

6. *The Sultan's Command*

A YEAR passed. And another. And Sham fulfilled the promise of the white spot. He grew strong, and his fleetness surpassed that of his dam. Whenever the horseboys raced their horses beyond the city gates, Sham outran them all. He outran the colts his own age and the seasoned running horses as well. He seemed not to know that he was an earthy creature with four legs, like other horses. He acted as if he were an airy thing, traveling on the wings of the wind. There came a time when none of the boys would challenge Agba's horse anymore, for constant defeat took the heart out of their mounts.

One spring morning when Agba was watering the other horses in his charge, Signor Achmet tapped him on the shoulder. The Signor's face was drawn, and beads of perspiration dotted his upper lip.

"Agba," he said in a voice drained of all swagger, "Sultan Mulai Ismael commands me to appear before him this day, at the hour when the sun is in the center of the world. He commands six horseboys to accompany me."

The Signor's words quickened. "You, Agba, will be one of the six. When you have watered the horses you will have your head shaved. The barber already awaits you. Then do you cleanse your body thrice over, from head to toe. Make ready."

Agba's eyes widened in terror. Sultan Mulai Ismael had reigned for over fifty years, and it was common knowledge that during his reign no horseboy summoned to the royal presence had ever returned. The Sultan was a fierce and bloodthirsty ruler. He thought nothing of ordering a thousand heads cut off to test the edge of a new saber. He thought nothing of commanding his soldiers to wipe out a whole village to test the power of his muskets.

Although the morning was warm, a chill of fear shook Agba from head to foot. If he did not return, who would there be to take care of Sham? Yet there was nothing to do but obey. He led the horses back to their stalls and went to the barber's courtyard behind the stables. The barber was already at work. Four of the boys were shaved clean, except for a small tuft of hair left growing from the very top of their heads. Agba's eyes noted the bloody scratches on the shaven places. Once

he had watched a shepherd shear some mountain goats. He seemed far gentler than the barber.

Suddenly it was Agba's turn. The barber was sharpening his razor on a stone. Now he was skimming it over Agba's head. It felt as if each hair were being pulled up by its root. The only comforting thought was the barber's quickness. The ordeal would soon be over. Agba saw the other boys go to the well to draw water for their baths, and soon he was joining them.

Razor still in hand, the barber watched to see that the boys washed each finger and toe separately, and to make certain that they poured three vessels of water over themselves, each time washing their fingers and toes singly.

The sun was almost overhead when at last they stood ready, alike as six blades of grass. Red felt caps on each head. Long, coarse mantles with hoods. Bare, browned feet. And clutched in each bosom a chameleon for good luck.

In single file they joined Signor Achmet and marched down the long corridor between the stalls.

Plop, plop. Plop, plop. The soles of their feet made dull, thudding sounds on the earth. To Agba they echoed the noise



of his heart. *Plop, plop. Plop, plop.* Brown legs moved forward, alongside a high outer wall, then up and up a steep ramp to the entrance of the Sultan's sacred precincts.

Two rows of royal guards flanked the entrance. They stood so still they might have been a banding of sculptured figures. But Agba could feel their eyes upon him, stinging his flesh like sand particles driven by the wind. As the frightened company halted, six guards came to life. They opened wide the gate, made a sweeping bow to Signor Achmet, and waved him and his retinue inside.

It was a gallery they had entered, with gleaming white columns and arches fitted with glazed tiles bluer than the skies. *Plop, plop. Plop, plop.* The bare feet of the horseboys marched on, down the endless passageway where birds flew wildly as if seeking escape. On and on they went, through a second gate, through an inner court, through yet another gate. Agba shuddered as each gate closed behind him. It was like the sharp crackling sound that comes with lightning. But no rumble of thunder followed. Only a stillness. It weighed on Agba's head, on his shoulders. It made breathing difficult.

Now, at a gate that was grander than the others, a fierce-looking guard barred their progress. He pointed in disdain at Signor Achmet's head and his feet. Quickly the Signor threw back his hood and removed his slippers. The slaveboys had no slippers to take off, but they, too, dropped their hoods.

So, silently, the frightened company filed down the last gallery and came out upon the garden of Sultan Mulai Ismael, Emperor of all Morocco.



7. *Six Steeds for a King*

WILD AND discordant music met their ears. Bagpipes, lutes, and tom-toms fought for supremacy. Agba did not heed them. Nor did he notice when the music stopped altogether, and gave way to the tinkling notes made by fountains of water playing in marble basins.

All his senses were trained on a wide dais at the end of the garden. There, sitting cross-legged on an embroidered red carpet, was Sultan Mulai Ismael himself.

The Sultan held the boy transfixed. He wore a towering white turban and a dazzling white robe with a golden sash. But what struck Agba was that in spite of the fine mantle and

a beard whiter than driven snow, the old man reminded him of a camel. His eyes were hidden by heavy folds of eyelids, like a camel's, and his lips were thick and slit in two, and there was a big hump on his back. Even his feet were like those of a camel, spongy and broad and shapeless.

"Perhaps I am not going to be beheaded after all!" Agba thought. "The Sultan does not look like a man to be feared. He is nothing but a camel!"

Agba would not have been surprised in the least to see him rise up and swing along through the garden, stopping to feed on the leaves of the orange trees and the jasmine bushes.

Signor Achmet was kissing the Sultan's shoulder now, and bowing to the ground. Meanwhile, a master of ceremonies placed each horseboy on one of the square tiles, like men on a chessboard. He arranged them behind the Signor, yet so placed that the Sultan could look full into the face of each boy.

Agba's eyes swept the throne. Squatting on small mattresses to the right of the Sultan sat the royal fly-flicker, the sword-carrier, the slipper man, the tea-maker. To the left were officers, messengers, and watch-keepers.

"Signor Achmet!" The Sultan broke the silence.

Frightened as he was, Agba wanted to laugh out, for even the Sultan's voice was high and shrill, like a camel that objects to being mounted.

"Signor Achmet!" he screamed. "I charge you, as head groom in the service of the Sultan of Morocco, to select six of the most perfect steeds in the royal stables. They will be a gift to His Majesty, Louis XV, the boy King of France."

The Sultan paused to let his words sink in. A fly buzzed close to his nose, and the fly-flicker deftly waved it away with a silken handkerchief.



“With six of your best horseboys,” he went on, “you will accompany these steeds on their journey to the court of Versailles. And you will present them to the King in person.”

So soft a sigh escaped the horseboys that it was lost in the little wind that stroked the trees.

“Seven days from this day,” the Sultan was saying, “you will depart. At the exact moment, on the seventh day, when the sun strikes upon the tower of the mosque, you will come to the palace gate. It will be the hour of your going.”

The Sultan twitched his thick lips. “A galleon already awaits you at Tangier. I have had stalls built into its hold, complete with mangers. I have ordered a store of corn and chopped barley to be laid in on the day of your arrival in Tangier. Am I, or am I not, great?”

