



THE  
**SPIDER'S**  
HOUSE

*a novel*

"Paul Bowles has had few equals in the second half  
of the twentieth century." —GORE VIDAL

PAUL  
**BOWLES**

AUTHOR OF *THE SHELTERING SKY*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY FRANCESCA PROSE



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# THE SPIDER'S HOUSE



*With a Preface  
by the Author*

Introduction by Francine Prose

AN **ecco** BOOK

HARPER  PERENNIAL

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FOR MY FATHER

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The likeness of those who choose other patrons than Allah is as the likeness of the spider when she taketh unto herself a house, and lo! the frailest of all houses is the spider's house, they but knew.

—THE KORA

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## INTRODUCTION

“Ten or twelve years ago there came to live in Tangier a man who would have done better to stay away.” This wickedly portentous sentence, which begins Paul Bowles’s story “The Eye in the Sky,” could—with the medieval city of Fez substituted for the cosmopolitan port of Tangier—just as easily serve as the opening of *The Spider’s House* and for most of Bowles’s novels and short stories, especially if we expand the list of ill-advised travel destinations to include nearly all corners of Morocco and a virtual Baedeker of hellish jungle outposts in Latin America and Asia. Fez was Bowles’s obsessive subject, to which he returned again and again, and which he wrote about so brilliantly, was the tragic and even fatal mistakes that Westerners so commonly make in their misguided and often presumptuous encounters with the mysteries of a foreign culture.

One can hardly imagine a more timely theme, one more perfectly suited to the perilous new world in which we find ourselves. Yet, strangely, Paul Bowles’s name never (as far as I know) appeared on those rosters of writers one saw mentioned in the aftermath of September 11, classic authors whose work appears to speak across centuries and decades, directly and helpfully addressing the crises and drastically altered realities of the present moment—terrorism, violence, neocolonialist warfare, revolution, and our dawning awareness of the hidden costs of colonialism and globalization. Perhaps it’s because the books that were commonly cited (*War and Peace*, *The Possessed*, *The Secret Agent*, and so forth) seemed, even at their most pessimistic, to offer some hope of redemption, some persuasive evidence of human resilience and nobility; whereas Bowles’s fiction is the last place you would go for hope, or for even faint reassurance that the world is anything but a horror show, a barbaric Darwinian battlefield.

Frequently, Bowles begins his fiction in ways that seem to promise (or threaten) the sort of narrative we might expect from other writers who have focused on the confrontation between East and West, from novelists as dissimilar as Conrad, Naipaul, and Forster, from works in which a naive colonial sightseer finds his way into one heart of darkness or another—and lives to regret it.

So *The Spider’s House* starts off with a prologue that could almost (but not quite) pass for the introduction to an unusually well written political thriller. John Stenham, a writer who has been living in Fez for a very long time, an American who speaks Arabic, who loves the culture with a passion bordering on the delusional, and who understands the locals as well as any Westerner can—which is to say, not at all—is being escorted home from a dinner party. His Moroccan hosts have insisted that the streets are unsafe for him to walk alone, and though Stenham resists with the insulted bravado of the foreigner who has proudly “gone native,” he accedes because the mood of the city has lately seemed restive and strange. “Ever since that day a year ago when the French, more irresponsible than usual, had deposed the Sultan, the tension had been there, and he had known it was there. But it was a political thing, and politics exist only on paper; certainly the politics of 1954 had no true connection with the mysterious medieval city he knew and loved.” Already, the sentient reader will have



predicted that this “political thing” will affect Stenham more than he could have predicted or imagined, and that the shock of his highly unpleasant awakening will give the novel the sort of arc we might find in a book by, say, Graham Greene.

But almost immediately we can watch Bowles part company with his fellow authors and enter territory that he has claimed as uniquely his own, a universe that few, if any, of us would willingly choose to inhabit—which is not to say that Bowles’s lifelong residence in the bleak and harsh (though often grimly hilarious) landscape seems voluntary, exactly.

The next long section is written from the point of view of a Moroccan boy named Amar, a complex, intelligent, and intuitive kid from a poor and pious family who, despite his own sharp instincts and good judgment, gets pulled into the very heart of the “political thing” that Stenham would so love to avoid and ignore. It’s a convincing and daring portrait—notably, few European or American writers have had the courage to write from the perspective of a North African Muslim boy—and one that is absolutely necessary for Bowles’s narrative strategy. Because Amar’s experience and his view of politics, of religion, of the nature of human existence, and of the way in which the universe operates could hardly be more unlike Stenham’s ideas or those of Stenham’s chic, decadent American and British friends. The profound and unbridgeable difference creates a tension that underlies—and spikes—the pressure created by the thickening web of conspiracy, and by the growing discord and blood violence erupting in the souks and streets of Fez.

In his characteristically distanced, clinical, quietly confident and authoritative tone, employing a rigorously unadorned, quasi-journalistic prose style, Bowles approaches his material and his characters in a way that seems relentlessly anthropological, scientific, distanced, unbiased by either contempt and derision on the one hand or sympathy and affection on the other—or by any powerful or particular tribal loyalties of his own. Writing about expatriates and Moroccans warily coexisting in the crowded cities and desert encampments of North Africa, he depicts all these groups acting badly. Even the unusually appealing Amar turns out to be capable of committing murder (manslaughter, really) without suffering much remorse. Every community seems capable of carrying out any crime, no matter how mindless or vile—willing and able to do anything except understand one another.

