

# Star of Light

by Patricia St. John  
Part 1

## Chapter 1 Kinza

A little girl came running down the side of the mountain one midday in spring. Pulling her cotton dress up around her knees, she skipped as lightly as a lamb on her bare brown feet, leaping over the bright orange marigolds that shone up at her. Baby goats jumped among the wildflowers, and the storks had begun to build their nests on the tops of the thatched houses.

Rahma was seven years old. She was small because she never had enough to eat. Her stepfather and his elder wife didn't like her and sometimes beat her. Her clothes were very ragged, and she had to work very hard. But today she was going to have a treat, and nothing could spoil her happiness. She had been asked to look after the goats alone while her brother went on some mysterious trip with their mother.

She was free and alone with just the goats and storks for company—two whole hours to play in the sunshine with the goat kids, with no one to shout at her, or make her grind the millstone, or carry heavy buckets of water.

She spotted Hamid, her brother, rounding up a couple of mischievous black kids who were trying to get into a patch of young wheat. Spring was making them feel excited, and they were jumping about all over the

place. Hamid joined in with them and then Rahma, too, her smooth dark hair blowing about her face, her black eyes shining brightly.

Laughing and shouting together, they steered the kids away from the patch of wheat and on to the open hillside where the rest of the flock was scattered. Then Hamid turned, surprised, to look at his little sister. He had not often seen her so happy and carefree, for country girls were taught to behave themselves properly.

“What have you come for?” he asked.

“To look after the goats. Mother wants you.”

“Why?”

“I don't know—she wants you to go somewhere. She has been crying and looking at Little Sister. I think perhaps Little Sister is ill.”

Her sparkling eyes looked sad as she remembered her mother's tears, for she loved her mother—only the sunshine and freedom had made her forget all about them.

“All right,” said Hamid, “but take good care of the goats. Here's a stick for you.”

He turned away and climbed the valley between the two green arms of the mountains. He walked fast because he did not want to keep his mother waiting, but he did not skip or look about him as Rahma had done, for his mind was full of questions.

Why did his mother look so worried and full of fear these days? Why was she always hiding away his baby sister, keeping her out of sight whenever she heard her husband or the older wife approaching? Of course, neither

of them had ever really liked Baby Sister, but they knew she was there, so why hide her? Mother even seemed afraid of Hamid and Rahma playing with the baby nowadays. She would drive them away and hide in a corner of the room, her little daughter clasped against her, and always with that fear in her eyes. Was it evil spirits she feared? Or poison? Hamid did not know, but perhaps today his mother would tell him. He walked faster.

He sighed as he climbed the hill, because until a few months ago his mother had never looked frightened, and he and Rahma had never been knocked about or considered in the way. They had lived with their mother and their father, who loved them, in a little thatched home down the valley. There had been three other curly-headed children younger than Rahma, but they had started coughing and grown thin. When the snow fell, and there was hardly any bread or fuel, they grew weaker and died within a few weeks of each other. Their little bodies were buried on the eastern slope of the mountain facing the sunshine, and marigolds and daisies grew on their graves.

Their father coughed that winter, too, but no one took any notice because, after all, a man must earn his living. So he went on working, and plowed his fields in spring and sowed his grain. Then he came home one night and said he could work no more. Until the following autumn, he lay on the rush mat and grew weaker. Zohra, his wife, and Hamid and Rahma gathered in the ripened corn and gleaned what they could so they could buy him food, but it was no use. He died, leaving his wife, still young and beautiful, a poor widow with two little children.

They sold the house and the goats and the hens and the patch of corn, and went to live with their grandmother. A few months later Little Sister was born, bringing fresh hope and sunshine to the family. They called her Kinza, which means “treasure,” and everyone loved and cuddled her. Yet, strangely, she never played or clapped her hands like other babies. She

slept a lot and often seemed to lie staring at nothing. Hamid sometimes wondered why she didn't seem pleased with the bunches of bright flowers he picked for her.

When Kinza was a few months old, a man offered to marry their mother. She accepted at once, because she had no work and no more money to buy food for her three children, and the family moved to their new home.

It was not a very happy home. Si Mohamed, the husband, was already married to an older wife, but she had never had any children, so he wanted another wife. He did not mind taking Hamid, too, because a boy of nine would be useful to look after the goats. He also thought Rahma could be a useful little slave girl about the house. But he could not see that a baby was any use at all, and he wanted to give Kinza away.

“Many childless women will be glad of a girl,” he said, “and why should I bring up another man's baby?”

But Zohra had burst into tears and refused to do any work until he changed his mind, so he rather crossly agreed to let Kinza stay for a while. No more was said about it—unless perhaps something had been said during the past few weeks, something that Hamid and Rahma had not heard. Could that be why their mother held Kinza so close and looked so frightened?

A voice above Hamid called to him to run, and he looked up. His mother was standing under an old, twisted olive tree that threw its shade over a well. She carried two empty buckets, and baby Kinza was tied on her back with a cloth. She seemed in a great hurry about something.

“Come quick, Hamid,” she said impatiently. “How slowly you come up the path! Hide the buckets in the bushes—I only brought them as an excuse

to leave the house, in case Fatima should want to know where I was going. Now, come with me.”

“Where to, Mother?” asked the little boy, very surprised.

“Wait till we get around the corner of the mountain,” replied his mother, leading the way up the steep, green grass and walking very fast. “People will see us from the well and will tell Fatima where we have gone. Follow quickly. I’ll tell you soon.”

They hurried on until they were hidden from the village and were overlooking another valley. Zohra sat down and laid her baby in her lap.

“Look well at her, Hamid,” she said. “Play with her and show her the flowers.”

Hamid stared long and hard into the strangely old, patient face of his little sister, but she did not stare back or return his smile. She seemed to be looking at something very far away and did not see him at all. Suddenly feeling very afraid, he flicked his hand in front of her eyes, but she didn’t move or blink.

“She’s blind,” he whispered at last. His lips felt dry and his face was white.

His mother nodded and quickly stood up. “Yes,” she replied, “she’s blind. I’ve known it for some time, but I haven’t told Fatima or my husband because they will probably take her away from me. Why should they be bothered with another man’s blind child? She can never work, and she will never marry.”

She started to cry, and tears blinded her as she stumbled on the rough path.

Hamid caught hold of her arm. “Where are we going, Mother?” he asked her again.

“To the saint’s tomb,” answered his mother, hurrying on, “up behind the next hill. They say he is a very powerful saint and has healed many people, but Fatima has never given me the chance to go. Now she thinks I’m drawing water, and we must return with the buckets full. I wanted you to come with me, because it’s a lonely path and I was afraid to go by myself.”

They climbed silently to a small cave that had been hollowed out of the rock. There was a bush outside with many dirty, rolled-up pieces of paper tied to its branches. These all told tales of sorrow and sickness. People brought their burdens to the bones of this dead man, and they all went home unhealed and un comforted.

They laid Kinza at the mouth of the cave, then Zohra lifted herself up again, calling on the name of a god whom she didn’t know, and the prophet Mohammed. It was her last hope. As she prayed, a cloud passed over the sun and a cold shadow fell on the baby. Kinza shivered and began to cry and reached out for her mother’s arms. Zohra gazed eagerly into her little daughter’s face for a moment, and then picked her up with a disappointed sigh. God had not listened, for Kinza was still blind.

Hamid and his mother almost ran down the hill. They were late, and the sun was already setting behind the mountains. The storks flew past with their rattling cry, black against the sky. Hamid was angry and bitterly disappointed. What was the good of it? Kinza would never see. God did not seem to care, and the dead saint would do nothing to help. Perhaps he wasn’t interested in baby girls.

They reached the well in silence. Hamid drew the water for his mother, gave her the buckets, then dashed off down the valley to collect Rahma and the goats. He met them halfway up the hill, for Rahma was afraid of the evening shadows and had wanted to get home. She held her

brother's hand, and the goats, who also wanted to go home, huddled against their legs.

"Where did you go?" asked Rahma.

"To the saint's tomb," answered Hamid. "Rahma, our little sister is blind. Her eyes see nothing but darkness—that's why Mother hides her away. She does not want Fatima and Si Mohamed to know."

Rahma stood still, horrified. "Blind?" she echoed. "And the saint—couldn't he make her see?"

Hamid shook his head. "I don't think that saint is much good," he said rather boldly. "Mother went there before, when Father coughed, but nothing happened. Father died."

"It is the will of God," said Rahma, and shrugged her shoulders. Then, clinging close together because night was falling, they climbed the hill, and the goats' eyes gleamed like green lanterns in the dark.

"I hate the dark," whispered Rahma with a little shiver.

Hamid stared up into the deep blue sky. "I love the stars," he said.

## **Chapter 2 The Secret Revealed**

They reached the village ten minutes later and passed by the dark huts. Through open doors, glowing charcoal gleamed cheerfully in clay pots, and families squatted around their evening meal by dim lamplight. But as they came near their own house they could hear the angry voice of Fatima, the older wife, shouting at their mother.

Fatima hated the new wife and her three children and made life as hard as she could for them in every possible way. She was bent and wrinkled

by long years of hard work, and Zohra was still young and beautiful. Fatima had longed in vain for a baby, while Zohra had had six. So perhaps it wasn't surprising that the older woman was so jealous and had been so angry at their coming to live in the house. She showed her hatred by sitting cross-legged on the mattress like a queen all day and making Zohra and Rahma work like slaves. Zohra had only escaped to the well because Fatima had fallen asleep—but unfortunately she had not slept for long. Furious at finding the young woman not there, she had sent a neighbor's child to spy out for her. So Zohra, carrying her buckets, had arrived home to find that Fatima knew all about her expedition. "Wicked, deceitful, lazy one!" shouted Fatima. "You can't deceive me. Give me that child! Let me see for myself why you hide her away, and hold her so secretly, and creep with her to the tomb. Give her to me, I say! I insist on having her."

She snatched the baby roughly from Zohra's grasp and carried her to the light, and the mother sighed and let her empty arms fall to her sides. After all, Fatima must know soon. They could not hide it much longer, and she had better find out for herself.

The frightened children squatted in the shadows by the wall, their dark eyes very big. The hut was silent as Fatima passed her hands over the baby's limbs and stared into Kinza's still face. Hamid, holding his breath, heard little sounds he had never noticed before—the slow, rhythmical munching of the ox in the stall, the rustle of straw as the kids nuzzled against their mothers, and the soft crooning of roosted hens.

