's really naughty now, isn't he?" he added laughingly. "He bites his mother, then he changes his mind and licks her." Khosrow paused, then said "Father, why do I love Sahar so much? I want to talk about him all the time. When I'm sitting in class I keep praying for the bell to ring so I can rush home and play with him."

"There's nothing wrong with loving, my son. Loving lightens the heart, just as malice and hatred darken it. Learn to love now, and then when you grow up you'll be ready to love what's good and beautiful in the world. The heart is like a garden full of flowers in bud. If you water them, they'll open; if you feed them with hatred, they'll wither. Remember that malice and hatred are not for the beautiful and good but for the ugly, the dishonourable and the unjust. A hatred of these things means love of justice and honour."

"Father, you're talking above my head again," Khosrow complained.

"Didn't you understand what I said?"

"I think I understood. You said that there is nothing wrong in loving Sahar. Then you said I must water the flowers ..."

"We must have been miles away while father was lecturing!" laughed Zari. "If you ask me, you should go to your uncle's and visit your cousin Hormoz, and come back when they've finished with Sahar."

"No Zari," Yusef said. "Khosrow has to learn that if Sahar is to be shod, he must put up with a few

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