Signor Achmet bowed low. The personal attendants, the officers and messengers, the six horseboys, bowed low.

Mulai Ismael rocked back on his haunches. He wriggled his great shapeless toes. It was plain to see that he was enamored of this idea that had come to him. For a long moment he sat thus. Then he leaned forward abruptly. “Do you, or do you not, have a question?”

“Sire,” asked the Signor, “shall the horses be mares or stallions?”

Agba listened so intently for the Sultan’s answer that he wished the honeybees and flies would go about their business more quietly.

“Stallions!” the Sultan commanded, “to sire many sons of the desert.

“And no two,” he added, as he curled his lips into a split smile, “shall be the same color. One shall be chestnut, deep toned. And one shall be yellow dun, with tail and mane of silver. And one shall be dark gray, like the gray of the wood dove. And one shall be the whiteness of the flag that flies over

the mosque at the hour of prayer. And one shall be black as a starless night. And one . . . ”

The blood pounded in Agba's ears. Did not Mulai Ismael know that a bay horse was, of all horses, the most spirited?

The Sultan closed the thick folds of his eyelids. He leaned back, resting the weight of his turban against the blue tiles of the wall behind him. A hush came over the garden.

The fly-flicker leaped to his feet just in time to swerve a fly that was headed for the Sultan's uncovered feet.

“ And one,” the Sultan spoke at last, his voice high and far away, “ and one shall be the color favored by the Prophet.”

Agba's heart was hammering now. He thought of the white spot on Sham's heel. Only Sham was fit for a king. Only Sham . . .

Now the Sultan sat bolt upright. The folds of his eyes rolled back. “ The sixth horse shall be a bay—not a dark bay, but a clear bay—whose coat is touched with gold. When he flees under the sun he is the wind.”

This time Agba's sigh was so deep that the sword-carrier and all the watch-keepers turned to look at him.

The Sultan, too, looked sharply, then went on. “ Color,” he said, “ is but one qualification. Only the most perfect horses in the kingdom shall be chosen. Signor Achmet, you will measure each horse in the royal stables for proportion. You will begin at the withers and count the number of palms to the tail. Then do you measure from the withers along the neck up over the poll and down the face to the upper lip. If the distance of the fore part is greater than the hind part, the horse

will travel like the wind, climb like the cat, and strike afar."

Agba's mind took wings. He and Sham were already in France. But the boy King was not mounting Sham. He was mounting the yellow dun, because no one but Agba could mount Sham. And together, Agba on Sham and the King on the yellow dun were riding tandem, cantering through the green forests.

Agba's daydreams ended in a start. The Sultan was clapping his spongy hands together. They sounded like hoofs in the mud. At once a white-robed scribe came hurrying out from behind the wall at the back of the throne. He was a shriveled, thin-faced creature, and in his arm he carried an ink horn, a quill pen, a sheaf of paper, and a white satin purse.

The Sultan waved him to a small mattress on his left. Quickly the scribe settled himself, dipped his pen in the ink, and with its point poised in mid-air waited for the Sultan's words.

"To the Most Noble, the Most Majestic King, Louis XV," the Sultan began. "That you may enjoy the years of Methusalem is the wish of my heart."

The scratching sound of the pen sent chills up and down Agba's spine. He had never before watched a man write.

Mulai Ismael mouthed each word slowly, as if it gave off a pleasant taste. "The bearer of this letter," he went on, "is chief groom in the service of His Majesty, Mulai Ismael, Sultan of Morocco. He is come with six Arabian stallions as a gift to Your Majesty. These Sons of the Desert are strong and fleet, and of purest Eastern blood. They are descended from mares that once belonged to Mohammed. From henceforward they

are yours, that you may use them to sire a better race of horses among you. They will strengthen and improve your breed."

The Sultan narrowed his eyes at the half circle of horseboys. "Six horseboys," he said, letting each word fall sharply, "will accompany the six stallions. And each boy will care for the horse in his charge as long as that horse shall live. Upon the death of the horse, the boy shall return at once to Morocco."

Agba did not hear the rest of the letter at all. Drums were beating inside him. "*As long as that horse shall live. As long as that horse shall live.*"

The secretary finished the letter and read it aloud.

"It wants a word," the Sultan said. "Insert *my* before *respects*. I charge you then to stamp it with the seal of Mulai Ismael."

With great exactness the scribe inserted the word *my* in its proper place. Then he opened his white satin purse and spilled the contents—a piece of red wax, a seal, and a silken cord—on the mattress. A slaveboy appeared from nowhere, almost as if he had come out of the purse, too. He held a candle for the scribe to melt the wax. Agba watched as the man dropped a stain of red on the paper and stamped it with the seal. Then he held the seal to his forehead, kissed it, rolled the letter into a scroll, and tied it with the silken cord.

Old Mulai Ismael beamed with satisfaction. A present of six Arabian stallions would make Monsieur le duc, the King's adviser, rub his hands with pleasure. Each horse could win big stakes on the racecourse for him.

The Sultan's little eyes gleamed in anticipation of all the

favors he would receive in return: the hogsheads of claret, the coffee and tea and brocades, a royal carriage, no doubt! But most important, Monsieur le duc would close his eyes to the Sultan's bloody rule.

The Sultan felt good. He nodded to the tea-maker, and with that nod the garden burst into activity. Slaveboys came running from every direction. Some began washing the Sultan's hands, sprinkling his turban, his beard, his shoulders, his feet, with perfumed water. Others came bearing a low, round eating table covered over with a hood made of palm leaves.

The tea-maker lifted the hood and there, glittering in the spring sunshine, was a gold teapot, sending forth a little jet of



steam. He dropped a packet of tea into the pot and added ginger and cloves and mint and thyme and as many loaves of sugar as he could hold in the cup of his hand. Then he stepped over to the sundial and watched the time pass.

The fragrance of steaming tea and spices filled the garden. The narrow slits of the Sultan's nose widened. The horseboys sniffed audibly.

At a nod from the tea-maker a guard sampled the tea. He took a second swallow, then wiped his beard on his mantle. The tea had not been poisoned.

Mulai Ismael reached for a cup. "Give it me!" he demanded. He drank three cupfuls in quick succession, then



sipped a fourth with great deliberation. At last, he ordered that everyone in the garden be served.

Agba looked at the beautiful amber color of the tea. He took a sip. He savored it slowly. It was good.

Over the gold rim of his cup, the Sultan's eyes wandered over the horseboys and stopped at Agba.

"Come near unto me," he commanded.

Agba's teacup dropped to the tile and shattered.

"Come near unto me!" repeated the Sultan, his shrill voice climbing to the breaking point.

Slowly, clutching his chameleon to his breast, the boy walked past Signor Achmet, past the squatting scribe and the officers and guards until he stood so close to the Sultan that he could smell the Oriental perfume with which his garments were scented. The cloying sweetness made him feel sick.

"The King of France is just about the age of this boy; perhaps a trifle older," the Sultan remarked. He fixed the boy with his eyes. "How old are you?" he asked of Agba.