Then the silence was broken by a triumphant cackle of laughter from the old woman, and Kinza, whose ears were very sensitive to loud noises and angry voices, gave a frightened cry. Fatima picked her up and almost flung her back into her mother's lap.

"Blind," she announced, "blind as night! And you knew—you knew all the time! You brought her here to your husband's house to be a burden on all

of us forever—never to work, never to marry. You hid her away in case we found out. Oh, most deceitful of women! Our husband shall know about this tonight. Now—get up and prepare his supper, and you, Rahma, fan the charcoal. When he has eaten his food, we shall hear what he has to say.”

The frightened little girl jumped up and set to work with the bellows till the flames leaped from the glowing coals and flung strange shadows on the walls. Zohra, trembling, laid her baby in the swinging wooden cradle that hung from a beam, and set to work to mash the beans and beat in the oil, for her husband had gone to speak to a neighbor and would be home anytime now.

Supper was just ready when they heard his firm steps coming along the path, and a moment later he appeared in the doorway—a tall man with black eyes and a black beard and a hard, cruel mouth. He wore a long garment made from dark homespun goat’s wool, with a white turban wound around his head. He did not speak to his wives or his stepchildren but sat cross-legged in front of the low, round table and signaled for the food to be set before him. If he noticed Fatima’s triumph, and the white, scared faces of Zohra and the children, he said nothing.

Zohra set the hot dish in the center of the table, and the silent family gathered around. There were no spoons, but she broke two large pieces of bread for her husband and Fatima and three small pieces for herself, Hamid, and Rahma.

“In the name of God,” they murmured as they scooped their bread in the center dish, for they hoped the words would drive away evil spirits that might be lurking around the table. Sometimes at midday when the sun was shining, Rahma forgot to say them, but she never forgot at night,

because the flickering shadows and dark corners made her feel afraid. Evil spirits seemed very real and near after the lamps had been lit. And certainly tonight the little home was full of evil spirits—dark spirits of jealousy and anger and hatred and cruelty and fear. Even little Kinza in her hanging cradle seemed to feel the atmosphere and wailed fretfully.

Si Mohamed frowned. “Stop that noise,” he growled. “Pick her up.”

The mother obeyed and sat down again with her baby held very closely against her.

Fatima waited a moment until her husband had finished eating, then she held out her arms. “Give that child to me,” she said threateningly.

Zohra handed over her baby and burst into tears.

“What is the matter?” said Si Mohamed irritably. His wives might quarrel all they pleased—wives always did quarrel—but he disliked them doing it in front of him. He had been plowing all day and was tired.

“Yes, what is the matter, indeed!” sneered Fatima, and she held out the baby at arm’s length so that the lamplight suddenly shone straight onto her face. But Kinza neither squinted her eyes nor turned away from it. Si Mohamed stared at her directly.

“Blind!” cried Fatima, as she had shouted before. “Blind, blind, blind! And Zohra knew it—she has deceived us all.”

“I didn’t,” sobbed Zohra, rocking to and fro.

“You did,” shouted the old woman.

“Silence, you women,” said their husband sternly, and the quarrel stopped immediately. Once again, there was silence in the dim hut. Rahma suddenly felt cold with fear and crept closer to the dying charcoal.

Her stepfather looked very closely at Kinza's tiny face, flashed the light in front of it, and jerked his hand toward her face until he was satisfied that the old woman spoke the truth.

"Truly," he agreed, "she is blind."

But the dreaded outburst of rage never came. He handed Kinza back to her mother, half-closed his eyes, and lit a long, thin pipe. He sat puffing away in silence for some time, until the hut was filled with sickly fumes, and then he said, "Blind children can be very profitable. Keep that baby carefully. She may bring us much money."

"How?" asked Zohra nervously, her arms tightening around her baby.

"By begging," replied her husband. "Of course, we cannot take her begging ourselves, for I am an honorable man. But there are beggars who would be glad to hire her to sit with them in the markets. People feel sorry for blind children and give generously. I believe I know of one who would pay to borrow her when she is a little older."

Zohra said nothing—she dared not. But Hamid and Rahma gave each other a long, rebellious look across the table. They knew the beggar of whom their stepfather spoke—an old man dressed in filthy old rags who swore horrible oaths. They did not want their precious Kinza to go to that old man. He would certainly mistreat and frighten her.

Their stepfather saw the looks through half-closed eyelids. He clapped his hands sharply. "To bed, you children," he ordered, "quickly!"

They got up hurriedly, mumbled good night, and scuttled into dark corners of the room.

There were low mattresses laid along the wall. Curling themselves up on these, they pulled strips of blanket over them and fell fast asleep.

Hamid never knew why he woke that night, for he usually slept soundly till sunrise. But at about two in the morning, he suddenly sat up in bed, wide awake. A patch of bright moonlight was shining through the window onto Kinza's cradle, and she was moaning and stirring in her sleep.

Hamid slipped from his mattress and stood beside her. Suddenly, a great wave of protective tenderness seemed to come sweeping over him. She was so small, so patient, and so defenseless. Well, he would see to it that no harm came to her. All his life he would guide her through her darkness and protect her with his love. His heart swelled for a moment, and then he remembered that he was only a boy himself and completely under his stepfather's control. They might take Kinza away from him, and then his love would be powerless to reach her.

Was there no stronger love to shelter her, no more certain light to lead her? He did not know.

### **Chapter 3 Si Mohamed Makes a Deal**

Blind Kinza sat in the doorway of her hut and lifted her small face to the sunshine. It was Thursday, and on Thursday Kinza went to work. She was two-and-a-half years old now and quite old enough, in her stepfather's opinion, to earn her living like the rest of them.

She sat still and patient, her weak legs folded under her, her hands clasped quietly in her lap. It was quite early, and Hamid, who carried her to her job, had taken the cow to pasture and would not be back for a while. In the meantime she was free to enjoy herself, and Kinza enjoyed herself quite a lot in her own way.

As long as the sun shone and the weather was fine, she was, on the whole, a happy little child. Since she had never seen the light, she could

not miss it, and there were many good things to feel. There was the warmth and shelter of her mother's lap, the clasp of her brother's strong arms, and the wet noses of the goat kids when they nuzzled her hands. There was the touch of the sun on her body and the wind on her face. Sometimes she was allowed to sit by her mother as she sorted the corn, and one of Kinza's greatest treats was to pick up handfuls of worn husks and let them slip through her fingers.

There were lovely things to hear, too, and she knew now that Hamid was coming toward her, from the particular sound of his bare feet on the dry mud. She held up her arms and gave a delighted squeak. Hamid picked her up and tied her firmly on his back.

"Market day, Little Sister," he announced. "Have you had some breakfast?"

Kinza nodded. Half an hour ago she had drunk a bowlful of sweet black coffee and eaten a hunk of brown bread. It was the best breakfast she knew, and she had really enjoyed it.

"Come, then," said Hamid, and they set off together, keeping under the olive trees to begin with, because, by nine o'clock in the summer, the sun was blazing hot. But very soon they left the trees behind them, and the path to market ran between wheat fields ripe for harvest, where the air smelled of poppies. The sound of the wind rustling through the corn made her sleepy, and Kinza laid her head on her brother's shoulder and shut her eyes.

There were many people on the path that morning, and as they reached the marketplace the crowds became thicker. It was an area of burnt yellow grass, shaded by eucalyptus trees, and the sellers sat cross-legged on the ground with their goods piled up in front of them while the buyers tramped around them. Kinza hated it. She hated the jostling and the

jostling and the noise, the dust that made her sneeze, the flies that crawled over her face, and the fleas that bit her legs. Most of all, she hated the moment when Hamid left her in the care of the old beggar.

But Hamid, to make it easier for her, had worked out a plan. During the week, he tried to beg, borrow, or steal a small coin. He would exchange it in the market on Thursday morning for a lump of sticky green candy, covered with nuts. Licking that candy was the biggest treat Kinza knew.

Hamid knew the marketplace very well and made his way to the patch of sand where Kinza and the beggar sat side by side. He made sure he got there before the beggar to give him time to settle Kinza and let her eat the green candy. Hamid took a few secret licks himself first, and then handed it over, warm and wet, to his sister. She clasped it in her right hand, loving its sweet stickiness, and began to lick it all over, going around and around it with the tip of her little pink tongue. In her left hand she held tightly to the hem of Hamid's tunic, in case the roaring crowd should pull him away from her.

They had not been there long before the old beggar came shuffling toward them with a colored drum in his hand. He was amazingly dirty and old, and his patched coat was falling to pieces. Hamid kissed his hand politely and received the coin that was paid to his stepfather each week for the loan of Kinza. But instead of dismissing him crossly as he usually did, the old beggar spoke to him.

"When your father comes down to buy," he growled, "tell him I have business with him."

Hamid nodded, freed himself gently from Kinza's grasp, and ran off. Kinza, finding herself left alone, started to cry, until the old beggar noticed and slapped her for it.

Her work was not very difficult during the early part of the day. All she had to do was sit with her small face lifted to the light so that everyone could see she was blind, and hold out her hand. The old beggar sat beside her, thumping his drum to make people look at her, and chanting and swaying. Many people felt sorry for the tiny white-faced child and gave her coins, which she handed to her master. So they sat until noon, and the sun rose higher, and the dust and the flies grew thicker. The crowds wandered around them and the stray dogs sniffed them. Sometimes people tripped right over her.

At noon, Kinza's master gave her a piece of dark rye bread and a cup of water, and because she had collected quite a lot of money during the morning he gave her a squashed plum. It was delicious. She sucked all her ten fingers in turn so that she didn't lose one drop of juice.

The afternoon was harder than the morning, for by two o'clock Kinza began to grow sleepy. Her dark head, tied up in its cotton cloth, began to nod heavily, and her eyes just would not stay open. She longed for her mother's lap, but all she could do was lean against the old man's rags to rest her weary head.

But only for a few minutes. He saw what had happened and angrily jerked her upright. Feeling dazed, she rubbed her knuckles in her eyes, stretched herself, and tumbled forward. Once again he jerked her back, slapped her, and propped her up against him. So, with her outstretched hand supported by the other, she sat begging, half-asleep, until the beggar suddenly got up and she fell over sideways.

He sat her up with an impatient bump. "Bad child!" he growled. "Sit and beg till I come back."