What mostly (if not entirely) exempts Bowles from the charges of racism that his portrayals of brutal Moroccans have, at times, occasioned is the fact that his dispatches from the various frontiers of savagery are so evenhanded and inclusive. It’s not at all clear that the vengeful merchants in his story “The Delicate Prey” or the sadistic bandit tribe in “A Distant Episode” are any worse than the Frenchmen in *The Spider’s House*, who round up all the young males in the medina of Fez and bring them into the police station to be tortured and perhaps killed. “As far as I can see,” said Bowles in a 1981 *Paris Review* interview, “People from all corners of the earth have an unlimited potential for violence.”

Readers accustomed to parsing literature for clues to the personal history of a writer, or for instruction on how to live, may be puzzled by the discrepancies between a body of work that seems to advise against ever leaving home and the facts of Bowles’s peripatetic existence. An avid and intrepid traveler, Paul (a dentist’s son from Queens) abandoned a promising career as a composer and spent much of his early adulthood in Paris and Germany, North Africa, Mexico, Guatemala, Ceylon, and Thailand. From the 1940s until his death in 1999, he was

more or less permanent resident of Tangier, where he lived with his famously eccentric and fascinating wife, Jane, author of the dazzlingly original novel *Two Serious Ladies*. He also formed a series of intimate relationships with Moroccan men and translated books of Mohgrebi oral narratives.

Bowles was immensely proud and fiercely territorial about his knowledge of North African customs, music, and folktales; about his familiarity with Islam, his fluency in Moghrebi, his ability to understand the North Africans around him or at least (unlike most foreigners) to admit, and know why, he would never understand them. In the prologue to *The Spider's House*, there's a revealing passage in which Stenham (the character who, one might argue, most nearly approaches being a stand-in for the author) admits to "a small sense of superiority to which he felt he was entitled, in return for having withstood the rigors of Morocco for so many years. This pretending to know something that others could not know was a little indulgence he allowed himself, a bonus for seniority. Secretly he was convinced that the Moroccans were much like any other people, that the differences were largely those of ritual and gesture ..."

In fact, *The Spider's House* should top the list of novels that speak to our current conditions. Set during the first upheavals that announced a more radical and violent phase of the Moroccan struggle for independence from the French, the book seems not merely prescient but positively eerie in its evocation of a climate in which every aspect of daily life is affected—and deformed—by the roilings of nationalism and terrorism, and by the damage done by colonialism. It's chilling to hear its characters speculate on the root causes of insurrection ("The people are living the same as always, with their bellies full of food, they'll just go on the same way. If they get hungry and unhappy enough, something happens.") and on the grim compensations of terrorism. Listening to his father mourn the widespread sinfulness that, in his opinion, signals the end of Islam, Amar understands why his countrymen are "willing to risk dying in order to derail a train or burn a cinema or blow up a post office. It was not independence they wanted, it was a satisfaction much more immediate than that: the pleasure of seeing others undergo the humiliation of suffering and dying, and the knowledge that they had at least the small amount of power necessary to bring about that humiliation. If you could not have freedom you could still have vengeance, and that was all anyone really wanted now."

Though it would be a reductive oversimplification, a gross injustice to the depth, inventiveness, and psychological complexity of this novel, it could conceivably be read as a sort of textbook, a monitory analysis of the sources of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world. "The arms used against the Moroccan people were largely supplied by your government," a nationalist tells Stenham. "They do not consider America a nation friendly to their cause." Yet another agitator speculates on the most efficient means of getting American attention. "Once we've had a few incidents directly involving American lives and property, maybe the Americans will know there's such a country as Morocco in the world ... Now they don't know the difference between Morocco and the Sénégal." To make matters even more complicated, Bowles takes a dim view of the opportunism, the cynicism, the manipulative dishonesty, and the gross irresponsibility of the insurgent nationalist movement, the people so-called liberators; this is a coolly reasoned perspective which effectively prevents the reader from forming a simplistic view of the region's problems, or of their solutions.

What makes this all the more intriguing, all the more persuasive, is that Bowles never thought of himself as a political writer—and, perhaps as a result, few readers see him that way. In the preface to *The Spider's House*, he wrote, “Fiction should always stay clear of political considerations. Even when I saw that the book that I had begun was taking a direction which would inevitably lead it into a region where politics could not be avoided, I still imagined that with sufficient dexterity I should be able to avert contact with the subject. But in situations where everyone is under great emotional stress, indifference is unthinkable. At such times all opinions are construed as political ones. To be apolitical is tantamount to having assumed a political stance, but one which pleases no one. Thus, whether I liked it or not, when I had finished, I found that I had written a ‘political’ book which deplored the attitudes of both the French and the Moroccans.”