A heavy silence was the answer.

"Speak up! How old are you?" he repeated, his voice rasping in anger.

Again a heavy silence.

The Sultan's hand fingered the stiletto that hung from his belt. It tightened until the leathery knuckles whitened.

A cold perspiration came out all over Agba's body. He opened his mouth, but no sound came. No sound whatever.

Suddenly a soft rustling noise behind him broke the terrible silence. It was made by the garments of Signor Achmet.

“Your Majesty,” he began, hesitatingly. “May I speak?”

“Speak out quickly,” the Sultan said, drawing his stiletto.

Signor Achmet’s voice was hushed. “The horseboy, Agba, has no power of speech.”

“What!”

“Aye, sire.”

Now even the horseboys gasped. They did not know that Agba was a mute. They remembered, now that they thought about it, that Agba talked with his fiery black eyes, his thin hands, his shoulders, his eyebrows, and with his silences.

The Signor nodded his head. “The boy is a mute.”

“Can he manage a horse?”

“Aye, Your Majesty.”

“Then I charge you to take him with you to the court of Versailles. A boy who cannot talk can spill no tales.” With a gesture of impatience he returned his stiletto to its sheath. Then he peered at the position of the sun and nodded a curt dismissal to Signor Achmet.

Agba stood still. He felt he had no strength to move. But the audience was ended. Signor Achmet struck him lightly on the shoulder. With the groom and the horseboys he bowed low before the Sultan and walked backward out of the garden.

As soon as they reached the outer gate, Agba freed the chameleon in his bosom. Then he listened for the footfalls of his little company. No longer did they go *plop, plop, plop, plop*. They were so light and springy they made no sound at all.

The other horseboys broke into excited chatter as they started toward the stables. But Agba was thinking only of Sham.



8. *Agba Measures Sham*

IT WAS almost sundown before Agba had a moment to measure Sham. With fast-beating heart he ran his hand along the horse's back until he came to the tail. Then he stopped. One! he counted in his mind. He placed his left hand ahead alongside his right. Two! He crossed his right hand over his left. Three! He brought his left hand around to his right. Four! Each time he spread out his fingers to make his hand as broad as Signor Achmet's.

The count at the withers was fifteen. He leaned his head against Sham's neck, afraid to go on.

What if the count from withers to muzzle would be less than fifteen hands or only equal to fifteen? A thousand hor-

rible thoughts flew into his mind. Sham left behind, Sham mistreated by another horseboy, a whip lashed across his body, spurs kicked into his ribs, the sand in his stall unchanged.

Sham nudged Agba's shoulder, scratching his nose on the boy's coarse mantle. Agba straightened. He could put off the moment no longer. Signor Achmet would soon be here. "I will get to your corridor at sundown," he had told Agba. "In all the royal stables there are but four bay stallions touched with gold. Already I have measured three. One qualifies. His hind part measures fifteen hands, his fore part eighteen."

Agba resumed his measuring. Fingers trembling, he placed his right hand on Sham's withers. One! Left hand came alongside. Two! Right over left. Three! Left alongside right. Four!

Right, left. Five, six.

Twelve at the crest.

Fifteen at the ears.

Now over the poll and down the face. Right, left. Sixteen. Seventeen.

Right, left. Eighteen. Nineteen.

Nineteen at the upper lip!

At that moment Agba felt the knotted stick on his shoulder. He wheeled around and faced the Signor.

The Signor's head was nodding up and down. "Aye," he was saying. "This one is chosen. He measures one hand more than the best. His neck is made long to stretch out in running."

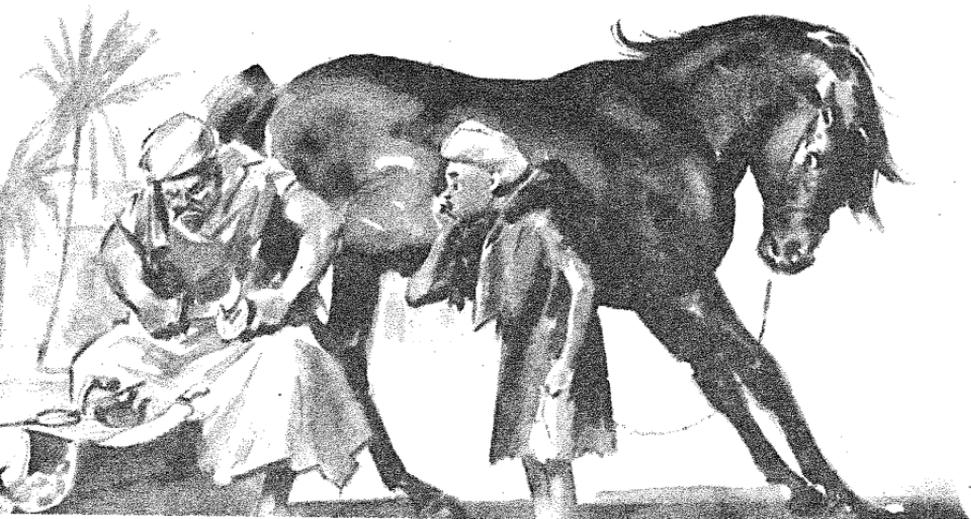
The Signor turned and was gone. Agba quickly closed the door of the stall behind him. Wild with excitement, he kissed the white spot on Sham's heel. He sprang up on Sham's back,

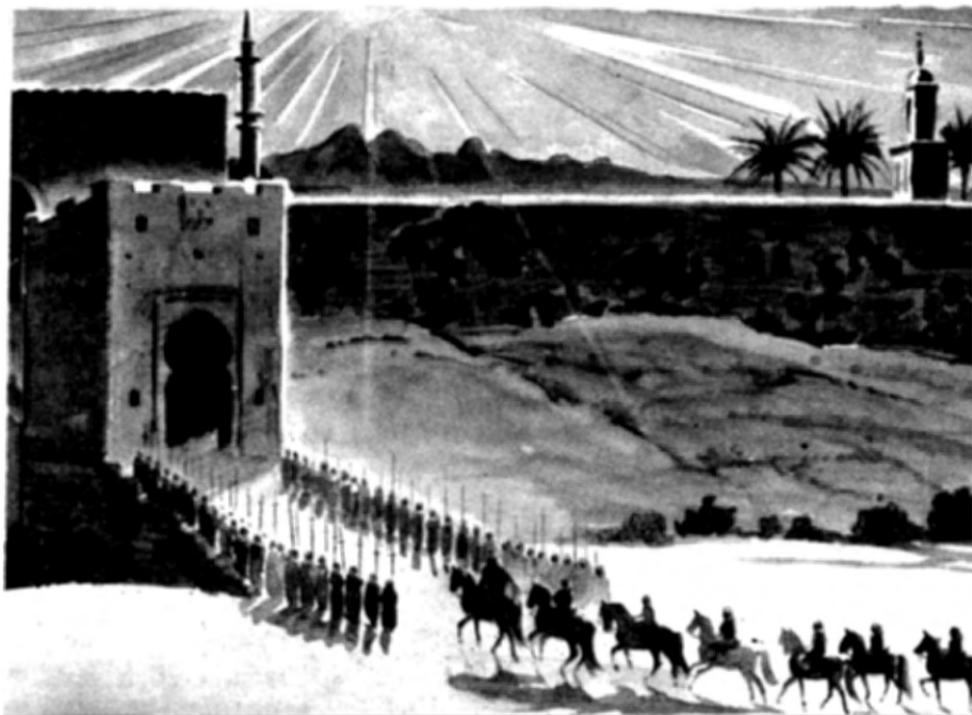
and with his hands for a neck rein, he rode him around and around the stall until they both were dizzy.