He had got up because, on the outskirts of the crowd, he had seen the tall figure of Kinza's stepfather looking about for him. The farmer would not

wish to speak to the beggar in the open market, so they met behind a huge eucalyptus tree and stood talking.

"You wanted me?" asked the farmer.

"Yes," said the old beggar. "I'm leaving the village. The country people are growing greedy and are giving less to honorable beggars, so I'm going to the big town on the coast, with my wife. The great feast will soon be here, and they say beggars grow rich in the streets of the town. Now this is what I want to say. Give me that blind child of yours. You are not a beggar, and you can never make use of her, but she makes a lot of money for me. My wife will look after her, and I will pay you a good sum for her."

Kinza's stepfather hesitated. He knew that he was plotting a very wicked thing, but he needed money badly. His cow had strayed into a neighbor's cornfield and had been put in the cows' prison. He had to pay a lot of money to get it back again. His harvest was poor this year, and Kinza, while she earned a little, was and always would be an extra mouth to feed.

Si Mohamed refused to listen to his conscience. After all, Kinza was not his child. Hamid was eleven, almost a man, and could soon be left to earn his own living, and Rahma could be married off in three or four years. But this might be the first and last chance he would ever have of getting rid of Kinza.

"How much will you give me?" he said at last.

The beggar mentioned a small sum. The farmer said that was not nearly enough. The beggar shouted back, and they bargained angrily for some time. Nobody took much notice, for that is the way prices are fixed in that



country. They finally agreed on a price that was exactly halfway between what both had asked in the first place.

“Right,” said the beggar at last. “I’ll be leaving the village at dawn on the first day of the week. When you hand over the child I will hand over the money, and it shall be done in the presence of witnesses.”

Though neither showed it, both were pleased. The old beggar fought his way back to Kinza, hoping she had managed to collect some coins while he had been away. But she had done nothing of the sort. She had crept into a patch of shade and lay fast asleep, curled up in a ball like a tired kitten.

#### **Chapter 4 Zohra Makes a Plan**

Hamid stood on the outskirts of the market, his thin brown face turned upward, his bright dark eyes fixed on the top of the mosque, waiting for the priest to appear and shout the four o’clock prayer call. This was the time Kinza was released and he could carry her off, safe for another week.

The crowd was thinning now, and Hamid could spot his sister sitting in a sad little heap beside her master. She was in disgrace because she had fallen asleep, and Hamid was impatient to rescue her.

The mosque was the village temple—a building with a square tower dazzling white against the blue sky. A golden crescent gleamed from the top.

At last the old bearded priest appeared and sent his chanted call ringing out across the marketplace. “There is one God,” he cried, “and Mohammed is his prophet.”

Faithful Muslims flocked to the temple or took off their shoes and prayed where they stood, facing east, bowing low, and sometimes kneeling with their foreheads on the ground.

The moment Hamid caught sight of the priest, he raced across the market, kissed the old beggar’s hand in greeting, and snatched up his little sister.

He had brought her a doughnut. She clutched it eagerly and took a mouthful. In the joy of feeling his arms safe about her once more, she forgot all about the hunger and thirst and weariness of that long day and nestled her head into his neck, crooning with delight. Her tired little body relaxed and she fell fast asleep, as she had been longing to do for the past three hours. Hamid, a little bent from the dead weight of her, wandered home along the river path in the sweltering heat.

He rested for a while under a fig tree, watching the river where the women were washing their clothes and the cows cooled their feet. He wondered where the river went. One day he would find out for himself.

Once again, as night fell, the family gathered around the clay bowl and ate their supper by firelight and candlelight. Kinza, refreshed from her sleep, sat on her mother’s lap, flushed and bright-eyed, opening her mouth for food like a hungry baby bird. Hamid watched her, loving her and remembering the pressure of her weary little body against his back. Always, always, he would protect her and make her happy.

The cows munched in the shed, and an old dog with a torn ear wandered in and lay down with his head on Rahma’s lap. Moths and bats flitted in and out, and the cat crept up and stuck her head into the clay pot to have supper with the family.

Hamid, tired from his climb, lay down to sleep. He dreamed that the terrifying old beggar stood between him and Kinza. Suddenly he woke to find that the moon had risen and the grown-ups were still sitting talking around the dead charcoal.

In the silver beams he could see their faces clearly—his stepfather grim and determined, Fatima cruelly pleased, and his mother pale and pleading.

“It is the only offer we shall ever get for her,” said Si Mohamed fiercely. “She will be looked after for life.”

“Life!” cried his mother bitterly. “There will be no life! She will die—she is so little and so weak.”

“A blind child is better dead!” remarked Fatima.

Zohra turned angrily on the old woman, but the man silenced them both by raising his hand.

“Silence, you foolish women!” he ordered. “Let there be no more talk about this. The child must come with me three days from now at dawn.”

He rose grandly, like a king, and Fatima rose too. But Zohra stayed crouched by the dead fire, rocking herself to and fro in the moonlight.

“Little daughter! Little daughter!” she murmured brokenly to herself, and Hamid lay quite still and watched her. He dared not speak or go to her for fear of waking his stepfather. But his hot little heart beat very fast, and his mind was completely made up.

It shall not be! he said to himself over and over again. I will not let her go. It shall not be!

He watched his mother creep away at last and lie down sorrowfully to sleep. He watched the pale patch of moonlight move across the doorway and rest on the cradle where Kinza lay dreaming. He saw the pale summer dawn begin to break and heard the first rooster crow—and all the time he lay thinking, thinking, thinking. But his thinking got him nowhere, and just before daybreak he fell into a deep sleep. Two hours later he was woken by his stepfather prodding him with his foot.

“Wake up, you lazy creature!” growled Si Mohamed. “It’s time you had the goats out.”

Hamid rolled off his mattress, washed his face and hands in a bucket of water, and started to eat his breakfast. Gobbling his bread and sipping his bowl of coffee, he glanced at his mother. Her face was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes, but she did not look as unhappy as he had expected. There was a very determined expression on her face, as though she had made up her mind about something. Once Hamid found her staring hard at him, and he stared firmly back. She raised her eyebrows a little and he gave a slight nod. A secret understanding flashed between them. As soon as they could, they would talk together.

They did not have to wait very long. Hamid took the goats on to the hillside. With a crust of bread saved from his breakfast, he bribed a friend to watch them for him, then he crept back and watched through a gap in the hedge. Soon he saw his mother go across to where the grindstone stood, and after a few minutes he slipped in and joined her.

Kinza was sitting as usual with her face turned toward the eastern mountain, waiting for the sun to rise. Zohra sat cross-legged, turning the heavy wheel that crushed the corn.

Hamid crouched down beside her and touched her arm. “Mother,” he whispered, “I heard last night. Is it the old beggar who is to have Kinza?”

His mother turned toward him, and her calm, steady gaze rested on him for a moment, as if she were making a decision. He was a thin little boy, small for his age, but very tough—and his love for Kinza was very strong.

“So my husband thinks,” she replied, “but I say that it shall not be. I will not have Kinza starved in those cruel streets. No, Hamid, you must take her somewhere else. You can save her if you wish.”

“Me!” echoed Hamid, amazed. But the look he gave his mother was reassuring—full of bravery and willing courage.

### **Chapter 5 Hamid Agrees to Help**

Listen,” said Zohra, and Hamid’s eyes never left her face as she spoke. All his life he would remember what she said to him that day.

“Four years ago,” she said, “your father took me to the tomb across the mountains. We left you children with your grandmother, but I carried your little brother Absalom on my back, because he was only a baby. After we had visited the tomb, your father wanted to go on to the town farther on. All day long we walked, from sunrise to sunset, in the burning heat. By the time we reached the town, my feet were cut and blistered and Absalom was crying and feverish. His eyelids were swollen and stuck together, and he could not look at the light.

“Next morning, your father went off to the market to trade, but I sat holding my baby, shading his eyes from the light and brushing the flies off him. As I sat there, a woman from the town came up and began chatting to me, and she noticed the child.

“Your baby is sick?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied, and turned his face so that she could see.

“She got up quickly. ‘Come quick,’ she said. ‘There’s an English nurse—she’ll give you good medicine and heal your baby. She healed my little boy when he rubbed prickly-pear thorns into his eyes.’

“I hung back. ‘I have no money,’ I said.

“‘It doesn’t matter,’ replied the woman. ‘She is a holy woman and heals without money because she loves her saint. He is a good saint and has mercy on the poor.’

“‘But,’ I objected, ‘the English are rich and live in grand houses. She will not receive me.’

“‘But she lives in one of our houses,’ answered the woman, ‘and those who go to her for healing are mostly poor. None are ever turned away—I tell you, she receives them in the name of her saint.’

“So I followed, feeling afraid, but eager for medicine that would cure my baby’s eyes. She led me down a narrow back street to a house with an open door. There were people coming out of that door— poor people like me, with babies tied on their backs. Some of them carried bottles of medicine and none of them looked afraid.

“We were only just in time, for the room was nearly empty. The nurse was tall and fair. I had never seen anyone like her before. She spoke kindly to everyone, and I saw her take little children up in her arms as though she loved them. As I watched her, my fear went away, and when everyone else had gone I went up to her and held out Absalom. She took him in her lap and examined his eyes. Her hands were very gentle. He didn’t even cry.

“She asked me many questions about him, and then she gave me medicine for his fever and ointment for his eyes. While she fetched them I looked at a picture on the wall. It was the picture of a man with a kind

face, holding a little child in His arms, and lots of other little children were clinging to His robe, looking up at Him.

“I asked her who that man was, and she said He was called Jesus, and He was sent from God to show us the way to heaven. She told me a lot about Him, how He healed the sick, and made blind people see, and loved everyone, whether they were rich or poor, grown-ups or children. I know she loved the man in the picture and wanted to be like Him—and that was why she gave me medicine and was kind to Absalom.”

Zohra paused, and then went on speaking very slowly. “I think, for the sake of the man in the picture, she would shelter Kinza, and so you must carry Kinza to her. You must start tonight when the moon is full, and you must walk all night and hide by day, for Si Mohamed will certainly search for you.

“But he need not know you are gone till tomorrow night. I will send Rahma out early with the goats before he’s awake and tell him you’ve taken them. He never bothers to look at Kinza in any case, and I’ll put a pillow in her cradle in case Fatima glances in. By the time he comes home from work, it will be dusk, and he cannot send out a search by night, nor will I tell him where you’ve gone. By the next day, you will be nearly there.”

