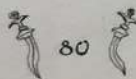


wasn't eaten by wild beasts, murdered by Signor Khan, or kidnapped by bandits, I would die of fever, for I did get a fever. But Signor Khan insisted we carry on, even though I had a raging temperature and thought I would die. Yet though he attended to me and probably saved my life with his care, Signor Khan was like a man driven by some other purpose, forcing us onwards day by day by day.

From Delhi we travel another fifteen days on the road heading for Lahore, from where we will make the ascent into Kashmir. The Musulman tells me that from there, we will climb up to the Khyber Pass and into Afghanistan. My father is a prisoner in an isolated fort near the borders of Kafirstan.

We reach the foothills and feel the first chill of the mountains.



One morning, I wake to find the bullocks and the carts gone. I didn't see or hear them go. Signor Khan says the bullock carts could go no further. Only our horsemen remain. We now have mountain ponies, all saddled and bridled, with panniers bulging with provisions.

Although the ponies look small and bony, they are hardy and sure-footed along these narrow mountain tracks, and not put off by crossing icy streams and terrifying rope bridges over rushing rivers, which hurtle down from their snowy sources. I am mounted on a small but wiry dark brown pony called Sultan. The ransom money is now strapped in saddlebags to a couple of ponies in tow with Signor Khan's horse.

It is only when we are trotting single file up a mountain track, that I glance at the rider behind me and realize I don't know him, though I have



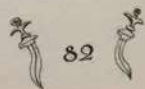
got to know most of my protectors during our many weeks in each other's company.

When the track broadens sufficiently, I ride on ahead and then, as casually as I can, drop back and back, until eventually I have scanned all their faces. I don't recognize any of them.

"I can't see Asaf Mohammed," I murmur in an off-hand way, pulling alongside Signor Khan. "And where are the emperor's guards?"

"We've taken on men who know the terrain better than the others. Don't worry about it. Asaf's probably among those who have stayed behind to wait for our return." He looks me in the eye as he says it, and I look steadfastly back. Once more, I feel in acute danger.

Now I am convinced I will be robbed – probably murdered – but when would it be? Where? Why not now, as we trail along lonely mountain paths,



with precipitous drops and furious rivers. What is Signor Khan's plan? I have no choice but to stay with him. Only he knows where my father is being held.

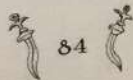
Winter has set in. It has begun to snow. I am thrilled and excited. I have never seen snow before. How strange that I should see it first in Asia and not in Europe. But I soon realize that its beauty is combined with its own stubborn, blinding, blocking, freezing force. We are held up a few days, and Signor Khan rages against our delay. I wonder why. I too am desperate to get on and find my father, yet I can see that there are days when the blizzards sweep across the valleys and we simply can't move on till the weather changes. When it does, we move on again, halt again and move on again, making small progress day



by day. Lofty highlands rise on either side of us. The scenery gets bleaker, browner, but somehow purer. There is a great beauty in the ice-blue skies, the terraced slopes of vines, nuts and fruit trees, and the slender turquoise domes and minarets we begin to glimpse on the distant skyline, as we cross the pass into Afghanistan.

I have been in Hindustan over three months now, so have at last picked up some Urdu; enough to understand from the talk among the guards that we are avoiding any towns. We bypass the capital, Kabul, and climb high into the surrounding mountains. Our pace quickens. Signor Khan seems nervous. He is short-tempered and shouts at the men to move more quickly. I notice he avoids my eye now and is constantly glancing about him.

One night, rolled up tightly in my buffalo-skin



bed beneath the stars, I am unable to sleep because of the cold and because of an unease I cannot shake off. I realize I am not the only one awake. Signor Khan is standing just a foot away from me. He is talking to someone who had arrived on horseback, though I can't hear what they say; can't hear what makes the Musulman give one agonized cry and lean against a rock with his head in his arms. I watch the stranger wheel his horse around and ride away. Signor Khan rocks to and fro, beating the rock with his fists, howling soundlessly. I watch with terror. I get to my feet. He hears me; turns with the swiftness of a cobra. I see his dagger glinting in his hand. Our eyes meet; his full of tears yet burning with fury and grief. He wants to kill. He could have killed me there and then.

"Why don't you?" I ask.



"Why don't I what?"

"Why don't you kill me?"

Signor Khan shakes his head violently. "Why don't I kill you?"

"You want the money don't you?" I don't flinch and my voice stays steady. "You wanted *The Ocean of the Moon*. I don't know why you didn't take it in the desert when you could have. Why didn't you?"