The seven days before their departure flew. Agba made a nosebag out of his turban to accustom Sham to the way he would have to eat on the overland journey to Tangier. He exercised him, increasing the distance each day. He took him to the farrier's and watched, troubled, as the big-muscled man took a knife and a hammer and fitted Sham's hooves to the shoes. Both he and Sham were covered with sweat when the shoeing was finally done.

On the last night in the Sultan's stables Agba hardly slept at all. He kept jumping down from his hammock and feeling inside the two great pockets which fitted over the cantle of his saddle. He wanted to make sure that nothing was missing: the leathern vessel for water, the fine new nosebag the Signor had given him, the rub-rag made of camel's hair, the little earthen jug of rancid butter, called *budra*, with which to rub Sham's legs, the fly crop made from the hairs of Sham's tail.

The stars were beginning to fade when at last he slept.





9. *Salem Alick!*

BY THE time dawn crept down the Atlas Mountains and filled the Meknes valley with long shafts of light, Signor Achmet and six horseboys, on their Arabian stallions, were on their way to the royal palace.

Agba, first of the six, rode with his eyes fixed on the sun. It was climbing higher and higher, veering southward, nearer and nearer to the tower of the mosque. Now its outer rim was almost touching the slender needle.

The Signor, too, was watching the sun. If he did not arrive at the exact moment the Sultan had specified, there was no

telling what the punishment might be. He quickened his pace. Agba and the other boys did not need to urge their horses. They were eager to go, tossing their heads with impatience. Just as the sun slid behind the tower, the procession moved up the steep incline that led to the entrance of the palace grounds.

And at that precise moment four bagpipers and four tom-tom players tore the morning stillness to shreds. The palace gates were flung open and Sultan Mulai Ismael himself came riding toward them. He swayed on his horse like a ship at sea, and in his wake trailed an enormous following—the parasol holder, the fly-flickers, the groom, the spur-men, and slaves and foot soldiers without number.

There was a flurry of movement along the walls. A thousand guards stood at attention. A thousand spears, like so many serpents' tongues, were thrust into the air. A thousand throats shouted above the drums and the bagpipes, " May Allah bless the life of our Sultan! "

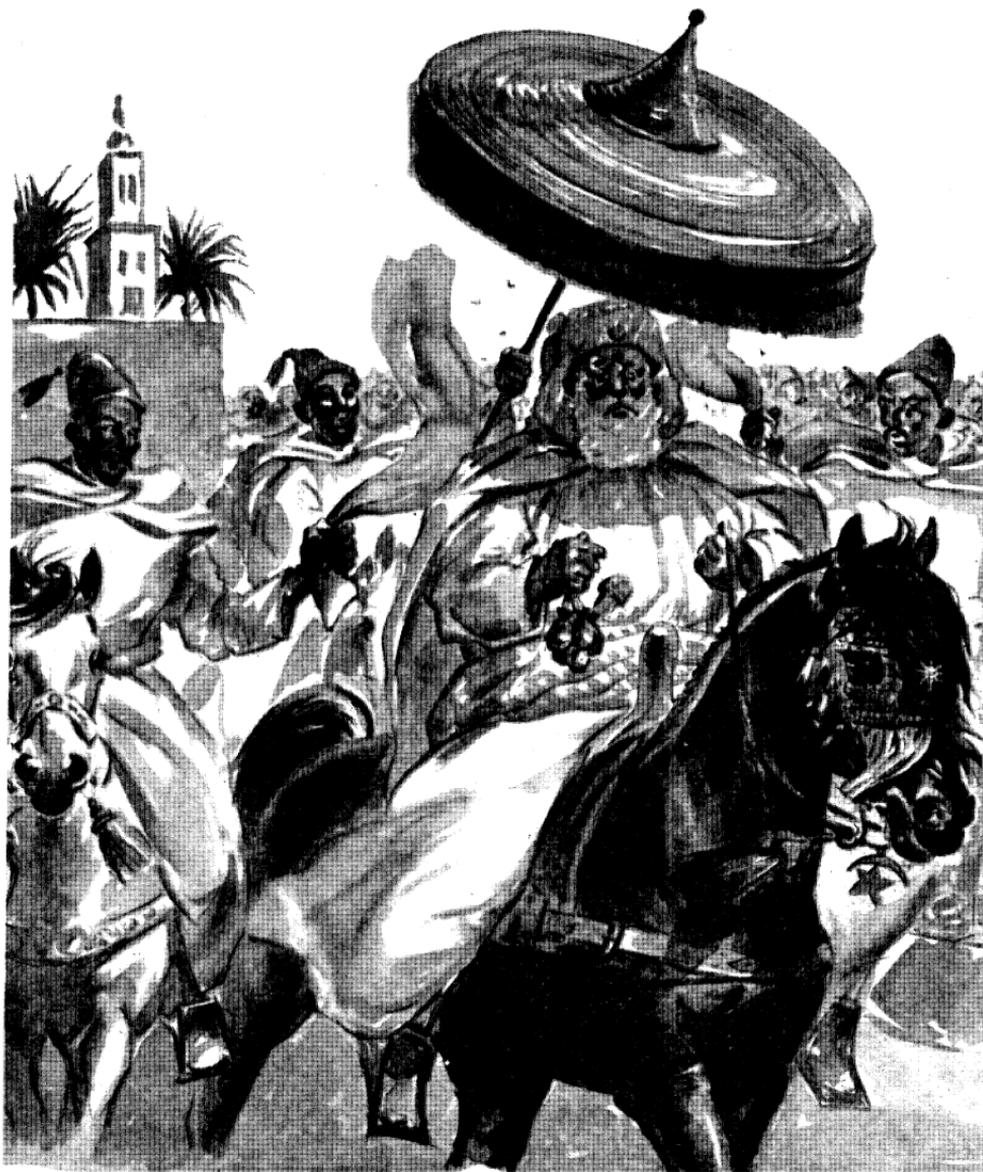
Signor Achmet and the horseboys bowed until their noses brushed the manes of their mounts. Without answering the salutation, the royal procession swept past them, down the incline between rows of guards, and led the way to the city gates.