The last sentence is particularly telling. To be a political writer (as the term is generally understood) suggests strongly held opinions, a polemical agenda, a taking of sides—something that would have been not merely esthetic anathema but a characterologic impossibility for the exquisitely detached Bowles. The novel's characters (both Moroccan and American) repeatedly express their contempt for those fanatics who would willingly sacrifice individual lives to gain political objectives. Moreover, what Bowles tells us at the start (and what subsequently emerges) is that his initial impulse for writing the book derived from his fear that the city of Fez (and by extension, the rest of Morocco) would be changed and modernized beyond recognition—an anxiety that he wisely mistrusts as stemming from the most self-indulgent species of romanticism. In a startling flash of self-awareness, Stenham realizes, “It did not really matter whether they worshipped Allah or carburetors. In the end it was his own preferences which concerned him. He would have liked to preserve the status quo because the decor that went with it suited his personal taste.” Throughout Bowles's work you can watch him battling against his own estheticism and cynicism (one of the characters in *The Spider's House* calls Stenham “a hopeless romantic without a shred of confidence in the human race”), and straining to see the world and its denizens as they really are—without sentimentality, without illusions, without blinders.

However unintentional, the political subtext of his fiction provides us with yet another opportunity to note that when one writes accurately and comprehensively about human beings, politics inevitably comes into the story, since—it hardly needs to be said—politics exerts such an enormous influence on every aspect of our lives. Even Chekhov, whom we also tend to think of as a largely apolitical writer (in contrast, say, to Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy) frequently established or clarified the nature of his characters by informing the reader about their political sympathies.

How peculiar it suddenly seems to mention Chekhov and Bowles in the same paragraph, or even the same essay. Were there ever two more dissimilar literary sensibilities? With his sangfroid, his lack of empathy, his chilly refusal to demonstrate an even passing interest in the process of spiritual transformation or individual redemption, Bowles strikes us as the anti-Chekhov. Which may be why he seems, right now, as necessary as Chekhov, equally valuable in his contribution to the chorus of voices that comprise our literary heritage, and no less essential in his ability to remind us of who we are, of how we live, and of what we can—and inevitably will—do, in accordance with our nature.

In an era in which circumstances much like those that inspired *The Spider's House* force us to enter into a highly partisan and passionate political engagement, we would do well to be aware, and wary, of the dangers and pitfalls of such an engagement: dogmatism, intolerance, the unshakeable conviction of one's own righteousness and innocence, the inability or refusal to admit that other people, in other nations, have hearts and souls, loves and hatreds, that their lives are not so different from ours, that they suffer and die just as we do. What Paul Bowles reminds us of, what he won't let us forget, is that all of us, regardless of nationality or religion, are capable of acting from highly suspect, compromised, "primitive" motives—and of behaving in ways that, we would like to think, we could never even imagine.

—Francine Pro

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## PREFACE

I wanted to write a novel using as backdrop the traditional daily life of Fez, because it was a medieval city functioning in the twentieth century. If I had started it only a year sooner, it would have been an entirely different book. I intended to describe Fez as it existed at the moment of writing about it, but even as I started to write, events that could not be ignored had begun to occur there. I soon saw that I was going to have to write, not about the traditional pattern of life in Fez, but about its dissolution.

For more than two decades I had been waiting to see the end of French rule in Morocco. Ingenuously I had imagined that after Independence the old manner of life would be resumed and the country would return to being more or less what it had been before the French presence. The detestation on the part of the populace of all that was European seemed to guarantee such a result. What I failed to understand was that if Morocco was still a largely medieval land, it was because the French themselves, and not the Moroccans, wanted it that way.

The Nationalists were not interested in ridding Morocco of all traces of European civilization and restoring it to its pre-colonial state; on the contrary, their aim was to make it even more "European" than the French had made it. When France was no longer able to keep the governmental vehicle on the road, she abandoned it, leaving the motor running. The Moroccans climbed in and drove off in the same direction, but with even greater speed.

I was embroiled in the controversy, at the same time finding it impossible to adopt either side's point of view. My subject was decomposing before my eyes, hour by hour; there was no alternative to recording the process of violent transformation.

Fiction should always stay clear of political considerations. Even when I saw that the book that I had begun was taking a direction which would inevitably lead it into a region where politics could not be avoided, I still imagined that with sufficient dexterity I should be able to avert contact with the subject. But in situations where everyone is under great emotional stress, indifference is unthinkable; at such times all opinions are construed as political ones. To be apolitical is tantamount to having assumed a political stance, but one which pleases no one.

Thus, whether I liked it or not, when I had finished, I found that I had written a "political" book which deplored the attitudes of both the French and the Moroccans. Much later Allal Fassi, "the father of Moroccan nationalism," read it and expressed his personal approval. Even coming so late, this was satisfying.

Each novel seems to impose its own particular working regime. *The Sheltering Sky* and *Let the Great Come Down* were written during travels, whenever the spirit moved and the physical surroundings were conducive to writing. *The Spider's House*, on the other hand, from the outset demanded a rigorous schedule. I began writing it in Tangier in the summer of 1951, setting the alarm for six each morning. I managed to average two pages a day. When winter came I sailed for Sri Lanka. There I adopted the same ritual; early tea was brought in at six

o'clock, and I set to work, still meeting my quota of two daily pages. By the middle of March, in spite of visits to distant temples and nights spent watching devil-dances, the book was finished, and sent off from Weligama to Random House.