Hamid’s eyes were bright with fear and excitement, but he only said, “How shall I know the way?”

“I’ve thought of that,” replied his mother. “There is only one road you can take. You must follow the river to the top of the valley and then you must climb the mountain. It is very high, but you must reach the top. Below you will see another river in a valley, and if you follow the road along the bank, you will at last reach a big main road with traffic. If you start walking up this road, it may be that a truck driver will give you a ride, for

the town lies about fifty kilometers along it up in the mountains. If you cannot get a ride you must walk it, and may God help you.”

“And when I get there?” breathed the little boy.

“When you get there,” said his mother, “you must find the house of the English nurse. Do not ask, but just watch. She lives in a street behind the market and opposite the doorway of the inn. Her house is the last one on the street. Go to her, tell her all our story, and give her Kinza. She will know what to do next.”

Hamid looked doubtful. “But what if she doesn’t want Kinza?” he asked.

His mother shook her head. “She won’t turn her away,” she replied confidently. “She told me her saint in the picture never turned anyone away. For the sake of her saint, I know she will receive Kinza and be good to her. Now, you must go back to your goats and I must finish the grinding, or Fatima will be angry. Think about what I have told you. I’ll bake extra loaves of bread for you to carry on your journey.”

Hamid got up to go back to his goats, feeling like someone in a dream. The world was really just the same as it had been yesterday, but to the eyes of the little boy it seemed different. Yet in spite of his fear about the journey, he never thought of refusing to go.

He whistled softly, and a few young goats grazing nearby came up and pushed their noses into his lap. He suddenly knew he loved them and would be sorry to leave them. He wondered when he would see them again, and for the first time he began to think about his own future, as well as Kinza’s. He certainly could not come back for a long time. His stepfather would be much too angry.

He led them home early that evening and sat quietly down beside his mother and Rahma, who were busy spinning wool. Both were working

hard because Fatima was sitting by watching, and neither spoke when Hamid joined them.

Hamid's young heart ached. Except when his mother had gone on the five days' pilgrimage to the tomb, he had never spent a night in his life away from her. Now he must leave her for a long time. Her silent love flowed out to him, comforting and strengthening him.

The evening dragged on and the light faded. Tonight everything felt different. For the first time in his life, Hamid was not hungry when the family gathered around the supper bowl, but he forced himself to eat in case Si Mohamed should notice. Then without a word he went out and lay down by the door and waited, battling with his fears and thoughts until his stepfather had lain down and the moon had risen.

He watched his stepfather fall asleep at last, and listened until his breathing became heavy and regular. Yes, he was sleeping deeply, snoring in his dreams. Only a little longer now. Hamid crept to the edge of the mattress and waited, with his eyes fixed on the mountain. On silent feet he stepped through the doorway and slipped behind the granary.

The old dog cocked its ear and rattled its chain, and Hamid held his breath. If the dog should bark, the whole plan would be ruined. He flung himself down beside it, burying his face in its mangy coat, fondling its ears, and wordlessly begging it to be silent. It turned its large head and licked the child's face, puzzled but loyal.

So he crouched waiting, with his arms around the dog's neck, listening for his mother. He jumped when she appeared with Kinza in her arms.

In complete silence she tied Kinza to his back. The baby wondered what was happening, but, trusting them completely, she laid her head down on her brother's shoulder and fell fast asleep again. Then Zohra tied two

loaves of bread on his other shoulder, took both his hands in hers and kissed them. He in turn pressed her fingers to his lips and clung to her for a moment. Then she gently sent him on his way and stood watching as he passed through the gate. Not a word had passed between them. Then, content with what she had done, she went back to her hut— to the empty cradle and the anger of her husband. And Hamid, like a small boat cut loose from its moorings and swept out into unknown seas, set off along the moonlit path.

## **Chapter 6 Adventures on the Way**

Uphill, downhill, along the river path, Hamid trudged on, becoming more and more exhausted. Kinza seemed to weigh heavier and heavier on his back. He remembered all he had left behind—his mother, Rahma, the thatched hut and charcoal fire, the goats, and the dog with the torn ear. He felt afraid of the unknown he was walking toward, but he knew he must keep going.

At last, exhausted, he reached a cornfield and, hiding himself and Kinza among the tall stalks, they fell asleep. Kinza woke before Hamid and, crawling out from the prickly cornstalks, she started to explore. She heard the sound of a grindstone and, with a cry of delight, she toddled toward it. Grindstones meant mother—and food and shelter and comfort.

A woman sitting at the door of her hut heard the cry and looked up. She could hardly believe her eyes! Coming toward her was the strangest little figure she had ever seen—a tiny child in a cotton gown, her outstretched hands groping, her face lifted to the light. Her black, tangled curls had straw sticking out all over them like a halo.

Kinza realized she was in a strange place and hesitated for a moment. Then she held her arms out and cried, "Mummy!"

The woman sitting at the grindstone was a young woman whose only child had died six months ago. Now, this baby staggered toward her crying the very word she had been longing to hear. She lifted Kinza into her lap and began kissing and soothing her.

Kinza knew this was not her mother and started to struggle free, but although these were the wrong arms, they felt safe and strong, and the woman's hands were gentle as they stroked her curls. At last she relaxed and asked for a drink. The woman fetched her a bowl of buttermilk. She drank every last drop, then curled up like a kitten in the woman's lap and went to sleep.

It was evening when Hamid woke up, feeling rested and comfortable. He suddenly realized where he was and jumped up with a little cry of alarm. Where was Kinza? He saw her tracks in the trampled cornfield and crept to the edge of the patch. What he saw gave him a real surprise.

Less than fifty yards away, he saw Kinza eating cherries in front of a hut, while a young woman laughed and tried to untangle her curls. Around them sat the whole village, who had come out to stare at this strange child who had somehow arrived among them.

Hamid felt ashamed. He had fallen asleep, they had lost a whole precious day's traveling, and, worst of all, Kinza had escaped and could well be in an enemy camp. He must rescue her quickly, for these people would certainly soon come to hear of the child missing from Thursday Village, the name of Hamid's village.

So, once again, when the sun went down and moonlight flooded the village, Hamid left the shelter of the cornfield and crept over to the doorway of the hut. Kinza had been put on a little mat and covered with a goatskin. Hamid scooped her up in his arms, whispering her name. She gave a little sigh and half woke but, knowing she was safely back with her

brother, she clung to him tightly and fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. She knew she was back in the right place.

Five minutes later they were bumping up the hillside, Hamid's heart thumping with fear. But no one had heard them—the rescue had been perfect.

Hamid paused and looked up to the mountain towering above him, and back to the valley and the river that led home. He knew which path he had to take and headed toward the mountaintop, which he reached just before dawn. Hamid felt he was standing alone on top of the world, gazing at range upon range of rocky peaks.

He knew he had to avoid Tuesday Market, a Spanish settlement where there were many soldiers who might be on the lookout for them. His stepfather could well have alerted the police by now. Hamid knew he must make his way straight down the mountain to the river in the valley two thousand feet below them.

He tied Kinza on his back again and set out, almost colliding with two men on horseback, whom he recognized as coming from his own village.

Dazzled by the sun, the men stared at him for a moment, then one leaped lightly from his horse and made a grab for Hamid.

"It's Si Mohamed's boy!" he cried. "The one who was missing from Thursday Village the day before yesterday."

Hamid ducked and bolted down the mountainside. His sudden movement startled the horse, which reared in the air. The man gave an angry shout and the horse plunged forward. By the time the animal was properly under control, Hamid was far away, leaping through the scrub, with Kinza bumping behind him. Not even noticing the thorns and roots and his cut, bleeding feet, he went crashing on, not daring to look behind, always

expecting a heavy hand to land on his shoulder and pull Kinza away from him.

The merchant, still clinging to the bridle, stood watching him. He had done his best, but he was not going to chase someone else's brat all over the scrub bushes and spoil his new shoes. It was none of his business, and he wanted to be in good time for market. He shrugged his shoulders, mounted his horse, and rode on. He would tell the police at Tuesday Market. It was their job, not his, to hunt runaway boys.

But poor Hamid dared not stop running, and Kinza, with her body nearly shaken to bits, gave jerky wails and hiccups on his back. There seemed to be nowhere to hide. Once, he caught his foot in a root and fell headlong. Bruised and dirty, he was up in a second. He had noticed a rock jutting out ahead of him. He made for it blindly, rounded it, and found himself close to a thatched hut, and beside the hut was a mud goat shed.

Hamid was quite certain that his enemy would appear at any minute around the rock, and this was his very last hope of escape.

He sprang into the close, dark shelter of the goat shed and found a sick goat and her kid lying on some straw. There was a pile of hay stacked against the wall, and Hamid burrowed into it. Then, like a hunted rabbit, he lay panting and shivering for half an hour.

When his heart was beating more normally, he wriggled himself around in the straw and began to think about his situation. He felt very ill; he was burning hot, and his head ached dreadfully. His limbs were heavy and stiff, and the straw pricked and rubbed his bleeding feet.

They had had nothing to drink that morning, and his mouth was parched from fear and running. Kinza, too, was miserable and wanted a drink. She

had started to cry, sounding like a starved kitten, and he could not silence her. If anyone came to the shed, they would certainly hear her.

He looked around desperately, and then for the first time he began to consider the sick goat, which had broken its front leg. He cheered up at once, for here was the answer to his problems. Hamid understood goats, and a mother with a kid would have plenty of milk.

He wormed his way out of the hay and, creeping to the doorway, grabbed hold of a piece of broken clay pot that had been thrown away. Then, with one eye on the house, he made friends with the goat and the kid, fondling their ears and letting them lick his hands. Then, once she trusted him, he lay down on the floor beside the mother and milked it into the piece of pot. He carried the sweet, warm, frothing milk to Kinza, who drank it all up and mewed for more. They drank as much as they could and soaked hard pieces of bread into it, for they were parched and starving.

The excitement of milking, the pain in his feet, the stuffy heat of the straw pile, and the fever in his body had kept Hamid awake all morning. He was terrified of going to sleep, too, in case Kinza wandered off again. He looked around for a piece of rope to tie her to him, but there was nothing suitable, and he dared not go out until it was dark. At last, exhausted, he clasped her tightly to him and fell into a deep sleep.

