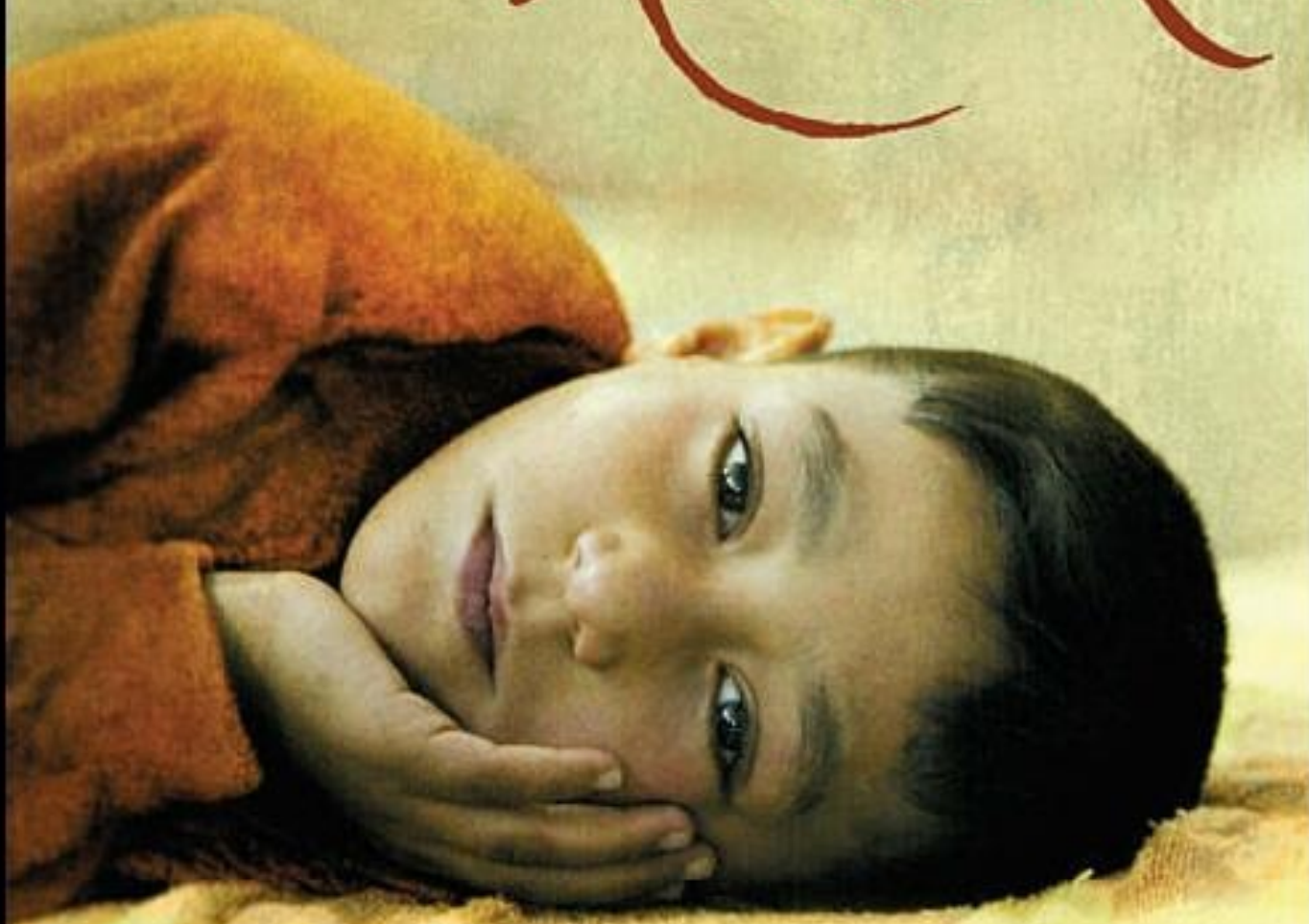


Kader Abdolah

*My Father's
Notebook*



The unforgettable story of a father, his son and
the country they love

MY FATHER'S NOTEBOOK

Kader Abdolah

Translated from the Dutch by Susan Massotty



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BOOK I

The Cave

And so it went until the men of Kahaf finally sought refuge in the cave. "Grant us Thy mercy," they said.