The tale is neither autobiographical nor factual, nor is it a *roman á clef*. Only the setting is objective; the rest is invented. The focal point of the action is the old Hôtel Palais Jamaïca before it was modernized. I called it the Mérinides Palace because one had to pass the tombs of the Mérinide kings on the way to the hotel. There is now an actual Hôtel des Mérinides built in the sixties on the cliff alongside the tombs.

The city is still there. It is no longer the intellectual and cultural center of North Africa; it is merely one more city beset by the insoluble problems of the Third World. Not all the ravages caused by our merciless age are tangible ones. The subtler forms of destruction, those involving only the human spirit, are the most to be dreaded.

*Paul Bowler*  
*December 1980*

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## PROLOGUE

It was just about midnight when Stenham left Si Jaffar's door. "I don't need anyone to come with me," he had said, smiling falsely to belie the sound of his voice, for he was afraid he had seemed annoyed or been abrupt, and Si Jaffar, after all, was only exercising his rights as a host in sending this person along with him.

"Really, I don't need anybody." For he wanted to go back alone, even with all the lights of the city off. The evening had been endless, and he felt like running the risk of taking the wrong turnings and getting temporarily lost; if he were accompanied, the long walk would be almost like a continuation of sitting in Si Jaffar's salon.

But in any case, it was too late now. All the male members of the household had come to the door, even stood out in the wet alley, insisting that the man go with him. Their adieus were always lengthy and elaborate, as if he were leaving for the other side of the world rather than the opposite end of the Medina, and he consciously liked that, because it was part of what he thought life in a medieval city should be like. However, it was unprecedented for them to force upon him the presence of a protector, and he felt there was no justification for it.

The man strode ahead of him in the darkness. Where'd they get him from? he thought, seeing again the tall bearded Berber in tattered mountain garb as he had looked when he had first caught sight of him in the dim light of Si Jaffar's patio. Then he recalled the fluttering and whispering that had gone on at one end of the room about an hour and a half earlier. Whenever these family discussions arose in Stenham's presence, Si Jaffar made a great effort to divert his attention from them by embarking on a story. The story usually began promisingly enough, Si Jaffar smiling, beaming through his two pairs of spectacles, but with his attention clearly fixed on the sound of voices in the corner. Slowly, as the whispered conversation over there subsided, his words would come more haltingly, and his eyes would dart from side to side as his smile became paralyzed and meaningless. The tale would never be completed. Suddenly, "Ahah!" he would cry triumphantly, apropos of nothing at all. Then he would clap his hands for snuff, or orange-flower water, or chips of sandalwood to throw onto the brazier, look still more pleased, and perhaps whack Stenham's knee playfully. A similar comedy had been played this evening about half past ten. As he thought it over now, Stenham decided that the occasion for it had been the family's sudden decision to provide him with someone to accompany him back to the hotel. Now he remembered that after the discussion Abdeltif, the eldest son, had disappeared for at least half an hour; that must have been when the guide had been fetched.

The man had been crouching in the dark patio entrance just inside the door when they had gone out. It was embarrassing, because he knew Si Jaffar was not a well-to-do man, and while a little service like this was not abnormally expensive, still, it had to be paid for; Si Jaffar had made that clear. "Don't give this man anything," he had said in French. "I have already seen to that."

"But I don't need him," Stenham had protested. "I know the way. Think of all the time I've gone back alone." Si Jaffar's four sons, his cousin and his son-in-law had all murmured "No, no, no," together, and the old man had patted his arm affectionately. "It's better," he said, with one of his curiously formal little bows. There was no use in objecting. The man would stay with him until he had delivered him over to the watchman at the hotel, and then he would disappear into the night, go back to whatever dark corner he had come from, and Stenham would not see him again.

The streets were completely without passers-by. It would have been quite possible to go most of the way along somewhat more frequented thoroughfares, he reflected, but obviously his companion preferred the empty ones. He took out his little dynamo flashlight and began to squeeze it, turning the dim ray downward to the ground at the man's feet. The insect-like whirring it made caused him to turn around, a look of surprise on his face.

"Light," said Stenham.

The man grunted. "Too much noise," he objected.

He smiled and let the light die down. How these people love games, he thought. This one playing cops and robbers now; they're always either stalking or being stalked. "The Oriental passion for complications, the involved line, Arabesques," Moss had assured him, but he was not sure it was that. It could just as easily be a deep sense of guilt. He had suggested this, but Moss had scoffed.

The muddy streets led down, down. There was not a foot of level ground. He had to move forward stiff-ankled, with the weight all on the balls of his feet. The city was asleep. There was profound silence, broken only by the scuffing sound he made as he walked. The man, barefooted, advanced noiselessly. From time to time, when the way led not through inn passages but into the open, a solitary drop of rain fell heavily out of the sky, as if a great invisible piece of wet cloth were hanging only a few feet above the earth. Everything was invisible, the mud of the street, the walls, the sky. Stenham squeezed the flashlight suddenly, and had a rapidly fading view of the man moving ahead of him in his brown *djellaba*, and of his giant shadow thrown against the beams that formed the ceiling of the street. The man grunted again in protest.