He stares through me, then drops his hand and re-sheathes his dagger. The tears hang like icicles on his ravaged cheeks. He glances around him as if afraid we might be overheard, then he drops to his haunches and rests his head between his arms. He waves me to come close. Hesitating and afraid of him, I sit on a rock just a little way off.

For a long time, he says nothing, then he speaks low and fast. "We are surrounded by spies, so be

on your guard. You see, I am as much a hostage as your father." His whisper is low but harsh. "The warlord Mir Baba sent me to collect the ransom but kept back my own son, whom he said he would kill if I didn't return within two years. It is a month over the two years agreed."

I groan with pity. He doesn't pause. "At first I admit it, I thought only of getting hold of *The Ocean of the Moon*. Your father told me of it during a fit of fever, when he thought he was dying. I never mentioned it again. I saw it as a way of making my fortune. It was worth far more than Mir Baba wanted for the ransom, but he was the pay of the Grand Vizier, both of them part of a conspiracy to make Prince Aurangzeb the next emperor, and they needed money. I offered to go to Venice and went to the Mogul court in Agra first to settle a deal with the Grand Vizier.

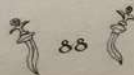
"The one lie I told you and your family was the amount needed for the ransom. I had to tell you it was thousands so that you would know there was no alternative but to give me *The Ocean of the Moon*."

"I always knew we couldn't trust you," I say bitterly.

"I implore your forgiveness." Signor Khan puts a hand to his heart. "I know you haven't trusted me. Why should you? As you say, why did I not steal *The Ocean of the Moon*, especially after the attack in the desert? I could have skinned you down to the bone to find it. I knew it must be on your person somewhere. The fake didn't fool me for a moment. But..."

"But?" I lean forward; his voice has dropped.

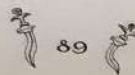
"But, I told you. I went first to Mecca on a haj. I made vows. I am a God-fearing man. I made vows,




not only to God, but to your father. I promised to get his ransom. Honour dictated that I keep my vows."

"But you tried to kill me in the balcony of the Great Hall, didn't you?" I whisper.

"That was not me. The Grand Vizier knew if the emperor saw *The Ocean of the Moon*, he would desire it for himself, and the Vizier wanted it for Prince Aurangzeb. So he tried to have you killed. They are always looking to the future, these kingmakers. The Great Emperor has four sons. Already they are planning twenty years ahead; the whole empire is already dividing itself into factions – especially those who favour Prince Dara and those who favour Aurangzeb. They are filling their coffers with treasure, stocking up their weapons, looking for allegiances among the princely states; even the warlords of Afghanistan





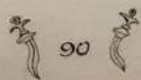
are ready to fight to the death for the prince of their choice. There may be four princes, but when the time comes for a new emperor to succeed Shah Jehan, believe me Filippo, only one son will be alive – and he will be the next emperor.”

“So, the Grand Vizier supports Aurangzeb?” I ponder. “And you? Who do you support?”

Signor Khan’s voice wavers slightly. “If I were a free man, I would support the eldest, Prince Dara. He is a good man with a true heart and a love of the people.”

The words have barely left his lips, and I think he has spoken so quietly that only I could possibly have heard, but there is a swish; a whistle, a drawn breath, a hiss. Signor Khan stays as he is, sitting on his haunches with his head in his hands, but now a dagger quivers in his back.

Even as he slowly topples over, I grab my



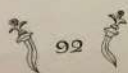
goatskin and throw myself sideways. Tumbling head over heels, bringing with me a small avalanche, I plummet down the hillside into a black void below.



Chapter 9 A CURSE

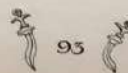
When I left Hindustan eight months later, I felt I never wanted to see that country again. Forgive me if I'm emotional. Everything had turned to ashes. It was as though that beautiful masterpiece, *The Ocean of the Moon*, was a curse that brought nothing but death and calamity.

Signor Khan was dead, killed by one of



Aurangzeb's spies, and his son was dead. That is what the messenger had come to tell him that night. How sorry I was now; how racked with guilt as I remembered my harsh attitude to him; how I hadn't asked who the stranger was, nor shown pity for his distress. Only now do I understand the trap the Musulman had been in; why he had been in such a hurry. He had tried to be my friend as much as he could, even though his son's fate hung in the balance. Whenever I was ill, and held up the journey, he looked after me, knowing that it was delaying his return to save his son.

I was found by tribesmen who came upon me at the bottom of a gully half-frozen to death. My guards and the ransom money had melted away, yet the tribesmen seemed to know why I was there; strangers never came that way except



those with ransom money. They knew exactly in whose hands my father was and where he was being kept prisoner. We were within a day's walk of Mir Baba's stronghold. They fed me and gave me a blanket, but they looked afraid and keen to be rid of me.