In single file the Signor and the horseboys followed. Through the narrow public streets they rode. Buyers and sellers and saints and beggars joined the parade.

Women, their faces half-hidden by veils, came out on the rooftops to watch and to add their high-voiced cries to the beating of the tom-toms and the skirling of the bagpipes.

Discordant as the music was, there was a kind of rhythm

and excitement to it, too. The horses kept time to it. The silken handkerchiefs of the fly-flickers and even the royal parasol waved to its rhythm.



As the parade left the market place, Agba felt someone pull at his mantle. He looked out of the corner of his eye and caught the toothless grin of the camel driver.

Agba smiled in quick recognition.

The camel driver bellowed a huzza. Then he extended his arms to heaven as if this moment of sharing Agba's glory was reward enough for all the camel's milk he had given him.

At last the procession reached the outer gate of the city. The music stopped. A great silence fell over the multitude as the Sultan, helped by his attendants, dismounted. With a jolting, camel-like trot he made his way to the six Arabians and tied a silken bag around the neck of each one. There was a dark red bag for the chestnut, a pale yellow one for the yellow dun, a gray bag for the dappled gray, a white bag for the white, a black one for the black, and for Sham there was a bag made of shiny gold cloth.

The Sultan's shrill voice pierced the quiet.

"These bags," he said, "contain the pedigree of each stallion. They also contain amulets of great power, amulets that will prevent and cure the bite of scorpions and protect your stallions from evil spirits. Guard these bags well. The King of France and Monsieur le duc will thus bear witness to my greatness." He patted his chest and grinned until his eyes were hidden in their folds of fat.

"Ride under the sun," his voice intoned. "Ride under the rain water, blessed of Allah. Ride the golden hills of the Atlas Mountains. Ride through the green valleys and the regions of the plains. Ferry across the winding rivers. And when you have

crossed the provinces of Errif and El Garb, then do you embark at Tangier and sail the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Travel in safety so that the King and Monsieur le duc will thus bear witness to my greatness."

He turned to Signor Achmet. His voice changed. "Give your horses the heel!" he shrieked. "Salem alick! Farewell!"

"Alick salem!" cried the Signor. Then, clapping his spurs to his horse, he wheeled and rode out of the gate, followed by the six purest-bred stallions in the kingdom of Morocco.

In the twinkling of an eye, horses and riders were gone, speeding toward the ship prepared for them.

The Sultan returned to his palace with a smile of satisfaction, thinking how neatly his plans were working out.

He did not know that the captain of the vessel had pocketed the money sent to buy corn and barley for the horses and had stuffed the sacks with straw instead. Nor did he know that the horseboys would be made to man the heavy sails on stormy seas. Nor that day after day they would be fed only on bread and water until they were skin and bones when, at last, they reached the coast of France.





10. *The Boy King*

IT WAS four weeks later to a day when Signor Achmet and his little company arrived at the court of Versailles. Monsieur le duc, the King's adviser, was in the beauty salon at the time. He was calmly admiring himself in a mirror, when suddenly the pixie-like face of the King's groom was reflected right alongside his own.

"My lord duke! My lord duke!" the groom puffed. "I have news! News!"

"What brings you to the beauty salon?" Monsieur spoke in an icy tone. "Is the stable afire?"

“ Oh, no, my lord.”

“ What is it, then? ” he asked, viewing the back of his wig with a long-handled mirror.

The elfin figure of the groom was agitated with excitement. “ Why, ’tis a gift to His Majesty, the King,” he breathed. “ A gift of six horses. They stand within the stable this very moment.”

“ Ha! ” scoffed Monsieur le duc. “ A hundred horses are in the royal stables. Yet you disturb my toilet with news of a paltry six more.”

“ But, my lord! They’ve come by land and by sea all the way from . . . ”

“ Hold your tongue!” the Duke commanded. He turned to the gentleman-of-the-wigs. “ You shall add forty more curls,” he said, rolling the words on his tongue as if he were tasting a French pastry. “ You shall do twenty on either side to form the effect of pigeons’ wings. What think you of it?”

The gentleman-of-the-wigs raised the fingers of his right hand as if he were holding a teacup.

“ *Exactement!* ” he grimaced. “ Forty it shall be! Twenty on either side! It will be my masterpiece! ” And he whisked the wig from Monsieur’s head, carefully replacing it with the old wig which, to the eyes of the groom, looked almost identical.

The Duke turned to the groom. “ Whence did you say the horses came? ” he snapped.

“ I did not say, my lord.”

“ Well, speak up! ”

“ From Africa, my lord. From Morocco. And, my lord, the

bearer of the gift and his six horseboys will not leave the stable."

"What's that? What's that? "

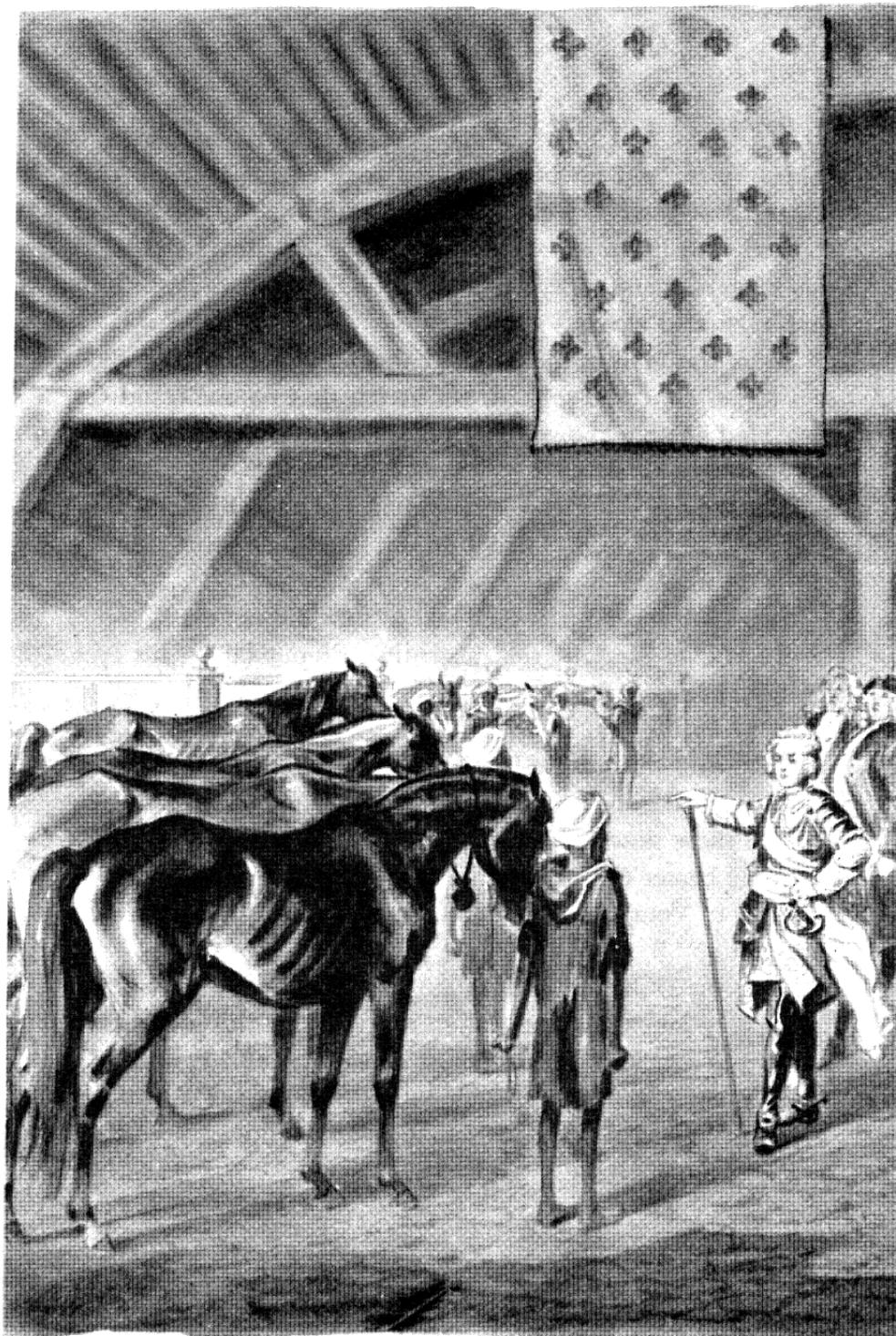
"They stand like stones. They will *not* leave. The chief fellow has a letter, and he will give it to no one but Monsieur le duc or His Majesty the King." The groom tiptoed around the gentleman-of-the-wigs and brought his face close to the Duke's. "Methought you'd like to know," he whispered, "that I have the King's horse in readiness. In a moment he leaves for the chase. But, my lord," the groom's face broke into a sly smile, "methought *you* would like to come to the stable and read the letter first."