Stenham smiled: unaccountable behavior on the part of Moslems amused him, and he always forgave it, because, as he said, no non-Moslem knows enough about the Moslem mind to dare find fault with it. "They're far, far away from us," he would say. "We haven't a inkling of the things that motivate them." There was a certain amount of hypocrisy in the attitude of his; the truth was that he hoped principally to convince *others* of the existence of this almost unbridgeable gulf. The mere fact that he could then even begin to hint at the beliefs and purposes that lay on the far side made him feel more sure in his own attempts at analyzing them and gave him a small sense of superiority to which he felt he was entitled, in return for having withstood the rigors of Morocco for so many years. This pretending to know something that others could not know, it was a little indulgence he allowed himself, a bonus for seniority. Secretly he was convinced that the Moroccans were much like any other people, that the differences were largely those of ritual and gesture, that even the fine curtain of magic through which they observed life was not a complex thing, and did not give their perceptions any profundity. It delighted him that this anonymous, barefoot Berber should



want to guide him through the darkest, least frequented tunnels of the city; the reason for the man's desire for secrecy did not matter. These were a feline, nocturnal people. It was no accident that Fez was a city without dogs. "I wonder if Moss has noticed that," he thought.

Now and then he had the distinct impression that they were traversing a street or an open space that he knew perfectly well, but if that were so, the angle at which they had met it was unexpected, so that the familiar walls (if indeed they *were* familiar walls) were dwarfed and distorted in the one swiftly fading beam of light that he played on them. He began to suspect that the power plant had suffered a major collapse: the electricity was almost certainly still cut off, because it would be practically impossible to go so far without coming upon at least one street light. However, he was used to moving around the city in the darkness. He knew a good many ways across it in each direction, and he could have found his way blindfolded along several of these routes. Indeed, wandering through the Medina at night was very much like being blindfolded; one let one's ears and nose do most of the work. He knew just how each section of a familiar way sounded when he walked it alone at night. There were two things to listen for: his feet and the sound of the water behind the walls. The footsteps had an infinite variety of sound, depending on the hardness of the earth, the width of the passageway, the height and configuration of the walls. On the Lemtiyine walk there was one place between the tannery and a small mosque where the echo was astounding: taut, metallic reverberations that shuddered between the walls like musical pistol shots. There were places where his footfalls were almost silent, places where the sound was strong, single and compact, died straightway, or where, as he advanced along the deserted galleries, each succeeding step produced a sound of an imperceptibly higher pitch, so that his passage was like a finely graded ascending scale, until all at once a jutting wall or a sudden tunnel dispersed the pattern and began another section in the long nocturne which in turn would slowly disclose its own design. And the water was the same, following its countless courses behind the partitions of earth and stone. Seldom visible but nearly always present, it rushed beneath the sloping alleyways, here gurgled, here merely dripped, here beyond the wall of a garden splashed or dribbled in the form of a fountain, here fell with a high hollow noise into an invisible cistern, here all at once was unabashedly a branch of the river roaring over the rocks (so that sometimes the cold vapor rising was carried over the wall by the wind and wet his face), here by the bakery had been dammed and was almost still, a place where the rain swam.

The two simultaneous sound-tracks of footsteps and water he had experienced so often that it seemed to him he must know each portion by heart. But now it was all different, and he realized that what he knew was only one line, one certain sequence whose parts became unrecognizable once they were presented out of their accustomed context. He knew, for instance, that in order to be as near the main branch of the river as they were now, at some point they had had to cross the street leading from the Karouine Mosque to the Zaouia of Ahmed Tidjani, but it was impossible for him to know when that had been; he had recognized nothing.

Suddenly he realized where they were: in a narrow street that ran the length of a slight eminence above the river, just below the mass of walls that formed the Fondouk el Yihoud. It was far out of their way, not on any conceivable route between Si Jaffar's house and the hotel. "Why have we come out here?" he asked with indignation. The man was unnecessarily

abrupt in his reply, Stenham thought. "Walk and be quiet."

"But they always are," he reminded himself; he would never be able to take for granted their curious mixture of elaborate circumspection and brutal bluntness, and he almost laughed aloud at the memory of how the ridiculous words had sounded five seconds ago: *Rhir zid o skout*. And in another few minutes they had circumnavigated the Fondouk el Yihoudi and were going through a wet garden under banana trees; the heavy tattered leaves showered cold drops as they brushed against them. "Si Jaffar has outdone himself this time." He decided to telephone him tomorrow and make a good story of it. *Zid o skout* It would be a hilarious slogan over the tea glasses for the next fortnight, one in which the whole family could share.

It was a freakish summer night; a chill almost like that of early spring paralyzed the air. A vast thick cloud had rolled down across the Djebel Zalagh and formed a ceiling low over the city, enclosing it in one great room whose motionless air smelled only of raw, wet earth. As they went silently back into the streets higher up the hill, an owl screamed once from somewhere above their heads.