But Kinza, realizing he was asleep and wanting to do just as she pleased, crawled out of the pile of hay. She took a few uncertain steps and bumped straight into the goat.

Kinza loved goats and felt perfectly at home with them, so having found what she wanted—friendly company and a place to lie that did not scratch—she crawled under the goat's chin and curled up to sleep. The little kid, no doubt feeling jealous, butted its way in, so they lay together

with the goat's front legs around them, both quite content—the newborn kid and the lost baby.

Hamid, turning feverishly in his sleep, soon tossed away the straw and lay with his arms and face exposed. Toward sunset, the mother of the household came in with a bucket to milk the lame goat. For a moment she thought it had had another kid— then she looked more closely and found it was a little girl curled up in a ball.

“May God have mercy on me!” exclaimed the woman. “It’s a baby!”

She looked around, puzzled, and caught sight of Hamid’s top half sticking out of the straw.

“May God have mercy on my parents!” she cried out. “There’s a boy as well!”

She marched quickly over to him and prodded him with her leathery foot. She was a big woman with a loud voice, and she wanted an explanation quickly.

Hamid woke with a start and struggled into a sitting position. He was fuzzy with sleep but realized at once that wherever he was he was cornered and caught like a rat in a trap. His head still ached terribly, and he lost all control of himself. He stuffed his knuckles into his eyes and began to cry.

“Stop it!” said the woman, slapping him on the back. “You are not from our village. Who are you? And where have you come from?”

Hamid gulped back his sobs and looked at her. He thought it might be best to tell the truth, and the woman listened to his story, frowning and nodding in turn.

When he had finished she looked at him kindly. It was a good story and seemed true enough. She had been married twice, and her first husband had been very cruel to her and her child. He had divorced her when she was only fifteen years old. She too had known what it was to see her baby illtreated, and she felt sorry for this unknown woman who was willing to risk so much for her blind child.

Besides all this, the woman had a motherly heart, and the bright-eyed boy who coughed as he spoke was obviously ill. She knew nothing yet about the filthy little bundle cuddling her goat, but at least she could give her a better spot to sleep in. So she milked her goat, and then, with the bucket in her right hand and Kinza under her left arm, she strode to her house, with Hamid limping behind her.

The house was a round mud hut, rather dark inside, with a stack of winter bedding for the goats heaped against the wall. A clay pot bubbled on a fire, and three little girls sat around it expectantly. As they entered, the husband came down the mountainside with the flock, and they all gathered around to eat. Hamid, who had eaten nothing but bread and milk for two days, thought he had never tasted anything so good—a lentil stew, flavored with garlic, oil, and red peppers with hunks of hot, soft bread to dip in it; a bowl of buttermilk from which they all drank in turn; and finally a dish of bruised apricots—the unbruised ones the father would carry to the Wednesday Market at dawn the next day.

Hamid felt his strength come back to him. For one night at least he would be safe and sheltered, and this made him feel peaceful, and his head stopped aching. The big countrywoman sat licking her fingers, and he gazed up at her as though she were an angel from heaven.

After supper the three little girls curled themselves up on goatskins against the hay, with a cat and her three kittens for company, and went straight to sleep. The father went out to milk, and his wife followed



because she wanted to talk to him. Hamid, sitting by the fire with Kinza leaning up against him, could hear their voices. He supposed they were talking about him, and he was quite right, for the woman came back soon with everything fixed up.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said encouragingly. “My husband is quite willing to help you. He is going into Wednesday Market tomorrow to sell apricots. He picks up a truck at the bottom of the hill just before daybreak. He will take you with him and say you are my sister’s children, for my sister lives on the road to Friday Market, where you are trying to get to, and she has a boy about your age and a baby girl. The truck will drop you about twenty-five kilometers from Friday Market, on the main road, and you can probably get a lift—if not, it’s not too far to walk.”

She looked down at his joyful face and suddenly felt sorry because he was so young and helpless. She fetched a basin and a towel and, stooping down, she washed his bruised, cut feet. Then she tore a rag into strips and bathed his wounds with olive oil. Finally, she laid him on one sheepskin with his little sister and covered them warmly with another. He fell asleep at once, grateful and unafraid, and she went and sat very still on her doorstep, her hands folded, looking out into the dusk.

### **Chapter 7 Hamid Completes His Mission**

Twenty-four hours later, Hamid found himself gazing up at the walls of the city he had come so far to find. Now he felt more strange and lost than he had ever felt before in his life.

He had had a very successful day. He had woken at dawn, cool and refreshed. The woman had fed them and blessed them and sent them out with her husband. At the bottom of the hill a truck, jammed tight with market-goers, had picked them up and rattled off down the valley. Hamid had never been in a truck before, and the noise and speed and jolting

thrilled him. The main road thrilled him, too, with its roaring traffic, and the two hours’ drive passed all too quickly. The road turned off to Wednesday Market, and he and Kinza were dropped about twenty-five kilometers from their destination.

He had walked all day, patiently plodding along in the heat, often sitting down to rest. At one point, he decided to stop and wash out Kinza’s little dress in the river since he thought that nobody was going to be really pleased to see her unless she was a little bit cleaner. When she was redressed, he decided she looked fit for a palace.

He had climbed a long, long hill, stopping to pick wildflowers along the way for Kinza to present to her new mother. At last he rounded a bend in the road, and just ahead of him was the old city wall and the town inside, in the shadow of the bare, jagged mountains.

Hamid stood in the cool of the shadow of the gate and watched for a while. He did not think he would have to ask the way if he could find the market, for his mother had described the house exactly, and he was afraid to speak to anyone. He thought he would wait until nighttime before making his way along those narrow, crowded, cobbled streets. It would be easier to slip along in the dark. But as dusk deepened he saw the shopkeepers on each side of the streets turn on the lights, and everyone walked past in the full glare of them. Apparently in this terrifying place there was no darkness and no hiding. The sooner he could safely get Kinza settled, the better.

He set off timidly along the cobbles, marveling at the beautiful things displayed in the shops—the bright silks, piles of fruit, and stacks of bread. It seemed to him like fairyland, and he gazed, bright-eyed and fascinated, at all this beauty—a magic town where everything glittered and dazzled. He forgot that he had felt lonely and afraid, and gazed up eagerly into the

faces of the shopkeepers and passersby. But no one smiled at him or looked kindly at him, and no one welcomed him to the golden city.

He crept along until he came to a splashing fountain where a little girl was filling buckets. She at least looked like a kind little girl, and very shyly he asked her the way to the inn above the market. She pointed him in the right direction.

It was not far. The old archway leading into the inn courtyard stood back from the street. Weary mules and donkeys were passing in, and travelers stood in groups looking out on the market. Hamid longed to go and rest on the straw with the donkeys, but he had no coin to pay for such shelter, and anyway, he felt his business had better be done that night.

He thought the house of the nurse would not be difficult to find, and he set off confidently. The street curved and he stopped. He could see the end now, and the rubbish tip beyond, and what he saw filled him with surprise.

There was a dim streetlamp outside the last house on the left, and under it he could see a group of little boys, dirty and ragged like himself, standing as if they were waiting for something to happen. As Hamid watched, the door was opened from the inside, and a beam of bright light shone out onto the cobbles. The children surged forward, tumbling over each other, and disappeared through the golden doorway. Then he heard other footsteps behind him, and three more little boys in black tatters rushed past him on swift, bare feet. They too went in. Then, as Hamid stood still in the shadows, he heard the sound of singing, and he thought he had never heard anything so beautiful.

Lured by the music, he crept closer, skulking along the wall, and at last he reached the top of the step and dared to peep in. Then he gasped with joy and excitement, for he was looking across a passageway into another room, and hanging on the wall of that room exactly opposite the doorway was the picture of the man who loved little children, carrying in His arms a curly-haired baby just about Kinza's age. Boys and girls were crowding around Him, holding out their arms, and He smiled down on them and did not seem to want them to go away. Hamid remembered the hard faces of the shopkeepers—this man was unlike any of them. He would certainly welcome Kinza just as He was welcoming the crowd of happy children in the picture.

But who were all those ragged little boys? And why did they go in? And what were they singing about? He could not see them, for they all gathered at one end of the room, but he could hear a woman's voice. As he listened, crouching on the step, straining to catch the words, the children began to chant something altogether, as though they were learning it by heart, just as they did in the mosque schools when they learned the Koran.

"Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'"\*

What could it mean?

Three times they repeated the verse, and Hamid whispered the words with them and tucked them away in his memory to think about afterward. The immediate problem now was, what to do about Kinza?

If all these children belonged to the nurse, she would certainly not want another. No little girls had gone into the house, so perhaps the English,

like his own people, on the whole preferred boys. Kinza's chances seemed very small if he knocked on the door and presented her as a gift. He must think of a better way than that.

Then he thought of a plan that he was certain would work because his mother had said that the saint in the picture had never been known to turn a child away. He would simply leave Kinza in the passage, like a surprise parcel, to explain herself as best she could. If this nurse was really like her saint, she would not throw such a tiny, helpless, homeless creature into the street on a dark night.

He skipped across the orange beam of light and sat down on the rubbish heap. He shook Kinza until she was thoroughly wide awake and then spoke to her very solemnly.

"Kinza, little sister," he said, "I am going to sit you down by yourself, and you must keep very still and not cry. If you cry, a lady will beat you hard. If you don't cry, she will soon come and give you a nice sweet."

Now Kinza understood this perfectly. She knew all about being hit if she did not keep still, and she seldom got what she wanted by crying. Also, she was very hungry. So she let Hamid soothe and pat her and then, placing the withered bunch of flowers in her hand, he crept off the rubbish heap. He pushed the door open a little way, lifted Kinza over the step, and sat her down in the dark passage.

Hamid suddenly felt his throat tighten and his eyes fill with tears. Kinza would never be his own again, and he realized how much he loved her. As a sign of his love, he took out his last dry crust from the cloth and thrust it into her hand. Then he left her sitting cross-legged against the wall, very tousled and very crumpled, clasping a bunch of dead poppies and an old crust, for the surprise and delight of the missionary lady.

But through the blur of his tears he had caught sight once again of the face of the man in the picture, and He seemed to be smiling straight at Kinza. Hamid felt comforted. Then, crouching against the wall of a little alley leading off the street, he tried to remember the words he had heard three times over: "Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world ... instead of darkness you can have the light of life.'" It was something like that, and whatever could it mean?

