

VALLEY OF THE SORCERERS

(A novel)

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Translated from Azerbaijani by
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The Caravanbashi, searching for the spirit of his father, Mammadqulu the Headsman, is drawn to the Valley of the Sorcerers. Sayyah the Sorcerer, a disciple of the White Dervish, undertakes to summon the spirit. The Caravanbashi's mysterious meeting with the Spirit is to end in tragedy.

If he just stretched out his hand, he could touch them. Lost in wonder yet again, the Caravanbashi contemplated the tired, mischievous stars sprinkled like salt right above his head. A while later he turned his gaze around him to the mules, camels and horses which had found themselves a spot for the night. Breathing heavily, the caravan sank into the silence of the night. The snuffling of the camels and whinnying of the horses, snuggled down into the dry earth, mingled with the distant howling of dogs or wolves, a howling that stirred a sense of unease in the human listener, akin to meeting a stranger on the road. Nothing else disturbed the ominous calm. Here and there campfires had burnt themselves out like the day, leaving glowing embers. In their beds of earth the camels, horses and mules lay still as stones covered in moss. This is how the caravan laid up for the night here. It was a large caravan, with animals, servants, slaves and camel drivers.

After a long, exhausting journey, the caravan was almost at the borders of its own land. The Caravanbashi

could sense this, as the frozen ground slowly changed to more familiar hues. Inshallah, God willing, when they reached their own land, they need no longer be afraid of robbers. Although there wasn't far to go, fear still lay like a rotting corpse out in the fields. He watched with satisfaction as three tall dark figures walked side by side from one end of the camp to the other – they were the watchmen. He knew each of them well and trusted them. These weren't empty words. Back home they had come through a thousand and one trials before he had agreed to them joining his caravan. As the watchmen drew closer, they gave no sign of knowing him and, following the rules, asked him the name of the night. 'And what would you do with me, if I didn't know?' the Caravanbashi thought to himself, but out loud he said, 'The dark red horizon.' The watchmen moved on, melting into the darkness.

Every night had its own name, which was invented early every morning by the Caravanbashi's most trusted man, Khaja Ibrahim Agha. The name was spread amongst the people of the caravan, and they alone knew the name. Outsiders could not know it, and in this way the caravan protected itself on the long and terrible journey. Protection from robbers and thieves, bandits and brigands, was really important. It was no laughing matter – the caravan was a beloved lady, bedecked in jewels and fine garments, who was to be cast before the Pivot of the Universe and only then would the goods destined for the bazar be sent to the bazar, and the goods ordered by customers be delivered to customers.

He had led this type of caravan many times now. It was easy for him to travel at any time, as if fate had quietly written this into his destiny. Back at home, his wife and only son and servants matured, advanced in years, grew older as they waited for him, while he never changed. It was as though a strange force, a current, had shot through all seven layers of his self and kept him in a state of tension. He could not grow old in any way at all, could not even wear himself out. He had a higher mission, a holy mystery, from his earliest days – or maybe not, he could not know for sure.

Not wanting to weary his brain with any more philosophy, the Caravanbashi went into the tent, specially erected for him. Khaja Ibrahim Agha appeared out of the darkness and followed him inside. This Khaja was a red-bearded man. Each bristle of his beard seemed to be redder than ever. ‘His face won’t have seen a drop of water for a month,’ thought the Caravanbashi. ‘The sooner we get home, onto our home turf, into our own houses, the better. These poor devils are exhausted,’ he thought sadly, as he took a candle from the corner, lit it with a flint and stood it on a copper tray.

A menacing half-light filtered through the tent, casting shadows. The Caravanbashi turned his sorrowful face towards Khaja Ibrahim Agha, wanting to ask, ‘What is it? What do you want?’

Khaja Ibrahim’s heart lurched: ‘May I sacrifice myself for you, I’ve come ... my heart was uneasy, there’s not far to go, we just have to cross the pass ahead of us, then we’ll be in the valley.’

‘I know. Are you trying to teach me the way?’

‘No, may I sacrifice myself for you, no; I know you are uneasy too. May this job finish soon, Inshallah. I came to see if you need me for anything? Shall I massage your feet? Good, good...’

‘No, Ibrahim Agha, you go and get some rest. We’re all really tired today.’

The Caravanbashi narrowed his eyes.

‘What do you think – maybe they won’t be in the valley?’

‘No, unfortunately. They are always there, but I don’t know about ours. I am really hopeful, but... What can we know? They stand all along the valley. This is what they do, if no-one comes and gives them work...’

‘There’s not long to go now. God willing, the person we need will be among them.’

‘He will, he will... You can be sure of that, don’t worry. We put our trust in Almighty God.’

‘Amen. Off you go. I’m going to snatch some sleep, if I can.’

Walking backwards, Khaja Ibrahim Agha left the warm tent for the cold night air. Outside, light glittered. The light from every star seemed to reach the earth, flooding the land with daylight. An ethereal sound of touching lamentation emanated from the light. Khaja Ibrahim Agha looked this way and that, and went closer to the tent. The camel Qotazli was settled on the ground, his flank rising and falling rhythmically. Camel boy Nazarali was fast asleep, his head resting on Qotazli’s flank. Khaja Ibrahim Agha chose himself a spot on the other flank, took something like a kilim from the camel, stamped the earth to soften it, spread out the rug and lay down on it. He tossed from

one side to the other, softened the ground a bit more, but whatever he did he couldn't get to sleep. Gazing at the mischievous, tired stars up in the sky, he was plunged deep in thought.

The name of the valley that Khaja Ibrahim Agha had just been talking about with the Caravanbashi, the valley of which he had said 'it won't be long till we get there, the valley begins in the green sward after the pass over the Invisible Mountain,' its name was the Valley of the Sorcerers. Really, the valley opened up where Snake Pass ended and the green sward began at the foot of what was known as the Invisible Mountain. The valley had been given its name because in all four corners of the earth, they believed that from the Maghreb to the Middle East every famous sorcerer chose this place to live. Why they chose this spot, no-one knew. They themselves did not say a word about it. Throughout the valley you could see the sorcerers – alone or in pairs, gathered together or taking a stroll, waving their arms and talking to one another, or staying silent.

The road home that passed through the valley was the main source of life for the sorcerers. They hoped for alms and gifts from wayfarers and received enough to get by. Sometimes a wayfarer would take one of the sorcerers away to use his help with magic. When the wayfarer had got what he wanted, he would have faith in the sorcerer's miraculous powers. His miraculous work completed, the sorcerer would return to his place in the Valley of the Sorcerers, and only when he had reached the foot of a