When they had arrived at the hotel's outer gate, Stenham pushed the button that rang a bell down in the interior of the hotel in some little room near the office where the watchman stayed. For a moment he thought: It won't ring; the power's off tonight. But then he remembered that the hotel had its own electric system. It was usually a good five minutes before the light came on in the courtyard, and then another two or three before the watchman got to the gate. Tonight the light came on immediately. Stenham stepped close to the high doors and peered through the crack between them. The watchman was at the far end of the courtyard talking to someone. "*Ah, oui*," he heard him say. A European in the courtyard this hour, he thought with some curiosity, trying to see more. The watchman was approaching. Like a guilty child, Stenham stepped quickly back and put his hands in his pockets, looking nonchalantly toward the side wall. Then he realized that his guide had disappeared. There was no sound of retreating footsteps; he was merely gone. The heavy bolt of the gate was drawn back and the watchman stood there in his khaki duster and white turban, the customary anxious expression on his face.

"*Bon soir, M'sio Stonamm*," he said. Sometimes he spoke in Arabic, sometimes in French; it was impossible to know which he would choose for a given occasion. Stenham greeted him looking across the courtyard to see who was there with him. He saw no one. The same two cars stood there: the hotel's station wagon and an old Citroen that belonged to the manager but which he never used. "You came quickly tonight," he said.

"*Oui, M'sio Stonamm*."

"You were outside, near the gate, perhaps?"

The watchman hesitated. "Non, m'sio."

He abandoned it rather than become exasperated with the man, which he knew he would do if he went on. A lie is not a lie; it is only a formula, a substitute, a long way around, a polite manner of saying: None of your business.

He had his key in his pocket, and so he went directly up the back way to his room, a little ashamed of himself for having started to pry. But when he stood in his room in the tower

looking out over the invisible city spread below, he found that he could justify his inquisitiveness. It was not merely the watchman's patent lie which had prodded him; much more than that was the fact of its having come directly on the heels of the Berber's strange behavior: the unnecessary detour, the gruff injunctions to silence, the inexplicable disappearance before he had had a chance to hand him the thirty francs he had ready to give him. Not only that, he decided, going further back to Si Jaffar. The whole family had so solemnly insisted that he be accompanied on his way home to the hotel. That too seemed to be a part of the conspiracy. "They're all crazy tonight," he told himself with satisfaction. He refused to tie all these things together by attributing them to the tension that was in the city. Ever since that day a year ago when the French, more irresponsible than usual, had deposed the Sultan, the tension had been there, and he had known it was there. But it was a political thing, and politics exist only on paper; certainly the politics of 1954 had no true connection with the mysterious medieval city he knew and loved. It would have been too simple to make a logical relationship between what his brain knew and what his eyes saw; he found it more fun to play this little game with himself.

Each night when Stenham had locked his door, the watchman climbed up the steep stairs into the tower of the *ancien palais* and snapped off the lights in the corridors, one by one. When he had gone back down, and the final sounds of his passage had died away, there was only the profound silence of the night, disturbed, if a wind blew, by the rustle of the poplars in the garden. Tonight, when the slow footsteps approached up the staircase, instead of the familiar click of the switch on the wall outside the door, there was a slight hesitation, and then a soft knock. Stenham had taken off his tie, but he was still fully dressed. Frowning, he opened the door. The watchman smiled apologetically at him—certainly not out of compunction for the lie in the courtyard, he commented, seeing that wistful, vanquished face. In the five seasons he had spent here at the hotel Stenham had never seen this man wear another expression. If the world went on he would grow old and die, night watchman at the Mérinides Palace, no other possibility having suggested itself to him. This time he spoke in Arabic. "*Smatsi*. M'sio Moss has sent me. He wants to know if you'll go to see him."

"Now?" said Stenham incredulously.

"Now. Yes." He laughed deprecatingly, with infinite gentleness, as if he meant to imply that his understanding of the world was vast indeed.

Stenham's first thought was: I can't let Moss start this sort of thing. Temporizing, he said aloud: "Where is he?"

"In his room. Number Fourteen."

"I know the number," he said. "Are you going to his room again, to take him my message?"

"Yes. Do I tell him you'll come?"

Stenham sighed. "For a minute. Yes." This would be disregarded, of course; the man would simply tell Moss that Monsieur Stonamm was coming, and disappear. Now he bowed, said "*Ouakha*" and shut the door.

He stood before the mirror of the armoire, putting his necktie back on. It was the first time Moss had ever sent him a message at night, and he was curious to know what had made the Englishman decide to vary his code of strict discretion. He looked at his watch: it was twenty

minutes past one. Moss would begin with florid apologies for having disturbed his work, whether he believed he had caused such an interruption or not, for Stenham encouraged his acquaintances to hold the impression that he worked evenings as well as mornings. It assured him more privacy, and besides, occasionally, if the weather were bad, he went to bed early and did manage to add an extra page to the novel that was still far from completed. Rain and wind outside the window in the darkness provided the incentive necessary to offset fatigue. Tonight, in any case, he would not have worked: it was far too late. Day in Fez began long before dawn, and it made him profoundly uneasy to think that he might not be asleep before the early call to prayer set off the great sound of cockcrow that spread slowly over the city and never abated until it was broad daylight. If he were still awake once the muezzins began their chant, there was no hope of further sleep. At this time of year they started about half past three.