What was the light of the world? He thought of the lamp burning in his hut at home and the flickering shadows on the wall. He remembered the moonlit journey, and the circling stars, and the sunrise on top of the mountain. Moonlight, starlight, sunlight, candlelight, and the orange glare of the city street—they had all faded now. He was sitting alone in a very dark alley, and the moon had not yet risen behind the wall of rock. But Jesus said that instead of darkness you can have the light of life. "I am the light of the world." He thought of Kinza, always living in darkness—could this light, which he had never seen, ever reach her? What did it all mean? If only it weren't so dark ... if only he wasn't so hungry ... if only he could have kept Kinza ... if only he could run home to his mother.

He stopped short in his thoughts and leaned forward eagerly. A crowd of boys came hurrying down the street, and at the corner they turned and waved. They were talking excitedly, all at once, so Hamid could not hear very well what they said, but he caught odd words: "Who is she?"—"Such a little girl!"—"Where is her mother?" Then the boys passed out of sight, and the street was left in silence.

Then, because he was longing to know what had happened, he tiptoed out of his alley and prowled back to the rubbish heap. The door through which he had placed Kinza was fast shut, and no sound came from inside. What had happened? There was a light in an upper window, and Hamid

crossed the street and stood with his back pressed against the wall of the house opposite, gazing upward. As he stood there looking, there passed across the lighted window the figure of a woman nestling a little child in her arms, and the child showed no sign of fear. She neither struggled nor cried. She lay at peace with one little hand uplifted to feel the face bowed over her.

Hamid had successfully completed his mission. All was well with Kinza. Not knowing where else to go, he slunk back to the rubbish heap, and covering himself as best he could with his rags, he curled up against the wall to sleep, with his head resting on his arm.

\* John 8:12.

### **Chapter 8 Doughnuts and Street Boys**

Hamid woke early the next morning, stiff and cold, and blamed himself for wanting to sleep so near the house. Yet somehow it comforted him to know that Kinza was close to him. He wondered whether she had woken yet and what she was doing. He wandered along the street and out into the deserted market, wondering what to do, where to go, and, above all, where his breakfast would come from. He was sure that Kinza was eating well, and he rather regretted having given her that last crust.

It looked like a golden city no longer. The shops were shuttered, and a few homeless beggars lay up against the temple steps, still fast asleep. Now that his mission was completed, Hamid felt horribly flat and tired, and he stood in the middle of the market longing for home.

Then he heard a familiar sound—the harsh rattle of a stork’s cry and the rush of great wings as they swooped over him, just as they used to do when he was with his goats on his own mountain. He looked up quickly and saw it flying up high to its nest in the turret of an old fort. He stared

at the massive old walls and found that he was standing opposite an old gate in an archway leading into a garden.

The gate was wide open and there seemed to be no one to stop him. Hamid trotted across the cobbles, climbed the steps, and tiptoed through. He found himself standing in the most beautiful garden he had ever seen in his life. It was square in shape, and in the middle was a fountain surrounded by green lawns and colorful flower beds. But while he was enjoying it all, a keeper came through the archway and ordered him out.

The town was beginning to wake up now, and Hamid found himself standing with his back to a little stall where a man was frying doughnuts in a deep stone trough of oil. He was obviously busy, having to do everything himself, and this had put him in a bad temper, for he was muttering and growling to himself.

Hamid suddenly had an idea. Drawing as near as he could to that delicious smell, and being desperate with hunger, he boldly walked up to the man and asked him if he needed an assistant.

The man looked him up and down. His usual boy had not turned up that morning, and Sillam, the doughnut-maker, was prepared to accept help from the first boy who came along. He opened the wooden barrier and beckoned Hamid inside. Sillam did not recognize the boy and did not know whether or not he was a thief.

“Take the bellows,” he said, “and blow up this fire, and if I find you helping yourself to anything that doesn’t belong to you, the police station is across the street!”

Hamid squatted down and began to blow. He did not feel very well; it was very hot, and the leaping flames scorched his face. Many little boys

before him had been unable to stand the heat. At last he heard his master's voice say, "Enough," and he staggered to his feet, dizzy and flushed.

"Now stand there and thread the doughnuts onto the blades of grass," said Sillam. Hamid worked quickly enough, burning his fingers a little, but not minding much because he was too hungry to think about anything else except the pains inside his stomach. But he did notice that quite a crowd of tattered, grimy little boys were watching him closely. He realized that somehow, before long, he would have to say who he was.

He had worked for about two hours when the master suddenly said, "Have you had any breakfast?"

"No," said Hamid, "and no supper last night, either."

Sillam handed him a couple of hot, golden doughnuts. With a sigh of relief, Hamid bit into the first one. It was wonderful. But the dark eyes of the little boys watching him suddenly became hostile. They were hungry, too, and this stranger was taking a job they wanted.

Doughnuts were a breakfast food, and the shop shut at midmorning. The master told Hamid he had worked well and could return early the next day. Then he gave him a small coin, and Hamid, feeling like a king, strutted across the market to decide how to spend it. He noticed a pile of sticky green sweets and longed to buy one for Kinza. But Kinza probably no longer needed green sweets. Perhaps she had forgotten all about him already. He suddenly felt sad, and decided to stop thinking about it and turn his attention to the baker's shop.

A voice at his side suddenly said, "Who are you?" He turned to see a little boy about his own age, with a shaved, spotted head, dressed in a dirty

white gown. A strange little figure, but his dark eyes were bright and intelligent, and he looked at Hamid in quite a friendly way.

Hamid faced him shyly. "I'm from the country," he replied.

"Why have you come to town?"

"To find work."

"Where are your mother and father?"

"Dead."

"Where do you live?"

"In the street."

The little boy, whose name was Ayashi, nodded approvingly. "I too," he said cheerfully, "have no mother, and my father has gone to the mountains. I too live in the streets. We all do. Now, buy us a loaf of bread with the money the master gave you, and give us each a piece. Then you shall be one of us and we will show you where we go for supper at night."

His confident voice and cheerful acceptance of his homelessness fascinated Hamid. "You shall be one of us" were wonderful words. Hamid bought his loaf quickly and spent the change on a handful of black, bitter olives. Then he followed his new friend to the eucalyptus tree in the middle of the square, where the gang squatted in the shade. He handed over the food to be divided up, and they fell upon it eagerly.

Hamid, with his portion, sat a little apart through shyness, but although no one said thank you, the gift had done its work. From that day onward he was truly one of them.

It was a strange gang that he joined that day—they were all dirty, ignorant, and poor, dressed in rags and tatters; children who had never

been loved. Tough and hardy they were, crafty and quick through living by their wits. Thieving, lying, and swearing were regular habits, yet they made the most of their pleasures. Hamid, watching silently, felt proud to be sitting among them. He had never met boys like these, and he thought they were wonderful—so tough and manly, easygoing and independent. He longed to become like them, and he wriggled nearer.

He realized that they earned their livings in lots of different ways. Some worked on looms certain days a week, and others, like himself, helped in the doughnut shops. They all begged in between and hung around the hotel on the off chance of carrying a bag for a tourist or washing a car. Some slept with their families at night in hovels they called home, while others crept into the mosques. Life was uncertain and exciting, and there seemed only one sure thing in the day—and that was their supper at the home of the English nurse.

Now they were all discussing the extraordinary things that had happened the night before. None of them had ever seen the strange little girl before, they said. No one knew where she came from. She held up her arms to the English nurse and called for her mother, but she would not say anything else. So the nurse had picked her up and taken her in, and today she was going to look for the baby's parents.

"And what if she doesn't find them?" asked one little boy. "Will she put her out in the street?"

Ayashi looked up quickly. "She will not," he replied with complete confidence.

"How do you know? Why not? It is not her child!" exclaimed the other children all together.

"Because," answered Ayashi simply, "she has a clean heart."

## Chapter 9 Supper at the Nurse's Home

The rest of the day passed pleasantly. Ayashi, pleased by Hamid's admiration, took him around the town and up onto the hillside to show him the spring of water welling up from the heart of the mountain. It never failed and kept the city supplied and the fields around it fresh and green.

At midday they hung around the door of the hotel. After a time, a waiter flung them some broken rolls and meat that guests had left on their plates, and the boys fell upon the food like hungry dogs. Then they curled themselves against the trunk of the eucalyptus tree and slept in the shade.

Evening came, and Hamid stuck close to Ayashi. They sat on some steps together with a few friends, watching the country people crowding into the square. Tomorrow was market day, and those who had come from a distance would spread out their sacks against the wall and sleep beside their wares. As darkness fell, the shopkeepers lit their lamps again, and other little boys sauntered up from their various jobs and collected on the steps.

"Come," said Ayashi, who seemed to be a sort of leader among them. "She will soon open her door now."

He beckoned Hamid to follow him, but Hamid hesitated. He felt torn in two. Hunger and his great longing to see whether all was well with his little sister urged him on, but caution held him back. What if he should be forced to speak while Kinza was there? She would certainly recognize his voice and run to him, and then everyone would be suspicious.

"Come on," called Ayashi impatiently, looking back.

Hamid shook his head. "I'm not coming," he replied, and sat down again on the steps with his head in his hands, staring gloomily into the market. Then he got up suddenly, for he had had an idea. He would not go in, but he would creep to the door of the house, as he had done the night before, and peep through a crack. Perhaps he would catch a glimpse of Kinza.

Like some guilty little thief, he darted into the quiet back street and sneaked along the wall toward the open door.

He peered around very cautiously, but there was no sign or sound of her—only the murmuring of voices, and then the shrill noise of the little boys singing. Kinza was apparently nowhere about, and he was standing in a very dangerous position. He shuffled onto the rubbish heap and began to cry quietly because his friends and his little sister were all inside the house where there was shelter and light and food—and he was left outside.

And then something happened. The door opened a little farther, and the nurse stepped out into the street to see if any more boys were coming before she started the lesson. She appeared silently, and Hamid did not see her at first. But she heard a wretched, sniffing sound close by and, looking around, she spotted him on the rubbish heap.

Hamid jumped up, frightened, but she stood between him and freedom and he could not escape, so he rubbed away his tears and crouched, staring up at her. He had never seen anyone like her before.

"Why don't you come in?" she asked.

Attracted by a sense of welcome, he got up and walked slowly toward her. She waited quite still, afraid of startling him. Then, when he was

close to her, she held out her hand. He took it and stepped trustfully through the doorway with her.

