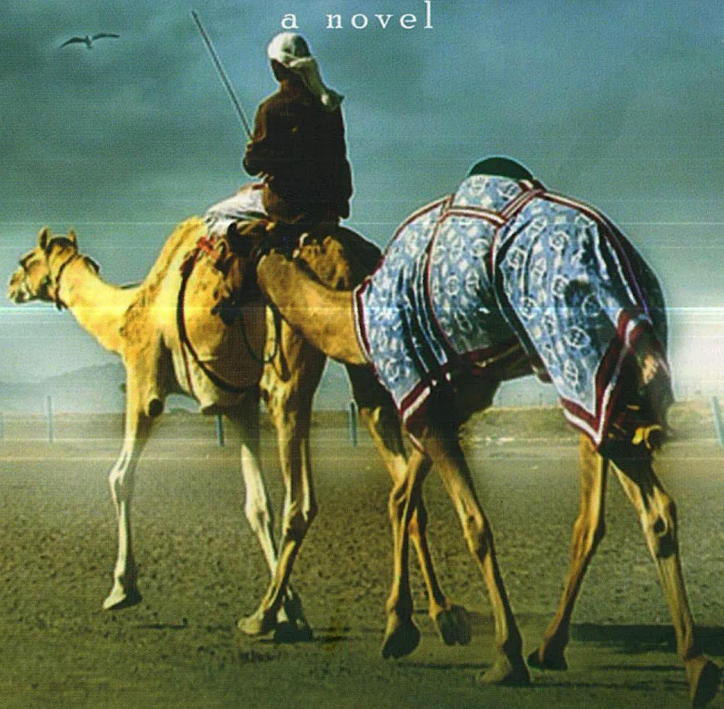


KAMAL ABDULLA

VALLEY
OF THE
SORCERERS

a novel



ian's
COLLECTION

VALLEY OF THE SORCERERS

(A novel)

Kamal Abdulla

Translated from Azerbaijani by
Anne Thompson



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Caravanbashi narrowed his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

half-buried, half-bare rock, known only to him, would he breathe freely.

There was a rule that whoever brought back some earnings would share them with everyone. It was impossible for a returning sorcerer not to share his earnings with the others; they shared their food and drink, their joys and sorrows, their travels; they talked together and kept silent together.

Every day every sorcerer would steal away to spend one or two hours alone behind rocks or occasionally thorny, bushy shrubs, tall as trees, known only to them. This was known as the time of solitude. It was a sacred time for them; no sorcerer dared approach another at this time, to do so was prohibited, forbidden. What the sorcerer did or did not do during this time, he alone knew. He would talk to himself in a language that no-one else knew, he would ask himself questions and answer them too. It was impossible to know the language.

But once one of the sorcerers, who had been taken to the city by a god-fearing merchant to cast a spell on his neighbour for heaping a thousand and one troubles on his head, in the heat of the moment revealed the secret of this time of solitude. During this time every sorcerer stripped himself of his magic. He would be left weak and defenceless as a child. They entrusted their magic to someone or something. When they emerged from this time of solitude, whatever had happened would be forgotten.

This god-fearing merchant was later tempted by the gold and silver he had paid to the sorcerer, who revealed to him the secret; he regretted the loss of the money and decided to spy on the sorcerer. When the time of solitude

came, he would follow him and get the money back. He began to spy on the sorcerer. When the hour came, the sorcerer entered the time of solitude. He covered his eyes with his hands, standing ramrod straight behind his usual rocks, paying heed to nothing. The merchant appeared at this moment. Without saying a word he began to search the sorcerer's garments, rummaging through his pockets. The frail sorcerer could not stop him. The man found the money he had given, he saw the gold wrapped in a blue rag, recognized it, the gold was all there, he took it and crammed it into his pockets, taking to his heels away from the area of solitude and although he shouldn't have done it, the merchant couldn't resist turning back to look at the sorcerer's face. His eyes closed, an offended smile on his lips, the sorcerer said: 'Go, but I do not consider this money honestly earned, it is not halal.'

The man paid no heed to these words. He scurried up to the road leading out of the valley to the city and set out breathlessly for home. It was the same road and the city stood in its place. It's hard to believe that to this day that desperate man is walking along the treacherous road, walking and walking but for many years the road has not let him go. He walks round and round the Invisible Mountain and somehow ends up close to Snake Pass again at the head of the Valley of the Sorcerers. People followed him but could not understand how this man who knew the road could get so lost, how he could keep walking and walking and then disappear from view, how he could end up behind the person following him. Mystery of mysteries.

There are those who tell quite a different story. They say that the god-fearing merchant has become an old man,

has been earning his livelihood in his home town and continues to do so to this day. The god-fearing merchant never came to these parts, never took a sorcerer from the foot of the Invisible Mountain, his ignoble neighbours are in rude health, hale and hearty, living in their own homes. God's mystery? Of course, God's mystery!

Khaja Ibrahim Agha and the Caravanbashi had good reason to be anxious as they headed into the Valley of the Sorcerers – they planned to choose a sorcerer to take away with them. They were not looking for a run-of-the-mill sorcerer. It was important that he had more than a special talent for sorcery and magic. Insh^h Allah, fate willed that the Caravanbashi would at last fulfil an ancient mystery, a plan, long cherished in his heart. Khaja Ibrahim Agha shared his beloved Caravanbashi's great desire for the plan to come to fruition. With every passing day he saw the body of the Caravanbashi creak and groan from its tribulations, and suffered even more than him. In his ravaged heart he asked God to bring a rapid end to this suffering.

