CHAPTER 6

The Female Camel

There was until there was in times so fair
When basil and lilies grew here and there
And Allah was to be found everywhere

At that time there was a Sultan who had an only daughter whom he greatly cherished. He was so concerned about her and her welfare that he kept her hidden behind seven hijābs (curtains) in her lavishly furnished room. Although he saw to it that she had everything she needed one day the princess fell ill and started to pine away, losing her vitality day by day. Very upset, the Sultan tried all within his means to find a cure for her. He summoned all the best doctors in the realm, one by one, but not one of them could cure her.

Now in that same medina, there lived an old woman who had heard about the princess’s illness. Deciding to try her luck with the Sultan, she set out one fine day for his palace, at the gate of which she was asked about her business and treated with much amusement by the guards once she had explained her mission. However, when they perceived how resolved she was they consulted with each other and eventually sent to inform the Sultan, who was at first annoyed but then realized that
since his other efforts to cure the princess had failed it would not hurt to try the old woman’s remedy. So the old woman was allowed to enter the palace where she was led to the princess’s quarters. On the way her mouth practically dropped open at the beautiful flowers and different colored birds that she encountered. At the entrance of the princess’s quarters the servants left her and, asking permission to enter, she was told, with all the respect due to her age, “Lift the hijāb and enter, dear aunt spinster.” The Sultan’s daughter kept repeating this phrase until the woman had lifted all seven hijābs. Finally she found herself face-to-face with the princess, whose pale face provided a marked contrast with her sumptuous surroundings. The woman started asking her about what might be ailing her. Shortly, she found out that the girl had never been outside the palace. When the old woman asked her whether she would like to go out the girl’s face became alive with excitement, but she pointed out that her father would never permit such a thing. The old woman mused over this and finally she assured the girl that she had devised a plan to deal with the Sultan.

The Sultan was very surprised to see the old woman come to see him after only a short consultation with his daughter and even more surprised to hear that she knew both what ailed his daughter and how it could be cured. He immediately wanted to know what she proposed. So she told him that it was very simple; she said what his daughter needed was to visit a saint’s shrine, that she herself knew the exact one where she could find the cure she needed, and was ready to accompany her there. It seemed such a simple and appropriate solution that the Sultan wondered why he had not thought of it himself. So they agreed upon a proper time when the old woman could take the girl to the shrine; then the Sultan recompensed the old woman generously and bid her goodbye.

On the appointed day the old woman came to take out the princess, who was in a state of great excitement as they set out, hardly able to believe that she was finally going out. The old woman took her to visit all the places she had heard of and wanted to see. After that she took her for a long walk in the countryside. When they became tired, they sat down to rest next to a flowing river. They had not been sitting there gazing into the river for very long when they noticed a rock lifting itself up and a female camel emerging from under it. The camel was laden with dirty dishes, which it brought into the river and addressed: “Get down my little dishes; get cleaned with all the fishes.” At which point the dishes proceeded to get down from its back and to clean themselves thoroughly in the river. Once they were spotlessly