They entered the lighted room together, and Hamid took a good look around. It was a long white-washed room with a rush mat on the floor and mattresses against the wall. At one end the boys sat cross-legged in a semicircle. On the wall opposite the door was the picture of the saint smiling down on them, just as He had smiled down on Kinza.

"Come," said the nurse, "sit down with the others. I'm going to show you something."

Ayashi grinned at him delightedly, and Hamid wormed his way into the semicircle and sat beside him. The boys looked younger here somehow, not like men of the world anymore.

The nurse sat down on the mattress in front of them and showed them a little Book. It was quite unlike the Koran, which was the only book Hamid had ever seen inside. None of the boys could read at all, anyway.

The nurse explained how God lived in a place like a bright golden city—heaven—where there were only good things and happiness.

I'd like to go there, thought Hamid. It would be even better than our village—no fear, no quarreling, no blindness.

But while he was thinking about this wonderful place, the nurse told them that because of the bad things people do wrong, God cannot let them into the city. The gate is shut to wrongdoers. Hamid had never worried about doing wrong before—in fact, he had never even thought about what wrong was. Of course he stole if he got the chance, and naturally he told lies if they would save him from a beating—why shouldn't he?

Then the nurse went on to tell them a strange story. Apparently, God's Son, whose name was Jesus, had left this wonderful city and come down into the world to live with the people He loved. At the end, He had died on a cross, as a punishment for all the wrong things everybody had ever done. He had done nothing wrong Himself and didn't deserve to die, but because He loved people so much, He wanted them to be able to go and live in His home— heaven—with Him. He had died in place of everyone else—even bad, lying, thieving little boys like Hamid and the rest of the gang. All they had to do was say they were sorry and ask Jesus to forgive them.

Then the nurse stopped talking and brought in two great bowls of steaming rice and handed around hunks of bread. The children divided up into two groups and huddled over their supper, scooping up the food at an amazing pace, then polishing the bowls with their dirty little fingers. No one spoke much until the last lick and crumb had vanished because they were racing each other to get the most. When every bit was gone, they sat back on their heels and questioned the nurse about the little girl whom they had found in the passage the night before.

"She is still with me," she said, smiling a little. "She is, at this moment, asleep in bed."

Hamid looked at her hard. She did not seem to be annoyed at Kinza still being with her.

"I took her all around the town with me today," went on the nurse, "but nobody has ever seen her before, or knows who her parents are. She is a little blind girl, so I suppose no one wants her."

"And what will you do with her?" asked the boys all together.

"Well, I shall have to keep her for the moment; there's nothing else to be done." This time she laughed outright, and Hamid nearly laughed, too, with joy and relief. He had a wild, reckless longing to see his little sister asleep in bed, and he was no longer afraid. He waited until the little boys had bowed and shaken hands with their hostess and skipped off into the dark. Then she turned and found him lingering in the passage. His heart was beating violently, but he spoke steadily and boldly.

"I come from a village," he said, "and in my village there are two or three blind baby girls whose parents come into the market. Let me see her, and perhaps I can tell you who her mother is."

The nurse looked down at him, surprised. She had certainly never seen this little boy before, and he might be speaking the truth. She had watched him since he had entered her house and noticed his thin, tired face and his bruised feet—also the ravenous way he had fallen on his food. She guessed he had traveled a long way and was glad to shelter him, so she led him to a room upstairs, where Kinza lay on a mattress, fast asleep.

She looked different because she had had a bath and had come out quite another color. Also her hair had been washed and cut, and instead of her tangles she had soft, dark curls falling over her forehead. Her old dress had been changed for a little white nightdress, spotlessly clean. Hamid gazed at her, fascinated, for a while, and then looked around the room. It was brightly lit and furnished simply, but there were pretty covers on the mattresses, books on the shelves, and pictures on the walls. He longed to stay with her but knew it was not possible.

"I do not know her," he said gravely. "She is not one of the children from our village."



He followed the nurse downstairs in silence, and she came to the door and let him out. He stepped into the street, looked up into her face, and took hold of the hand that had been so kind to Kinza.

“You are good,” he said simply. “Your food is good; your teaching is good; your heart is good. May God have mercy on your ancestors!”

Then he bounded away down the street and disappeared into the darkness.

### **Chapter 10 Hamid Learns a Lesson for Life**

Hamid kept his job at the doughnut shop. He worked hard, and his master was usually quite kind to him, giving him his breakfast and his coin regularly. The coin he spent on lunch, and the nurse provided him with his supper. He slept with Ayashi just inside the mosque, and as long as the sun shone and the weather kept warm, he was happy. There was always plenty to do. The boys helped with the harvesting and picked olives. On hot days they went bathing in the rocky stream that flowed from the spring in the mountain and washed all their dirt away.

Five days a week, they went to the house of the English nurse. Hamid knew many stories about Jesus now. He knew that He was not a saint at all, but the Son of God who had come down into this world. He knew that the lame and the blind had come to Jesus, and He had healed them. Hamid wished that he also had lived then, for he would have carried Kinza to Him, and her eyes would have been opened. He knew that Jesus had died with His arms stretched out in welcome on a cross, and He had been placed in a rock tomb. He had come to life again and left the tomb. Then He had been seen in a beautiful garden.

He knew, too, that Jesus had gone back to heaven, the City of Light, and was still alive, and that the living Spirit of Jesus was willing to come into the hearts of people to make them good.

Summer turned into autumn, and the nights became colder and longer. There were no more tourists in the hotel now, so there were no cars to watch and no luggage to carry. The boys often begged for money or scraps at rich people’s houses. Life became hard and uncertain. The only comfort that could really be depended on was supper at the house of the English nurse.

She lit a charcoal fire for them these nights and let them in early. They would troop across her hall, leaving a trail of black footprints on the tiles, their rags dripping. Then they would huddle around the glowing coals to warm their blue fingers, and gradually their teeth would stop chattering.

Clothes were a great problem. The wind and rain pierced and rotted their rags, and Hamid wondered just how much longer his flimsy summer gown would hold together. He did not know what he would do when it finally fell to pieces. Some of his friends had begged or stolen sacks, but Hamid had not been so lucky.

Kinza, on the other hand, had no clothes problem. She always went shopping with the English nurse, and Hamid often saw her waddling across the market on legs that had grown amazingly fat and sturdy during the past two months. Over her clean gown she wore a red woolly jersey and a little brown cloak. She had rubber shoes on her feet and a woolly hood over her dark curls. She looked the picture of health and happiness, and Hamid, edging up as close as possible, felt very proud of her.

The rain was pouring down one night when the children splashed their way up the cobbles and hammered on the door of their refuge. They shook themselves on the step like wet little dogs and surged forward

toward the fire, puffing and blowing and sniffing. The English nurse felt especially sorry for them, for she thought she had never seen them look so wretched and sad. Yet they lifted their merry, cheeky faces to her and their dark eyes were still bright. She marveled at their courage.

But there was one well-known little figure missing, and this was the second night he had not turned up—an undersized shrimp of a boy who had come regularly for months.

“Where is Abd-el-Khader?” the nurse asked.

“He can’t come,” replied one child in a careless voice. “His rags fell right to pieces, and he hasn’t a father. He has nothing to wear at all, and he must stay at home till his mother can save enough to buy a sugar sack.”

No one seemed to care or seemed surprised, and the evening passed as usual. But when supper was finished the nurse turned to Hamid, who always lingered to the last. “Do you know where Abd-el-Khader lives?” she asked.

Hamid nodded. “Up at the top of the town by the prickly-pear hedges,” he replied, “but the path is like a muddy river. You could not go there tonight.”

“I think I could,” said the nurse, “and if you would like to earn a little money, you can take me there.”

Hamid nodded enthusiastically. He liked Abd-el-Khader. He waited at the bottom of the stairs while the nurse went upstairs to sort out some old clothes, and while he waited, his bright eyes roamed around the house. He had never been left alone before, and he found it very interesting. He poked his nose into the room on the left and found himself in a little kitchen. On one shelf stood a china bowl of eggs, just low enough for him to help himself.

Hamid hesitated. He could not count, but perhaps the nurse could and would notice if he took two. On the other hand, raw eggs sucked through a little hole in the top were delicious, and Hamid had not tasted one for a long time. He decided it was worth the risk. If he waited outside the door, the nurse would never see in the darkness. Even if she noticed later, she would not be able to prove it was him.

So he took an egg in each hand, slipped out into the street, and stood waiting in the dark. Soon the nurse appeared with a bundle and a key, and, what Hamid had not bargained for, a powerful flashlight.

“Come along,” said the nurse, turning on her flashlight. “Walk with me and we can both walk in the light.”

But to the nurse’s surprise, Hamid did not wish to walk in the light. He seemed to be taking great care to keep out of the the beam, slinking along the gutters, shuffling against the wall. It was very dark and very muddy, and once or twice he slipped, clutching his precious eggs tightly in both hands.

“Why won’t you walk with me in the middle of the road?” asked the nurse, puzzled. “You will fall if you run along in the gutter like that.”

“I’m all right,” muttered Hamid rather miserably. He was not enjoying himself at all. He was so afraid of that broad beam of light, and the eggs somehow did not seem worth it. He wished he could get rid of them, and yet at the same time he wanted to hold on to them.

It was pitch black away from the light, and when they started climbing the steep back alleys Hamid could not see where he was going at all. Suddenly his foot caught on an unexpected step, and he fell headlong on his face. He gave a sharp cry of shock and pain, and the nurse, who was a little ahead, turned around quickly and shone the light full onto him.

She saw him struggle to his feet, his gown covered with black mud and yellow egg yolk. She saw his hands clasping the smashed shells and his grazed knees streaming with blood, and she understood at once what had happened. He would have scuttled away from her, but she took hold of him quickly, and he burst into frightened tears. He had no idea what she would do. She might fetch the police and put him in prison, or she might beat him in the street. Whatever she did or did not do, he felt sure she would never have him in her house again. Never again would he enter that place of warmth and light. He would be shut out, and it was all his own fault.

Then through his sobs he heard the voice of the nurse speaking quietly to him. "Come along," she said. "You've cut your knees badly. We'll go home and bandage them up, and then you can show me the way again afterward." She kept tight hold of him, and they walked home in silence, except for Hamid's sniffs. When they got there, she locked the door on the inside.