In that cave We covered their ears and their eyes for years.

And when the sun came up, the men saw it rise to the right of the cave. And when the sun went down the men saw it set to the left, while they were in the space in between.

They thought they were awake, but they were asleep.

And We turned them to the right and to the left.

Some said, "There were three of them, and a fourth watched over them."

Others, hazarding a guess, said, "There were five of them, and a sixth watched over them."

And there were those who said, "There were seven of them." No one knew.

We woke them, so that they might question one another.

One of them spoke: "We have been here for a day or part of a day." Another said: "Allah alone knows how long we have been here. It would be best to send one of us to the city with this silver coin. We must be careful. If they find out who we are, they will stone us."

Jemiliga then left the cave with the silver coin in the palm of his hand.

When he reached the city, he saw that everything had changed and that he did not understand their language.

They had slept in the cave for three hundred years and did not even know it. And some say there were nine more.

This was God's word, God's story. And "The Cave" was one of the stories in the Holy Book in Aga Akbar's house.

We have started with His word before trying to decipher Aga Akbar's secret notebook.

There are two of us, Ishmael and I. I'm the omniscient narrator. Ishmael is the son of Aga Akbar who was a deaf-mute.

Even though I'm omniscient, I can't read Aga Akbar's notes, so I'm going to tell the story up to Ishmael's birth, then leave the rest to him. But I'll come back again at the end, because Ishmael can decipher the last part of his father's notebook.

The Cave



From Amsterdam it takes a good five hours to fly to Tehran. Then you have to travel another four and a half hours by train to see the magical mountains of the city of Senejan loom up, like an age-old secret, before your eyes.

Senejan itself is not beautiful and has no history to speak of.

In the autumn an icy wind whips through the streets, and the snowy mountaintops form a never-changing backdrop.

Senejan has no special foods or products. And since the Shirpala River has dried up, the children play in the riverbed to their hearts' content. The mothers keep a watchful eye on them throughout the day to make sure no strangers lure them into the hollows.

The city's only poet of significance—long since dead—once wrote a poem about Senejan. It's about the wind that carries the sand in from the desert and deposits it on the inhabitants' heads:

*Oh wind, oh wind, alas there's sand in my eyes,
Oh my heart, oh my heart, half-filled with sand.
Alas, there's a tiny grain of sand on her lip.
Sand in my eyes, and oh God, her rosy lips.
The rest of the poem goes on in much the same vein.*

The rest of the poem goes on in much the same vein.

Whenever a poetry reading was held in one of the buildings in the old bazaar, it was bound to be attended by old men rhyming about the mountains. Their favourite topic was an ancient cuneiform relief that dated back to the time of the Sassanids.

An Anthony Quinn movie about Muhammad was once shown in Senejan. It was quite an event. Thousands of country bumpkins who didn't know what a movie theatre was rode their mules through the mountains to stare in wonder at *Muhammad, Messenger of God*.

Hundreds of mules were tethered in the marketplace. The authorities were beside themselves. For three months the doors of the movie theatre were open night and day, while the mules ate hay from the municipal troughs.

Although Senejan didn't figure prominently in the nation's history, the surrounding villages did. They brought forth men who made history. One of these was a great poet, Qa'em Maqam Farahani, whose poetry everyone knows by heart:

*Khoda-ya, rast guyand fetna az to-ast
wali az tars na-tavanam chegidan
lab-o dandan-e torkan-e Khata-ra*

*Though I would never dare to say it aloud, God,
The truth is that You are a mischief-maker,
Or You would not have made the lips and teeth
Of the Khata women as beautiful as they are.*

The girls born in these villages make the most beautiful Persian carpets. Magic carpets you can fly on. Really fly on. This is where the famous magic carpets come from.

Aga Akbar was not born in Senejan, but in one of these villages. In Jirya. A village covered with almond blossoms in the spring and with almonds in the fall.

Aga Akbar was born a deaf-mute. The family, especially his mother, communicated with him in simple sign language. A language that consisted of about a hundred signs. A language that worked best at home, with the family, though the neighbors also understood it to some extent. But the power of that language manifested itself most in the communication between Mother and Aga, and later between Aga and Ishmael.