This was the Caravanbashi's secret wish: he wanted to summon the spirit of his father, Mammadqulu the Headsman, who many years ago had gone mad and left for a life in the wilds. He passed away, leaving no trace, no grave, and his son had never seen him properly. The Caravanbashi wanted to talk to him, to ask his father some questions. The wretched Caravanbashi needed a sorcerer to make his wish come true. Khaja Ibrahim Agha gave a confident pledge that they would definitely find a spirit-

summoning sorcerer in the valley and take him with them. If they did not, then the Caravanbashi's days would be even more torturous. Khaja Ibrahim Agha himself could not say when he fell into a restless sleep, pondering this.

Everything lay behind a tulle curtain; that's where things happened, if they happened at all. The Shah's faithful servant, the gleamingly moustachioed headsman Mammadqulu, never thought over his boldest moves, but with a nod in the direction of the Almighty plunged into action. He behaved in exactly the same way with this journey, thinking that it would be easy. Though he thought he had plenty of time left, he summoned all his strength in mind and body. If he whose every cell roared in motion was surprised by his sudden decision, he should have been more discouraged than anyone. What was this, you thought, you were transported, like a small child wandering off the path, or they took you from that path. You slept, you woke up suddenly, you rubbed your knee with your ever itchy hand, 'Enough' you said, 'I'm tired,' you said. You didn't want anything other than to live out your days in the little crooked house, in the crooked, cobbled street in that beautiful, light, city on the mountain top, in touching distance of the moon, a solitary cloud in the blue sky above. So he took his decision, but for some reason a strange anxiety plucked at his heart strings, pulling them taut, the unease started an ache in his heart, whatever it was this ache appeared afresh in his heart. When it began, his brain was drying out, as though he was hiding in multi-coloured mists, he grew numb as though he had forgotten everything, every memory, and

however hard he tried, whatever he did, he could not find the strength within him to remember anything or anyone, and this alone he knew indistinctly: if he could remember someone, something, this pain turning quietly into an ache, as though rocked in the embrace of the black clouds, the stupor in his head would immediately pass, it would. Whatever he did, he couldn't remember anything properly. To return to life from this terrible pain was a sweet dream for him. Look at the works of God, he needed it now more than ever that punishment from the heavens – he could find no other name for it, but punishment, only punishment, this torment could not be described as a prize, no, this punishment came down to him from the heavens like a bird settling alone on its native bough, this affection, this love, this meaninglessness, which he never believed in before, never admitted to his consciousness, because he had never encountered it, though he had heard a great deal about it, this love, he had not believed in as he had never encountered it, this love, this passion, really was sweet, oh God! Suffering.

Maybe this girl loved him so much out of fear, because those who are afraid of him have all involuntarily sworn their love, lavished him with sweet promises, but as soon as he lay with each of them, he saw the barbs deep in their eyes; whether from fear or revulsion, they wanted to throw him off like a blanket. Trying to understand this fear in each of them, he said to himself, 'No, this is not how it should be. If this is love, then I don't need it at all. The sooner it's over and this alien daughter of an alien man is out of my head, the better.' When he thought this, he could not finish what he was doing and, exhausted, would half-finish the

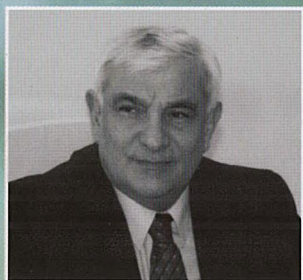
job, and suddenly rise from the girl, who was trembling from passion or fear, and start to get dressed, grumbling and swearing to himself. This is truly how it was, because Mammadqulu the Headsman hated people who were afraid of him.

Now, everything seemed different. This time there was no fear, this young bride didn't turn her gaze away from him, shamelessly she fixed her green eyes on him, not blinking her long lashes she looked steadily at him. Not a sliver of separation remained between them, there was not a sliver of doubt that they had joined not just their trembling bodies but their trembling souls. They both understood that whatever this was, whatever had happened up until this point was for them nothing but nonsense, vain chatter. Whatever happened afterwards belonged to the future. It was on one of these nights that Mammadqulu the Headsman came to his fateful decision. The first amongst the executioners, the magnificently moustachioed Mammadqulu was carried by the army from state to state, from city to city, nourished and cherished. Strapping, imposing, broad shouldered, as he approached his 50th year, he said to himself one day when he was feeling good, 'I am God's servant, that's who I am.' Without forethought, without further ado, Mammadqulu the Headsman took his unexpected decision on the instruction of his soul.

This was his decision. In the city on the mountain top, which is, therefore, closer to the heavens, the stars, the moon and the one and only God, he had forever to take

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. . .with a child's enthusiasm and a child's stubbornness they want to learn from them about the world, about the lands here, about life. The spirits of the dead, sometimes patient and restrained, sometimes impatient, tell them of what they know and of what they do not know, of what they have heard and of what they have not heard. They look with sadness and bitterness at these impatient spirits who listen to their words with great respect and desire, with unbounded interest and fervour, who long to learn from them and await their turn to come into this world.



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