He looked at the typed pages lying on the table, placed a fat porcelain ash tray on top of them, and turned to go out. Then he thought better of it, and put the entire manuscript in the drawer. He went to the door, cast a brief longing glance back at his bed, stepped out and locked the door behind him. The key had a heavy nickel tag attached to it; it felt like ice in his pocket. And there was a strong, chill draft coming up the tower's narrow stairwell. He went down as quietly as he could (not that there was anyone to disturb), felt his way through the dim lobby, and walked onto the terrace. The light from the reception hall streamed over across the wet mosaic floor. No isolated raindrops fell from the sky now; instead, a faint breeze moved in the air. In the lower garden it was very dark; a thin wrought-iron grille beside the Sultana's pool guided him to the patio where on sunny days he and Moss sometimes ate their lunch. The lanterns outside the great door of Number Fourteen had not been turned on, but slivers of light came through from the room between the closed blinds. As he knocked, a startled animal, a rat or a ferret perhaps, bolted, scurried through the plants and dead leaves behind him. The man who opened the door, standing stiffly aside to let him pass, was not someone he had ever seen before.

Moss stood in the center of the room, directly under the big chandelier, nervously smoothing his moustache, an expression of consternation in his eyes. The only feeling of which Stenham could be conscious at the moment was a devout wish that he had not knocked on the door, that he could still be standing outside in the dark where he had been five seconds ago. He disregarded the man who stood beside him. "Good evening," he called to Moss, his intonation carrying a hint of casual heartiness. But Moss remained taut.

"Will you please come in, John?" he said dryly. "I must talk to you."

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## **BOOK 1**

### **THE MASTER OF WISDOM**

*I have understood that the world is a vast emptiness built upon emptiness.... And so they call me the master of wisdom. Alas! Does anyone know what wisdom is*

—SONG OF THE OWL: THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

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## CHAPTER 1

The spring sun warmed the orchard. Soon it would drop behind the high canebrake that bordered the highway, for the time was mid-afternoon. Amar lay beneath an old fig tree embedded in long grass that was still damp with dew from the night before. He was comparing his own life with what he knew of the lives of his friends, and thinking that certainly his was the least enviable. He knew this was a sin: it is not allowed to man to make judgments of this sort, and he would never have given voice to the conclusion he had reached, even if it had taken the form of words in his mind.

He saw the trees and plants around him and the sky above, and he knew they were there. And since he felt a great disappointment in the direction his short life had taken, he knew that dissatisfaction was there. The world was a beautiful place, with all its animals and birds that moved, and its flowers and fruit trees that Allah had generously provided, but in his heart he felt that they all belonged really to him, that no one else had the same right to them as he. It was always other people who made his life unhappy. As he lay there propped indolently against the tree trunk, he carefully pulled the petals from a rose he had picked a half hour earlier when he had come into the orchard. There was not much more time for him to figure out what he was going to do.

If he were going to run away he must go quickly. But already he felt that Allah was not going to reveal his destiny to him. He would learn it merely by doing what it had been written that he would do. Everything would continue as it was. When the shadows lengthened he would get up and go out onto the highway, because the twilight brought evil spirits out of the trees. Once he was on the road there would be nowhere for him to go but home. He had to go back and be beaten; there was no alternative. It was not fear of the pain that kept him from going now and getting it over with. The pain itself was nothing; it could even be enjoyable if he did not wince or cry out, because his hostile silence was in a sense a victory over his father. Afterward it always seemed to him that he was stronger, better prepared for the next time. But it left a bitter flavor in the center of his being, something that made him feel just a little farther away and lonelier than before. It was not through dread of the pain or fear of this feeling of loneliness that he stayed on sitting in the orchard; what was unbearable was the thought that he was innocent and that he was going to be humiliated by being treated as though he were guilty. What he dreaded encountering was his own powerlessness in the face of injustice.

The warm breeze that moved down across the hillsides and valleys from Djebel Zalag found its way into the orchard between the stalks of cane, stirred the flat leaves above his head. Its tentative caress on the back of his neck sent a fleeting shiver through him. He put a rose petal between his teeth and chewed it into wet fragments. Out here there was no one at all, and no one would arrive. The guardian of the orchard had seen him come in and had said nothing. Some of the orchards had watchmen who chased you; the boys knew them all. This was a "good" orchard, because the guard never spoke, save to shout a command to his dog,

make it stop barking at the intruders. The old man had gone down to a lower part of the property near the river. Except for a truck that went by now and then on the highway beyond the canebrake, this corner of the orchard lay in complete silence. Because he did not want to imagine what such a place would be like once the daylight had gone, he slipped his feet into his sandals, stood up, shook out his *djellaba*, inspected it for a while because it had belonged to his brother and he hated wearing it, and finally flinging it over his shoulder, set out for the gap in the jungle of canes through which he had entered.