Aga Akbar knew nothing of the world at large, though he did understand simple concepts. He knew that the sun shone and made him feel warm, but he didn't know, for example, that the sun was a ball of fire. Nor did he realise that without the sun there would be no life. Or that the sun would one day go out forever, like a lamp that had run out of oil.

He didn't understand why the moon was small, then gradually got bigger. He knew nothing about gravity, had never heard of Archimedes. He had no way of knowing that the Persian language consisted of thirty-two letters: *alef, beh, peh, teh, seh, jeem, cheh, heh, kehh, daal, zaal, reh, zeh, zeh, sheen, sheen, sad, zad, taa, zaa, eyn, gheyn, faa, qaf, kaf, gaf, lam, meen, noon, vaav, haa, and ye*. The *peh* as in *perestow* (swallow), the *kehh* as in *khorma* (date), the *taa* as in *talebi* (melon), and the *eyn* as in *eshk* (love).

His world was the world of his past, of things that had happened to him, of things he had learned, of his memories.

Weeks, months, and years were a mystery to him. When, for example, had he first seen that strange object in the sky? Time meant nothing to him.

• • •

Aga Akbar's village was remote. Very little went on in Jirya. There wasn't a trace of the modern world: no bicycles, no sewing machines.

One day, when Aga Akbar was a little boy, he was standing in a grassy meadow helping his brother who was a shepherd, tend a flock of sheep. Suddenly their dog leapt onto a rock and stared upwards.

It was the first time a plane had flown over the village. It may, in fact, have been the very first plane to fly over Persian airspace.

Later those silver objects appeared above the village often. The children then raced up to the roof and chanted in unison:

*Hey, odd-looking iron bird,
come sit in our almond tree
and perch in our village square.*

“What are they chanting?” young Aga Akbar asked his mother.

“They’re asking the iron bird to come sit in the tree.”

“But it can’t.”

“Yes, they know that, but they’re imagining it can.”

“What does ‘imagining’ mean?”

“Just thinking. In their minds they see the iron bird sitting in the tree.”

Aga Akbar knew that when his mother couldn’t explain something, he should stop asking questions and simply accept it.

One day, when he was six or seven, his mother hid behind a tree and pointed to a man on a horse—nobleman with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

“That’s your father.”

“Him?”

“Yes. He’s your father.”

“Then why doesn’t he come home?”

Using their simple sign language, she placed a crown on her head, stuck out her chest, and said, “He’s an aristocrat, a man of noble birth. A scholar. He has many books and a quill pen. He writes.”

Aga Akbar’s mother, Hajar, had been a servant in the nobleman’s palace, where he lived with his wife and eleven children. He could see that Hajar was different, however, so he took her to his house on Lalehzar Mountain, where he kept his books and worked in his study.

She was the one who tidied the study, dusted the books, filled the inkpot and cleaned the quills. She cooked his lunch and made sure he had enough tobacco. She washed his coat and suit, and polished his shoes. When he had to go out, she handed him his hat and held the horse’s reins until he was in the saddle.

“Hajar!” he called one day from his desk in the study, where he was writing.

“Yes, sire?”

“Bring me a glass of tea. I’d like to have a word with you.”

She brought him a glass of tea on a silver tray. (That very same tray can still be seen on the mantelpiece in the house of Aga Akbar’s wife.)

“Sit down, Hajar,” he said.

She continued to stand.

“Come now, Hajar, I’ve given you permission to sit, so take a seat.”

She sat on the edge of a chair.

“I have a question for you, Hajar. Is there a man in your life?”

She didn’t reply.

“Answer me. I asked you if there was a man in your life.”

“No, sire.”

“I’d like you to be my *sigh* wife. Would you like that?”

It was an unexpected question.

“That’s not for me to say, sire,” she replied. “You’ll have to ask my father.”

“I’ll ask your father in due course. But first I’d like to know what you think of the idea.”

She thought for a moment, with her head bowed. Then she said clearly, “Yes, sire, I would.”

That same evening, Hajar’s father was taken to the nobleman’s study by the village imam, who recited a short sura from the Holy Book and said, “*Ankahtu wa zawagtu*,” declaring Hajar to be the wife

Aga Hadi Mahmud Ghaznavi Khorasani.