After two days, an older tribesman comes to me and indicates that I should follow him. We walk all day and roll ourselves into yak skins at night. When I awake, the tribesman has gone. Before me are the curving, battle-worn ramparts of the prison fort. I stand before the huge, scarred wooden gates. Can my father be somewhere within those towering walls?

Lounging around outside, smoking cheroots, with spears propped up against the wall, are guards; scrawny jagged-looking men with swords at their sides, and I know that they would kill on

the slightest whim. They stare casually. I might be a stray dog, for all the interest they show. Perhaps I no longer look foreign. My skin has become sallow through months in India, and my body is now quite thin and almost lost in the loose tunic and pyjamas I wear, having long ago given up my own tattered clothes.

"Chulloh! Get away with you!" One of them shoos me off with his hand. Perhaps he thinks I am a beggar.

I speak in slow careful Urdu. "I am the son of Geronimo Veronese, and I have come to pay his ransom."

Every head turns. They straighten and take up their spears. One of them disappears through a small door within the huge gate of the fort.

It is a long wait. Why, I haven't the energy to guess. At last, the warrior reappears; his face is

blank. He waves me inside. We enter a spacious but bare earthy courtyard, and I am taken across it to a room and thrust inside.

I find myself standing before an older man. His beard is grey and his face puckered with old scars. He lounges on a grubby bolstered mattress, smoking a hookah. But I am not deceived by his casualness; by the bowing and deference the warrior showed him, I know this must be a chief.

"So what have I got as payment?" he demands with a betel-red-toothed grin, though his eyes do not smile. I hate him. This is Mir Baba, in the pay of the Grand Vizier. I am sure he ordered the killing of Signor Khan and his son, and has already snatched the ransom money from our ponies. He is playing with me, thinking I have nothing.

I put my hand inside my jacket and, from an inside pocket, pull out the ruby and diamond

encrusted ring little Murad gave me. I still have the dagger hidden away. The sarcastic smile vanishes from his face. Greedily, he takes the ring and turns it between his fingers, holding it up in a thin ray of light.

Please let it be enough, I pray. I close my eyes and my head goes weak with dizziness. I hear their voices fading as I crumple to the ground.

Someone is shaking me. I open my aching eyes. A strange bedraggled figure stands over me. His hair is long down to his shoulders and quite white, as is his long tangled beard. It is the eyes I recognize, though they seem devoid of sanity. How often had I gazed into those strange greeny-blue eyes of his portrait.

"Father?" I whisper as if waking from a dream.
"Giuseppe?"

"No, Father! My name is Filippo. You don't know me because I was born after you left. We tried to tell you..."

He cackles, then weeps. "Did you bring *The Ocean of the Moon*?"

I get to my feet and sway. He reaches out and, though barely sturdier than I, supports me, then embraces me.

I never answer his question, and he never asks it again. We leave the room. No one challenges us as we stumble out, father and son, our arms linked, and just walk away from his prison.

So it is done. It is sixteen months since I left Venice, but the ransom is paid; my father is free. But for what? They have kept him in a dungeon all those years, till he has become a sick and demented old man, reduced to a wreck in mind and body. Slowly, we leave that hard, pitiless place to begin

our long journey home. We reach a trade route through the mountains and by using some of the jewels from Murad's dagger, bargain a place on the caravan train on its way to Lahore and Delhi.

Rambling and mostly incomprehensible, my father questions me about the family, and Venice. He forgets my answers, and questions me again and again about home. How badly he wants to see Venice again, but we only get as far as Lahore.

Once more, I feel the curse of *The Ocean of the Moon*. One morning, I wake to find my father dead beside me. He had died quietly, as if like a clock his body had just wound down and stopped. I bury him according to Muslim rites; there is no other way.

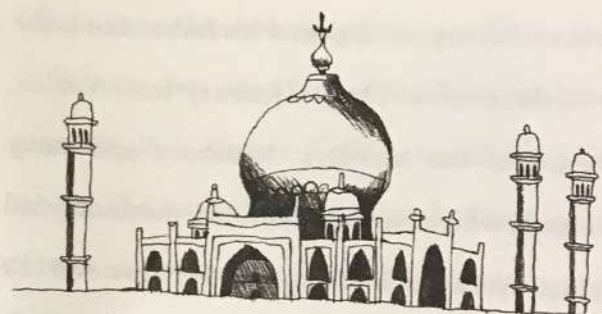
Unable to mourn, I carry on to Agra, my heart utterly devoid of emotion. I would collect the rest of the payment for *The Ocean of the Moon* from the

Royal Treasurer, and then return to Venice as speedily as possible.