Monsieur le duc patted the groom's shoulder with a jeweled hand. Then, upsetting a powder table in his haste, he snatched up his plumed hat and hurried to the stables with the groom running bow-legged behind him.

As Mulai Ismael's letter was being put into the Duke's hands, King Louis XV, followed by twenty courtiers, walked into the royal stable. A great stillness seemed to come in with them. The only sound in that vast high-ceilinged building was made by Sham swishing a fly from his hip.

The young King stopped stock still. He seemed transfixed by the pitiful gathering before him. Slowly, looking from one to the other, he studied the six stallions and the lead horse of Signor Achmet. They were carefully groomed, but so bony that each rib showed. And beside each stallion stood a thin, ragged horseboy, holding his charge on a lead rope.

The King was about the same age as the horseboys, but there the likeness stopped. He wore high polished boots and



golden spurs, and his breeches and coat were of velvet. The horseboys were barelegged, and the insides of their legs were covered with blue-green welts made by their stirrup straps on the long overland ride. And their bodies were wrapped in coarse, hooded cloaks.

Agba was glad of the hood. It was like the protective shell of a turtle. He could see out, yet he felt that no one could see him. Had he only known, the darkness of his hood made glowing embers of his eyes.

Monsieur le duc cleared his throat. He bowed low. "Your Majesty," he sniveled, "may find this letter interesting. I know not what it says."

Louis XV looked past the Duke as if he did not exist.

"Read it to me," he said absently, without taking his eyes from the horses or the boys.

"It bears the seal of Mulai Ismael," the Duke said as he untied the silken cord and broke the red seal. His tongue passed rapidly over the complimentary phrases at the beginning. Then he read more slowly.

"'The bearer of this letter is come with six Arabian stallions as a gift to Your Majesty. These Sons of the Desert are strong and fleet . . .'"

Here the Duke burst out laughing. "Really, Your Majesty, this is very amusing. The Sultan refers to these bags of bones as 'strong and fleet and of purest Eastern blood.' Pardon me, Your Majesty, but it is enough to make me die of laughter."

At the sound of his hollow laughter all the horses laced their ears back.

The King's face clouded. "Read on," he said.

"Very well. 'They are descended from mares that once belonged to Mohammed.'" Now the Duke's voice was full of mockery and scorn. "'From henceforward,' the letter reads, 'you may use them to sire a better race of horses among you. They will strengthen and improve your breed.'"

The King's groom brought forward his mount. The horse was a big gelding, nearly twice the size of the Arabians. From his superior height, he looked down on the six stallions and let out a shrill whinny.

The Duke shrieked with laughter. "See there, Your Majesty! Even your own horse is laughing. I trust you will send these old sand sifters back to the desert where they belong. The bony broomtails!"

Agba's fists clenched. He could not understand a word of this foreign tongue, but he knew that the man was laughing at Sham and the other horses. His burning eyes sought the King's. He longed to tell him that the horses were gaunt only because of the terrible journey, and that soon they would be sleek and beautiful again. He longed to tell him how swift they were, and how brave.

"Send a messenger to Bishop Fleury," the King said to the groom. "Tell him the King awaits him."

The courtiers who were clustered behind the King drew a sigh. This was all very much like a play. Act One was over. Now there would be a little wait for Act Two.

Monsieur le duc made his own use of the intermission. He drew a tiny snuff bottle out of his pocket and dipped into

it with a miniature silver spoon. Then he fed each nostril a rounded spoonful of the snuff.

“Your Majesty,” he said, pinching his nose and snuffing noisily. “Mulai Ismael insults the horses of France. He insults your own mount. But more dastardly, he insults your Royal Majesty.”

Making a wry face, he let his glance wander over the chestnut, the dappled gray, the yellow dun, the black horse, the moon-colored horse. When he came to Sham he stopped short. “Monstrosity!” he spat out the word. “Nothing but skin and bones, and a crest so high you can hang your hat upon it! Fie! Pooh! Bah!”

His face wrinkled until it looked not much bigger than a prune. Then the prune seemed to burst open, and the very stable trembled with the force of the Duke’s sneeze.

Sham wheeled in fright. And to Agba’s horror his off hind hoof landed squarely on Monsieur le duc’s toe.

Quick as a flash Agba lifted Sham’s foot. He could not help noticing, with the faintest of smiles, that it was the one with the white spot.

With a mighty outcry the Duke grabbed his foot and went hopping about the stable like a one-legged bird.

“Help! Help ho!” he cried while the courtiers and the horseboys tittered. Agba thought he saw a smile flicker across the King’s face, but he could not be sure. Bishop Fleury had arrived.

Agba liked the Bishop at once. He had friendly blue eyes and wore no wig at all. His hair was powdered white by time.



He bowed to the King first, then turned to the Duke, his eyes crinkled with suppressed laughter.

“What is it, Monsieur le duc? What is it?” he asked.

Monsieur le duc’s face was stained an angry red.

“This—this clumsy, camel-necked nag!” he stammered.

“He crushed my toe. What is more, he did it from a vile temper and . . .”