Next the imam explained to her that she was allowed to have children, but that they couldn't have their father's name. Nor would they be able to inherit anything. Hajar's father was given an almond grove, the profits of which were to be shared with Hajar: one half for him, the other half for Hajar and any children she might bear. When her father died, the entire grove would belong to Hajar and her children.

Ten minutes later her father and the imam left. Hajar stayed.

She was wearing a blue-green dress that she'd inherited from her mother.

Early in the morning she'd gone to the village bathhouse and furtively removed her body hair. Then she'd dipped her toes in henna and her fingertips in the sap of the *runas*—a wild, reddish-purple flower—until it had dyed her fingers red.

"I'll be spending the night here, Hajar," the nobleman announced.

She made up the bed.

Then Aga Hadi Khorasani slipped into the bed beside her, and she received him.

• • •

Hajar had seven children. Aga Akbar, the youngest, was born a deaf-mute.

She noticed it before he was even a month old. Though she saw that he didn't react normally, she didn't want to believe it. She kept him with her at all times, allowing others to see him only briefly. This went on for six months. Everyone realised that the baby was deaf, but nobody dared to say anything. Finally Kazem Khan, Hajar's oldest brother, decided that it was time to broach the subject. Kazem Khan, an unmarried man who rode through the mountains on horseback, was a poet. Though he lived by himself on a hill above the village, there were always women in his life. The villagers saw a succession of women silhouetted against his lighted window.

Nobody knew what he did or where he went on his horse.

When there was light in his house, people knew he was home. "The poet is at home," they then said to each other.

Nothing else was known about him. Yet when the village needed him, he was always ready to lend a helping hand. At such moments he was the voice of the village. If a flash flood suddenly turned the dry riverbed into a raging torrent and their houses filled with water, he immediately appeared on his horse and diverted the flow. If a number of children unexpectedly died and the other mothers feared for their children's lives, he galloped up on his horse with the doctor in tow. And all the village brides and grooms considered it an honor to have him as a guest at their wedding feast.

This same Kazem Khan rode his horse into the courtyard of Hajar's house and stopped in the shade of an old tree. "Hajar! My sister!" he called, still in the saddle.

She opened the window.

"Welcome, brother. Why don't you come in?"

"Could you come to my house tonight? I'd like to talk to you. Bring the baby with you."

Hajar knew he wanted to talk to her about her son. She realised she would no longer be able to hide her baby.

As evening fell, Hajar strapped her baby to her back and climbed the hill to the house that the villagers referred to as "a gem that had fallen among the walnut trees".

Kazem Khan smoked opium, a generally accepted practice in those days. It was even considered

sign of his poetic nobleness.

He had lit the coals in the brazier, laid his pipe in the warm ashes and put the thin slices of brownish-yellow opium on a plate. The samovar was bubbling.

“Sit down, Hajar. You can warm up your dinner in a moment. Let me hold the baby. What’s his name? Akbar? Aga Akbar?”

She reluctantly handed the baby to her brother.

“How old is he? Seven or eight months? Go ahead and eat your dinner. I’d like some time alone with him.”

Hajar felt a great weight bearing down on her. She couldn’t eat. Instead, she burst into tears.

“Come now, Hajar, there’s no need to cry. Don’t feel so sorry for yourself. If you hide the baby, if you give up on him, you’ll just make him backward. For the last six or seven months, he’s seen nothing, done nothing, had no real contact with the world. Everywhere I go in the mountains, I see children who are deaf and dumb. You have to let people talk to him. All you need is a language, a sign language that we can invent ourselves. I’ll help you. Starting tomorrow, let other people take care of him too. Let everyone try to communicate with him in his or her own way.”

Hajar carried her child into the kitchen and again burst into tears. This time tears of relief.

Later, after Kazem Khan had smoked a few opium pipes and was feeling cheerful and light, he came in and sat down beside her.

“Listen, Hajar. I don’t know why, but I have the feeling I should play a role in this child’s life. I didn’t feel this way about your other children, mostly because they were fathered by that nobleman and I don’t want to have anything to do with him. But before you leave, we need to talk about him and about your baby’s future. It’s high time that nobleman learned that Akbar has an uncle.”

The next day Hajar took Akbar to the palace. Never before had she shown any of her children to the father. She knocked on the door of his study and entered with Akbar in her arms. She paused for a moment, then laid the baby down on the desk and said, “My child is deaf and dumb.”