As I got close to the city, sounds of wailing and lamentation echoed from the balconies and minarets. Then I heard the news: Queen Mumtaz Mahal, the favourite wife of the emperor, for whom he had bought *The Ocean of the Moon*, had died in childbirth. The emperor was crazed with grief and the whole kingdom was plunged into mourning.

This wonder, this creation of incomparable beauty, had brought nothing but sorrow and death. How I cursed *The Ocean of the Moon*; how I hated that land. All I wanted to do was get away from that country – that whole continent – as fast as possible.

Thus I left Hindustan, feeling empty and bereft, never wanting to return.



Chapter 10 THE OCEAN OF THE MOON

It is twenty years since these events took place. But now I am back in Hindustan with my brother Carlo, and, though I swore never to return, we are here in the city of Agra. Carlo had always wanted to visit the great Mogul empire and to pay his respects at our father's resting place in Lahore.

Prince Aurangzeb deposed his father and is the ruler of the empire. On our journey from Venice, we heard of the murders, treachery and many dark deeds which, several years on, eventually led to Prince Aurangzeb taking power. However, he did not kill his father. The Great Emperor, Shah Jehan still lives – they say he is a prisoner in his own palace; I think of my father. But my little friend Prince Murad is dead, as are Prince Sultan Sujah and the revered Prince Dara. They fought each other, as my Musulman said they would, and were outwitted and murdered by Aurangzeb and his supporters.

We had thought of bypassing Agra, not wishing to visit such a city of blood, and yet we had also heard that after the death of his beloved Queen Mumtaz, Shah Jehan had built her a tomb, which many fellow travellers told us was

of unimaginable beauty, and not to be missed.

So now we stand outside the great arched gateway. It is dawn. Within the high walls, we can see the tops of the trees and clouds of green parrots swooping and screeching as they greet the new day. We hear the call to prayer. The echo reaches us; long, long, reverberations of:

Allahu-Akbar

Ash-badu-alla-ilaha-illallah

Ash-badu anna Muhammadar-Rasulullah

Hayya-alassalab

Hayya-alal-Falab

Allahu Akbar

La ilahu illallah

There is a sense of immense peace and goodness. The gatekeepers unroll themselves from their

blankets and greet us as we enter the dark green gardens. Night still hangs in shadows and stretches long-fingered across the lawns. The great sky turns silver. Our hearts stop. The light strikes an opaque shape. It is a dome; a vast dome – bigger than any I have ever seen. More and more light pours through a crack in the dawn sky. The dome floats moon-white, like a giant lotus, and lights up the four white minarets standing like handmaidens at each corner.

Carlo hides his eyes as if he has seen a vision. "Is it really there?" he asks, awestruck.

He looks again. "Yes, yes! It is still there."

But I am silent. I remember Shah Jehan holding *The Ocean of the Moon* in his fingers, suspended in the candlelight so that the gems were filled with air, fire, water and ice. I seem to see it again now – but huge and overwhelming,

as if we stand within the jewel itself.

I too shut my eyes, expecting that such beauty cannot be real, that it will have vanished when we open them again. But it hasn't. We stare in utter silence, watching the dawn sliding pale pink over the white marble.

We have been standing for three hours. The sun is riding high in an azure sky, the dome is too white, too bright to look at, but still we stand, dazzled, speaking occasionally in hushed voices. Beyond, we see the glittering River Jamuna, and the fields stretching away to a shimmering horizon. A distant camel train picks its way through the shallows. Life goes on.

Only later, as we rode away from that sad beautiful city, did my brother say, "We have just seen *The Ocean of the Moon*."

Perhaps that's how it should be. A true

masterpiece cannot stay hidden, either in its creator's workshop or in the secret jewel box of a queen. Rather, it is an inspiration for ever and ever. Instead of *The Ocean of the Moon* being a gift for the living, it became, for Shah Jehan in his grief, transformed into this shining tomb.

Whoever has *The Ocean of the Moon* now, and for whatever dark purpose it has been used, the Taj Mahal, as they call it, will always be a monument to love, and represent all that is good in the world. Perhaps even the life of my father was worth it.

I leave this land in peace.

POSTSCRIPT



It is known that Geronimo Veronese, the jeweller, came from Venice to Hindustan (India) during the reign of the Great Mogul Shah Jehan, probably to buy precious stones. He could also have been employed by one of the Mogul courts. Contemporary travellers report that he was taken hostage by Afghans. He died and is buried in Lahore.

He is thought by some to have designed the Taj Mahal, built 1632 to 1644.