“The Sultan’s letter,” the King interrupted. “I desire you to show it to Bishop Fleury.”

“Read it to me, Monsieur le duc,” said the Bishop. “My eyes are fading.”

Monsieur le duc spared nothing in the reading. At the end he said, "I beg your pardon, Bishop Fleury, but the rains have spoiled the harvest. Corn is scarce. My advice to the King is to send these nags of small stature back to Africa." His eyes fell on Sham. "Save one," he added. "The chief cook is in need of a cart horse to drive to market."

The King looked to the Bishop with questioning eyes.

"Dear son," the Bishop said as he put a gentle hand on the boy's head. "Pray look at your own stableful of horses. Pray look at your favorite mount. He is stout of limb, and lusty. These Arabian creatures are small. Moreover, corn is dear. Why do you not turn the high-crested creature over to the chief of the kitchen? He could draw a cart to market and bring back the food for your table. The other horses could be assigned to the army to transport supplies. They would thus need far less to eat than if they were employed in the chase."

Agba's and the King's eyes met. It was the King who looked down first. He was King in name only. He had no power to change the order of the older men. He nodded his head listlessly. "Let it be as you say." And without another glance at the stallions he mounted his great horse and rode away.





11. *The Thieves' Kitchen*

ONLY AGBA and Sham remained in the King's stables. Signor Achmet dared not go back to Morocco and face the wrath of the Sultan. He swallowed his pride and went along with the other horseboys, accepting a humble position as groom in the French army. Before he left, however, he took the bag from Sham's neck and tied it around Agba's. "The pedigree and the amulets will be safer with you, Agba," he said, with a meaningful look at the King's groom.

In the days that followed, Sham regained his vigor. And with it seemed to come an intense distrust of everyone except

Agba. With Agba in the driver's seat, Sham's way of going to market was so bold and handsome that journeymen turned round to gape at him. He pranced his way between the stalls of the pea-shellers and the artichoke-boilers as if he were making figure eights in the King's courtyard. As for the harness and the degrading vehicle he pulled, one would have thought he wore purple housings and drew the King's carriage!

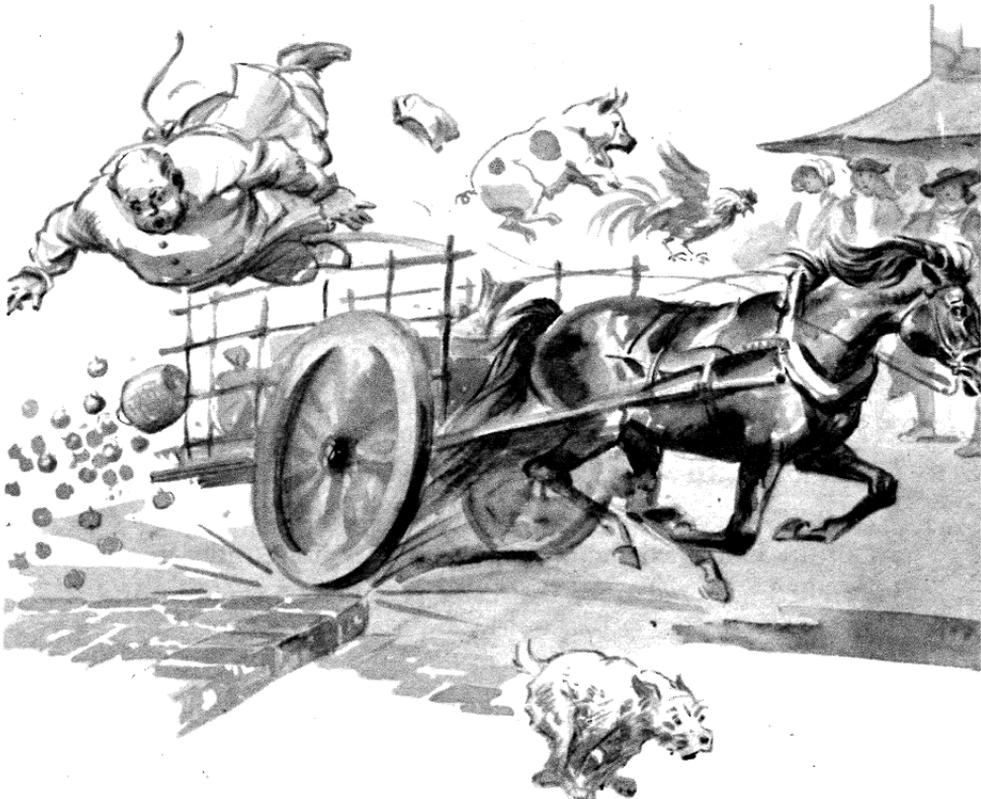
But if the chief cook so much as touched the reins, Sham took the bit and went where he pleased, and no amount of whip-lashing could control him. The people in the market place stood in open-mouthed wonder at the spirit of Sham. Secretly they admired the proud way he took the cook's lashes. There was the plump apple woman who polished her apples with her apron. She soon made it a habit each market day to save two of her biggest apples—one for the fiery little horse and the other for the quiet boy. Even the vendor of sweets held back a pan of frosted pastries on the days when Sham was expected. And a farmer who had the turnip stall managed to keep from his wife a whole sackful of turnips for Sham.

One day the chief cook insisted upon driving alone to market. He wanted to select a nice suckling pig for the King's birthday dinner. "And," he told Agba, "I need every inch of space for the live pig and for sausages and potatoes and mushrooms and herrings and eggs and chickens. You will stay in the kitchen and scour the pots."

Now, the cook told Agba only half the truth. What he really wanted was to be rid of Agba. It irked him that a mere sliver of a boy could manage the horse and he could not. If

he could just get rid of the boy, he had a feeling he could master the horse.

But he was wrong. Without Agba, Sham was mischief itself. He waited until the cart was groaning with vegetables and fish and fowl and the live pig. Then suddenly he became forked lightning. In and out among the market stalls he streaked. He overturned the cart, spewing chickens, herrings, eggs, the frightened pig, and an amazed cook high into the air!



Children screamed. Fishmongers, marketwomen, eating-house keepers, slipped and stumbled. They shook their fists and shouted at the King's cook.

As he scrambled to his feet, the cook was so confused he did not know whether to chase the horse or the suckling pig! He darted first after one and then the other, and ended by catching neither. When the little apple woman quietly held out her hand and brought Sham to a halt, it was more than the cook could bear. He was beside himself with rage.

"This settles it!" he cried. "Everyone but me can handle the crazy brute. I'll sell him at the Horse Fair."



To horse traders, the Horse Fair was known by quite a different name. It was called the Thieves' Kitchen because no one knew where the horses came from and nobody cared. No questions were asked.

Red-faced and panting, the cook led Sham to the big open shed of the Thieves' Kitchen. Sham was not winded in the least. He seemed actually to be enjoying the cook's discomfiture.