“Deaf and dumb? What can I do to help you?”

A few moments went by before Hajar could look him in the eye.

“Let my child bear your name.”

“My name?” he asked, and fell silent.

“If you’ll let him have your name, I promise never to bother you again,” said Hajar.

The nobleman remained silent.

“You once said you liked me, and once or twice that you respected me. And you said I could always ask you for a favour. I’ve never asked for anything before, because I didn’t need to, but now I beg you to let my child bear your name. Only that. I’m not asking you to make him an heir. Just to have Akbar’s name recorded in an official document.”

“The baby’s crying,” he said after a while. “Give him something to eat.”

Then he stood up, opened the window, and called to his servant, “Go and get the imam. Hurry up, we haven’t got all day!”

Before long, the imam arrived. Hajar was sent off to wait in another room while the two men discussed the matter behind closed doors. The imam wrote a few lines in a book, then drew up a document and had the nobleman sign it. The whole thing took only a few minutes. The imam rode back home on his mule.

“Here, Hajar, this is the document you wanted. But remember: keep it in a safe place and tell no one of its existence. Only after my death can it be shown to other people.”

Hajar tucked the document in her clothes and tried to kiss his hand.

“There’s no need for that, Hajar. You can go home now. But come and visit me often. I’ll repeat

what I've said before: I like you and I want to go on seeing you.”

Hajar strapped her baby to her back and left. When she came down from the mountains, she knew she was carrying a child with a venerable name: Aga Akbar Mahmud Ghaznavi Khorasani.

The document turned out to be worthless. After the nobleman died, his heirs bribed the local imam and had Aga Akbar's name removed from the will. Since Hajar hadn't been expecting her child to inherit anything, it hardly mattered. She was satisfied with the name alone. Aga Akbar's parentage was known. His father had roots that could be traced back to the palace on Lalehzar Mountain.

Akbar grew up, married and had children. And even though he was a simple carpet-weaver, he remained proud of his lineage. He kept with him at all times the document with his long name.

Akbar often talked about his father. He especially wanted his son Ishmael to know that his grandfather had been an important man, a nobleman on a horse with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

The nobleman was killed by a Russian. Just who the murderer was, nobody knew. A soldier? A gendarme? A Russian thief who sneaked over the border?

• • •

The mountain range where Aga Akbar lived and where his forefathers had lived before him bordered on Russia, known in those days as the Soviet Union. The southern part of the range belonged to Iran, the northern part, with its permanent layer of snow, to Russia.

No one knew, however, what that Russian soldier, or the Russian army, had been looking for in the mountains.

All that was left of the murder was a story that lived on in Aga Akbar's memory.

When they were home by themselves, Akbar told the story to Ishmael, who was assigned the role of the nobleman on horseback. Akbar was the Russian soldier, wearing an army coat and a cap with bold red insignia.

Ishmael, his wooden rifle slung over his shoulder, mounted a pillow. Aga Akbar put on his coat and cap and hid behind the cupboard, which served as a makeshift boulder.

Ishmael rode his horse—not too fast, not too slow, but sedately, as a nobleman should—past the cupboard. A head peeked out. The horseman went on riding for another few yards, then the soldier suddenly leapt out with a knife in his hand, took two or three giant steps and planted his knife in the horseman, who fell off his horse and died.

No doubt this story was largely a fantasy, but the death of Aga Akbar's mother was very real.

“How old were you when Hajar died?” Ishmael signed.

Aga Akbar had no concept of time.

“She died when a group of unknown black birds perched in our almond tree,” he signed back.

“Unknown?”

“I'd never seen them before.”

“How old were you when the black birds perched in the tree?” Ishmael signed.

“My hands were cold, the tree had no leaves and Hajar no longer spoke to me.”

“No, I mean how old? How *old* were you when your mother died?”

“Me, Akbar. My head came up to Hajar's chest.”

He had been about nine, Kazem Khan explained later. Hajar had been feeling ill, so she had gone to bed. Akbar had slipped in under the blankets and held his mother in his arms.

“Your mother died in your arms?” Ishmael signed.

“Yes, but how did you know?”

“Uncle Kazem Khan told me.”