Outside on the road the sun was warmer and the wind blew harder. He passed two small boys armed with long bamboo poles, who were hitting the branches of a mulberry tree which a larger boy scooped up the green berries and stored them in the hood of his *djellaba*. Another three were too busy to notice his passage. He came to one of the hairpin bends in the road. Ahead of him on the other side of the valley was Djebel Zalagh. It had always looked to him like a king in his robes, sitting on his throne. Amar had mentioned this to several of his friends, but none of them had understood. Without even looking up at the mountain they had said: "You're dizzy," or "In your head," or "In the dark," or had merely laughed. "They think they know once and for all what the world is like, so that they don't ever have to look at it again," he had thought. And it was true: many of his friends had decided what the world looked like, what life was like, and they would never examine either of them again to find out whether they were right or wrong. This was because they had gone or were still going to school, and knew how to write and even to understand what was written, which was much more difficult. And some of them knew the Koran by heart, although naturally they did not know much of what it meant, because that is the most difficult thing of all, reserved for only a few great men in the world. And no one can understand it completely.

"In the school they teach you what the world means, and once you have learned, you will always know," Amar's father had told him.

"But suppose the world changes?" Amar had thought. "Then what would you know?" However, he was careful not to let his father guess what he was thinking. He never spoke with the old man save when he was bidden. Si Driss was severe, and liked his sons to treat him with exactly the same degree of respect he had shown to his own father fifty or sixty years before. It was best not to express an unasked-for opinion. In spite of the fact that life at home was a more serious business than it would have been had he had a more easy-going parent, Amar was proud of the respected position his father held. The richest, most important men of the quarter came to him, kissed his garments, and sat silent while he spoke. It had been written that Amar was to have a stern father, and there was nothing to do about it but to give thanks to Allah. Yet he knew that if ever he wanted anything deeply enough to do with his father, the old man would see that his son was right, and would give in to him. This he had discovered when his father had first sent him to school. He had disliked it so much that the first day that he had gone home and announced that he would never return, and the old man had merely sighed and called upon Allah to witness that he himself had taken the child and left him in the *aallem's* charge, so that he could not be held accountable for what might come afterward. The next day he had wakened the boy at dawn, saying to him: "If you won't go to school, you must work." And he had led him off to his uncle's blanket factory in the Attarin to work at the looms. This had not been nearly so difficult as school, because he did not have to sit still; nevertheless, he did not stay, any more than he had stayed at any one of the

several dozen different places where he had worked since. A week or two, and off he went to amuse himself, very likely without having been paid anything. His life at home was a constant struggle to keep from being led off to some new work of his father's devising.

Thus it was that among all his early friends Amar was the only one who had not learned to write and to read other people's writing, and it did not matter to him in the least. If his family had not been Chorfa, descendants of the Prophet, his life no doubt would have been easier. There would not have been his father's fierce insistence on teaching him the laws of their religion, or his constant dwelling on the necessity for strict obedience. But the old man had determined that if his son were to be illiterate (which in itself was no great handicap), at least he was not going to be ignorant of the moral precepts of Islam.

As the years had passed, Amar had made new friends like himself, boys of families so poor that there had never been any question of their going to school. When he met his childhood friends now and talked to them, it seemed to him that they had grown to be like old men, and he did not enjoy being with them, whereas his new friends, who played and fought every minute as though their lives depended upon the outcome of their games and struggles, lived in a way that was understandable to him.

A great thing in Amar's life was that he had a secret. It was a secret that did not even have to be kept secret, because no one could ever have guessed it. But he knew it and lived by it. The secret was that he was not like anybody else; he had powers that no one else possessed. Being certain of that was like having a treasure hidden somewhere out of the world's sight, and it meant much more than merely having the *baraka*. Many Chorfa had that. If someone were ill, or in a trance, or had been entered by some foreign spirit, even Amar often could set him right, by touching him with his hand and murmuring a prayer. And in his family the *baraka* was very strong, so powerful that in each generation one man had always made a name for himself as a healing his profession. Neither his father nor his grandfather had ever done any work save that of attending to the constant stream of people who came to be treated by them. Thus there was nothing surprising about the fact that Amar himself should possess the gift. But it was not this he meant when he told himself that he was different from everyone else. Of course, he had always known his secret, but earlier it had not made so much difference. Now that he was fifteen and a man, it was becoming more important all the time. He had discovered that a hundred times a day things came into his head that never seemed to come into anyone else's head, but he had also learned that if he wanted to tell people about them—which he certainly did—he must do it in a way that would make them laugh, otherwise they became suspicious of him. Still, if one day in his enthusiasm he forgot and cried: "Look at Djebel Zalagh! The Sultan has a cloud on his shoulder!" and his friends answered: "You're crazy!" he did not mind. The next time he would try to remember to include their world, and say it in reference to some particular thing in which they were interested. Then they would laugh and he would be happy.

Today there were no clouds on any part of Djebel Zalagh. Each tiny olive tree along its crest stood out against the great, uniformly blue sky; and the myriad ravines that furrowed its bare slopes were beginning to fill with the hard shadows of late afternoon. A threadlike road wound along the side of one of the round hills at its feet; tiny white figures were moving very slowly up the road. He stood and watched them awhile: country people



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