Still silent and ashamed, Hamid washed his hands under the tap, and then the nurse sat him down and bathed his black knees till the cuts and grazes were quite clean. She put ointment and bandages on them, then she took a good look at him. He sat slumped in a sorry little heap covered with mud and raw egg. The only clean parts about him were the little tracks on his cheeks made by his tears.

Still without speaking, she went upstairs where she kept a bundle of old clothes, and she came back with a clean shirt and a grey woolly sweater that had been mended many times. Then she fetched more warm water and soap and scrubbed him clean. Next she dressed him in his new clothes and sat down beside him.

He looked up at her, marveling, for it was his very first experience of someone returning good for evil, and he could not understand it. Instead

of prison and a beating, he had been given medicine and clean, beautiful clothes.

"Hamid," said the nurse beside him, "you fell over and hurt yourself because you would not walk in the light with me. You were afraid to walk in the light because you had stolen my eggs."

There was no answer.

"You don't deserve ever to come here again," went on the nurse, "but they were my eggs and I paid for them, so I'm going to forgive you—only you must promise never to steal anything out of my house again."

Hamid nodded.

"And remember," said the nurse, speaking very slowly, "you could not walk in the light with me because of what you had done wrong. Jesus says He is the Light of the World. You must ask Him to forgive you for what you did tonight and then you must walk beside Him in His light every day until you get to heaven. He will make you feel clean inside, just as I made you feel clean outside when I washed away the mud and egg."

Hamid looked down at his clean clothes and bandages, and understood. His eggs, which had seemed so precious, were gone, but he did not want them anymore. He had been forgiven and washed and made clean. He had been brought back into the warmth and shelter of the nurse's home. They were going out again into the dark to find Abd-el-Khader's house, but it would be quite different now. He would walk close beside the nurse. He would not stumble, and he would not be afraid of the light any longer, because he no longer had anything to hide. They would walk guided by the flashlight's bright, steady beam. It would be a treat.

Half an hour later, having finished their task, they returned to the house. The wind roared against the rocks behind the town, and the rain beat up the streets in cold gusts. Hamid said good-bye on the step.

“But where are you going to sleep?” asked the nurse doubtfully.

“In the mosque,” answered the little boy.

“Have you any blankets there?”

“No.”

“Isn’t it very cold?”

“Tonight I shall be warm in my new sweater.”

“Well, you can come in tonight and sleep on the floor. The fire is still burning.”

So she left him lying comfortably on the mat, covered with a blanket, staring into the glow of the dying charcoal and thinking over the events of the evening. He had learned something that night that he would never forget all his life. Sitting up suddenly, he held out his hands and whispered the words of a simple hymn he had learned by heart, asking God to give him a clean heart, forgive the bad things he had done, and lead him to heaven.

## **Chapter 11 Christmas**

Hamid and Ayashi crept shivering from the mosque one morning to find the olive groves and mountains above the town white with snow. The winter season had come to stay.

One week was particularly cold and bleak, and on a night of drizzling rain, the children arrived at the door as usual and knocked impatiently, for the wind seemed to be cutting them in two and their sodden, fluttering rags

clung to their bodies. The door was opened at once, and they tumbled over the threshold, eager to reach the warmth of the fireside. But once inside the passage they stopped suddenly and stared, the cold and the rain forgotten.

For instead of the bright glare of the electric light, they found themselves facing the soft blaze of candles set in a circle on a little table in the middle of the room, with olive branches wreathed around them. On the floor, arranged like a picnic on a colored cloth, a feast was spread. There were nuts, almonds, raisins, sweets, oranges, bananas, sugar biscuits, and honey cakes; and on a tray in the corner was a shining teapot and a collection of little glasses. A kettle sang merrily on the glowing charcoal, and the room seemed warm and welcoming. Even Kinza had stayed up for the feast. She sat on a cushion, holding a big red-and-white rubber ball, her face lifted expectantly.

“It’s the feast of the Christians today,” explained the nurse to the wide-eyed little boys, “so I thought we would celebrate it together. It is the feast of the birth of Jesus Christ. He was the greatest gift God ever gave, so at His feast we all give presents to each other. That is why Kinza has a rubber ball, and I’ve bought you all sweets and oranges and bananas.”

The children sat down to their feast, shyly at first because of the strangeness of it all. But gradually their tongues loosened, their toes and fingers thawed, and their cheeks flushed. They talked and ate merrily, tucking away their fruit and sweets in their rags to eat later, and sipping glass after glass of hot, sweet mint tea.

Hamid could not take his eyes off Kinza. She was dressed in her very best blue frock, and her curls were brushed out like a halo. How round and sturdy she had grown! He suddenly remembered the white-faced, ragged little sister of past winters, the mud in the village, and the poverty and wretchedness. All that seemed shut out now; they seemed to be cut off

from the bleak world outside, sitting in a warm, kind circle of candlelight. The children were talking about feasts in general, and he began to talk too. He told them about the sheep feast in his own village. The nurse, watching his eager face, felt glad. He, too, had changed—since the night he took the eggs. He was no longer a shy, fearful little stranger but took his place confidently every night. She sat watching him, longing to know what had happened in his child heart, until her attention was suddenly taken by something that was happening beside her.

Kinza had risen to her feet, and there was a look on her face the nurse had never seen before, as if she had remembered something—some dearly loved sound. Groping forward uncertainly, feeling her way with touch and hearing, she moved toward the speaker and stood beside him, wondering what to do.

At any other time, Hamid would have been frightened at his secret being discovered and would probably have pushed Kinza away. But there was an atmosphere in the room that night that took away fear and suspicion, and Hamid, forgetting everyone else, put his arm around his little sister and drew her to him. She nestled up to him, remembering the voice she loved, and laid her shining head comfortably against his wet rags.

And the nurse, watching in amazement, suddenly noticed how alike they were. Little memories flashed into her mind. The two children had arrived at the same time from nowhere. Hamid had asked to see Kinza asleep, and she had noticed how he secretly watched her in the street. She suddenly felt quite sure that they were brother and sister, but even if she was right, it would make no difference. Hamid was unlikely to tell his secret, and she certainly would not part with Kinza. She could only wonder what sad story had brought them to the city and be glad that they had been led to her door.

The other children stared too. She knows his voice, they thought wonderingly, and they glanced at each other with surprise. But they could not speak their thoughts in front of the nurse and soon forgot about it as they drank more glasses of mint tea. Then, when the feast was ended, the nurse asked them to turn around and look at a white sheet hung on the wall. She blew out the flickering candles, and pictures appeared on the sheet. The boys thought it was magic, and watched wide-eyed and openmouthed.

It started with a picture of a girl and a man knocking at the door of an inn, but they had to go away because there was no room. Hamid felt sorry for them because he, too, on his first night in town, had stood and gazed into the inn, longing for shelter. He had had no money, so he had slept on the rubbish heap. But the couple had gone into the stable, and the next picture showed them inside with the cattle. Then a wonderful thing had happened. She gave birth to a baby Son and wrapped Him in a cloth and laid Him in the manger. Hamid remembered how his mother had wrapped up Kinza, and she had slept in a wooden cradle. This baby was the child of very poor people, no doubt.

But what was the nurse saying? The baby in the manger was Jesus Christ, whose birth all Christians celebrated. He was God's great gift, and He had come willingly. The stable in the picture looked rather dark, lit only by one small lantern, but the home of the Son of God in heaven was bright with the light of glory and love. Why had He left it?

The nurse was telling them, "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor. He left the light and came into the dark, a homeless child, so He could lead people to the shelter and love of His Father, God."

And then there was a third picture. There were shepherds on the hillside, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Hamid thought of his own goats and the days he had spent with them on the mountain. Another picture appeared, of an angel appearing to the shepherds, who were afraid. “Fear not—unto you is born a Savior,” said the angel. The sheep grazed on contentedly—there was peace in heaven and goodwill on earth.

Then the last picture flashed on the screen. The shepherds were kneeling, barefoot, in their rough fleece coats, worshipping the King of heaven who had become a homeless child, lying in a manger among the cattle.

It was over. The nurse switched on the lights, and the pictures faded. There was nothing left of the feast except the burnt-out candles, sweets papers, orange peels, and banana skins. But the thought of a love that gave, and of a love that became poor, stayed with Hamid as he stepped thoughtfully out into the wet street. Kinza stood in the doorway, waving as they went, and as he passed he put out a shy hand and touched her hair.

The other boys had gone on ahead, but Hamid loitered, the pictures still bright in his head, not noticing the drizzling rain.

As he passed under a streetlamp, a sharp little mewling caught his ears. Looking down he saw a skeleton-like kitten, very small and wet, trying to shelter behind a drain pipe.

In his eleven years of life, he had seen many starving kittens dying in the street and had never given them two seconds’ thought. But tonight it was somehow different. He could not possibly have explained, but the first seeds of gentleness had been sown in his heart. He found to his surprise that he cared about the starving little creature, and he picked it up and held it against him. It was so thin that its skin seemed to be stretched tightly over its bones, and he could feel its heart beating rapidly.

What should he do with it? He had no doubts at all. There was one open door where it would certainly be welcome, and Kinza would probably love it. It would be his Christmas gift to her.

He pattered back over the cobbles and knocked at the nurse’s door. When she opened it, he held out the shivering, wretched creature with perfect confidence.

“It’s for Kinza,” he explained, “a gift of the feast. It is very hungry and cold, so I brought it to you.”

The nurse hesitated. The last thing she really wanted just then was a half-dead ginger kitten, covered with sores and fleas, but she could not refuse, because she knew why he had given it. With a sigh of joy, she realized that her evening’s work had not been in vain. One little boy at least understood and entered into the spirit of Christmas. He had wanted to give, and he had been gentle and kind to an outcast kitten. It was the first time she had ever seen a local child care about the sufferings of an animal.

So she accepted it gratefully and joyfully, and then holding it at arm’s length she carried it to a box near the fire and sprinkled it all over with disinfectant powder. Then she gave it a saucer of milk, and it twitched its tail at a cheeky angle and lapped it up— a tough, brave little kitten that deserved to be saved!

As she sat watching it, a funny picture came into her mind that left her laughing. She imagined all the Christmas love gifts before the manger—the gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and perched on top of the glittering pile, precious in the eyes of the One to whom it was given, was a thin, flea-ridden, ginger kitten with its tail sticking up in the air—the sign of a little boy’s love and care.