The cook cast a quick glance to the right and to the left. In all the long shed there was not another horsetrader in sight. He sighed with relief, for the fewer people who saw him in his

disheveled condition the less talk there would be. If word of the lost pig and the runaway horse ever reached the royal kitchen, his high position would be ruined. The scullions, as they cleaned their pots and kettles, would whisper and laugh behind his back. He must sell the horse quickly. He resolved to get rid of him to the very first buyer.

Scarcely had he blotted the splattered eggs from his overblouse when a man walked past. He was enormous in build, and he stalked rather than walked, like a big tiger cat. His hat was pulled far down over his head and he looked neither to the one side nor to the other. Yet somehow the cook sensed that the man was in the vicinity of Thieves' Kitchen for but one purpose. He was in need of a horse.

Almost past the shed, he wheeled about and came skulking back, shaking his head as if suddenly remembering an errand.

The cook could not see the face of the man, but he noticed the brutish size of him—hands big and broad, legs shaped like water casks. He noticed, too, that the man carried a horsewhip. A wood carter, he figured. Or a street hawker.

“Ahem!” the cook cleared his throat. “Are you in need of a stout beast, sir?”

The man stopped in his tracks.

“No!” he snarled, pulling his hat even farther over his eyes. “Your price is too high.”

“But, sir,” wheedled the cook, “I have not spoken to you about the price.”

“I know you thieves,” the carter bawled out, waving the cook aside. “You steal a horse. Then ask a fortune for it.”

A group of passers-by and idlers began surrounding the two men.

The cook spoke in a low tone. "Name *your* price, my good man, and I'll throw in the harness, too, and a slightly damaged cart with a few vegetables in it. He's a good stout beast, he is."

"Why, that weed!" the carter threw back his head and bellowed. "He's neither horse nor pony. Too small for one; too big for the other. Besides, his neck's misshaped!"

"But, sir," pleaded the cook, "you've not even looked at the creature."

The carter motioned the growing crowd to close in. He thumped himself on the chest with the handle of his whip. "Me and all my friends here," he roared, "we saw the whole show. Ho! Ho!" he snorted, "the beast made a fool out of you. He freed your pig and scrambled your eggs. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Then he brushed the people aside and began fumbling in his pockets, taking a little money from each one. "I'll give you these francs for the nag," he said. "Then I'll teach him a thing or two." And he cracked his whip sharply as if to prove his words.

Sham felt the gust of wind made by the whip. He quivered, then went up on his hind legs and neighed shrilly.

The cook laughed. He was not interested in Sham's feelings. He was interested only in getting rid of the horse. That the man was brutish concerned him not at all. Quickly the deal was closed, and the carter led Sham away.



12. *Agba Becomes an Awakener*

WHEN THE chief cook returned alone, his clothes torn and his face grim, Agba knew that Sham was in trouble. He was beside himself with worry. He dogged the man's footsteps, but he could learn only that Sham had been left in Paris. Why or where the cook stubbornly refused to tell.

Finally he became so annoyed at Agba's shadow that he booted the boy out of the kitchen door. "You, you tagtail!" he bawled out after him. "Stay out of my sight. Go find the beast yourself."

Agba fled to Paris. He haunted the market place, the Horse

Fair, the stables of the inns. Night and day he searched the roads that led into the great city. He lived on nothing but apples which the apple woman gave him. When he did sleep, he curled up in a nest of straw in the very shed where Sham had been sold.

One night the owner of a chocolate shop offered him a job as an awakener. "Ye seldom seem to sleep anyway," he told Agba. "Ye may as well be paid for waking others. Besides, ye look as if ye needed some steaming chocolate to warm your belly and a kind word to warm your heart."

Agba was glad of the work. The chocolate shop was in the center of the market district and served carters and buyers. One among them might turn out to be the owner of Sham.

Each night now he snatched a few hours of sleep in the shed at the Horse Fair. Then long before sunrise he would hurry to the chocolate shop, drink his pot of chocolate, and go to work. It was his job, as soon as the market stalls were ready for business, to awaken the customers who had arrived in the middle of the night and had fallen asleep over their cups.

Some slept so deeply that no amount of shaking would rouse them. They had almost to be lifted to their feet. These heavy sleepers paid Agba two sous. The light sleepers paid him one sou. A few laughed in his face and did not pay him at all.

One early summer evening when Agba was on his way to the shed, he decided to wander along the Boulevard St. Denis and wait for dark to fall. He stopped to watch the play of water in a marble fountain. There was something about the tinkling sound that reached far back into his memory. The street faded

away. In its place was the Sultan's garden. Agba could smell the orange blossoms and jasmine. He could hear the Sultan's voice: "And one shall be a clear bay touched with gold."

He was hardly aware of the sound of cartwheels and the *clomp-clomp* of unshod hooves. Yet he closed the shutter on his dreams and from force of habit rather than hope turned to look at the animal.

Something within him snapped. A small, dusty horse, harnessed to an empty cart, was coming toward him. The horse turned toward the fountain as if to drink, but the driver jerked him sharply away.

Agba's heart seemed to stop altogether, then suddenly began thumping. He waved to the man to stop.

"Aside! You dog!" roared the carter as he struck Agba's legs with the lash of his long whip.

Agba jumped aside, his eyes never leaving the horse. He tried to make the little purling noises in his throat, but they would not come. No matter. This beaten creature could not be Sham. It was only the size that brought up his memory. There was no wheat ear on his chest. Or . . . could it be hidden by the collar of his harness? There was no white spot on his off hind heel. Or . . . could it be crusted with mud?

Agba followed the cart past a big inn, past a theater of marionettes, past houses with gabled roofs that stared down at him with their triangular eyes, then down squalid old streets and narrow passages. *Clop, clop. Clop, clop. Clop, clop.* Once the horse stumbled and Agba could hear the loud curses of the driver. Then *clop, clop. Clop, clop.* And just when Agba could bear the

sound no longer, the horse turned into an extremely narrow alley and stopped before a rickety shed.

Hiding behind a barrel, Agba peered around and saw that half of the shed was empty, the other half piled to the rafters with wood. He watched as a cat leaped out from the woodpile, streaked toward the horse, and landed lightly on his back. A weak whinny escaped the horse but it was lost in the carter's scorn. "Grimalkin! You crazy tomcat!" he taunted, "still in love with your bony friend?"

Agba saw the cart drawn into the shed, saw the driver hitch the horse to a ring on the wall, toss him a bundle of hay, and walk off into the deepening twilight.

Slowly, slowly, the boy stole into the shed. He walked around the cart until at last he was standing face to face with





the horse. He was near enough to touch the muzzle, near enough to stroke the gaunt neck, but he forced his hands to hang at his sides. Now the cat was mewling softly, and to his voice the boy added the only sounds he could make, the little purling noises like a brook on a summer's day.

The ears of the horse began to twitch. His nostrils quivered. Then without a sound he lowered his head and rubbed it against Agba's shoulder.

Agba did not need to look for the wheat ear or the white spot. It was Sham!