~~“I crawled under the blankets. When she was sick, she used to talk to me and hold my hand. But the time she stopped talking, and her hand no longer moved. I was scared, really scared, so I stayed under the blankets, not daring to come out. Then a hand reached under the blankets, grabbed me and tried to pull me out. I held on to Hajar’s body, but Kazem Khan finally dragged me away. I cried.”~~

The next day the oldest woman in the family wrapped Hajar in a white shroud. Then several men came with a coffin and carried her to the cemetery.

After the funeral Kazem Khan took little Akbar with him.

“I wanted him to understand what death was,” he later told his nephew Ishmael. “So I rode over the mountains with him, in search of something that would show him that dying was part of life.

“I looked around in the snow, hoping to find a dead bird or a dead fox or maybe even a dead wolf. But on that cold winter day the birds flew more energetically than ever and the wolves bounded across the rocks. I stopped, sat him down on a boulder and pointed at the plants buried beneath the snow. ‘Look! Those plants are dead, too.’ But that wasn’t a good example. I saw an old mountain goat who could barely leap from one rock to another. ‘You see that goat? He’s going to die soon.’ No, that wasn’t a good example either.

“I was hoping that a bird would stop flying in mid-air and suddenly drop dead at our feet. But no birds dropped dead that day.

“I put Akbar back on the horse and we rode on.

“After a while, I saw the nobleman’s palace in the distance. It had been empty since his death. I rode over to it.”

“Why?”

“I had no idea. I just thought, Let’s have a look. I led the horse around to the back. Aga Akbar didn’t know what I was trying to do. ‘Stand on the horse’s back,’ I gestured to him, ‘and climb up onto the stone wall!’”

“‘Why?’ he signed.

“He didn’t want to. So I went first. I climbed up onto the wall and lay there. ‘Come on!’ I said. ‘Give me your hand.’

“I grabbed him, pulled him up and then helped him climb up onto the roof. We inched our way up the courtyard stairs.

“‘Don’t look so surprised,’ I said when we reached them. He didn’t want to go down the stairs.

“‘What are we going to do?’ he signed.

“‘Nothing, just look around. Come on, this palace belongs to you, too.’

“We walked gingerly down the stairs. He briefly forgot his mother. I even noticed a smile on his face.

“We went into the courtyard. I’d never been inside the palace before. I thought the doors would be locked, but they were open. I thought the rooms would be empty, but no, the furniture was all in place. The courtyard door had been blown open by the wind and the snow had drifted halfway down the hall. We went in.

“There was dust everywhere. Even the expensive Persian carpets were covered in a fine layer of sand. We left footprints. You could see that a man and a little boy had walked through the room. ‘Give me your hand,’ I said to Akbar. ‘Do you see that? That’s what death is.’

“I looked for the nobleman’s study, for his library. Akbar stared in amazement at everything—the chandeliers, the mirrors, the paintings. ‘Go on, take a look,’ I said. ‘You see those portraits? Those are your ancestors. Take a good look at them. Oh, Allah, Allah, what a lot of books!’

“I had no idea there were so many books on Lalehzar Mountain. ‘Hey, Akbar, come here. You see

this book? It's been written by hand. Let me read it:

*Khoda-ya, rast guyand fetna az to-ast
wali az tars na-tavanam chegidan
lab-o dandan-e torkan-e Khata-ra
beh een khubi na bayad afaridan.*

"I took out a sheet of parchment on which a family tree had been drawn. 'Do you see those names? Each one of those men has written a book. You can also write one. A book of your very own.'

"Write?" signed Akbar.

"I'll teach you.' I rummaged around in the drawer in search of an empty notebook and found one. 'Here, take it. Put it in your pocket. Now hurry up, let's go.'"

They left the palace and rode home. Kazem Khan needed to smoke his opium pipe and drink a few cups of strong tea. "Where are you, Akbar? Come here, I've got a lump of sugar for you. Russian finest sugar. Mmm, delicious. Have a sip of tea, Akbar. Now where's your book? Come sit by me. Opium is bad. You must never smoke opium. If I don't smoke my pipe in time, I get the shakes. When I do smoke it, though, I think up fantastic poems. Go and get your book and write something in it."

"I can't write. I can't even read," Akbar signed.

"You don't have to read, but you do have to write. Just scribble something in your notebook. One page every day. Or maybe just a couple of sentences. Anyway, try it. Go upstairs, write something in your book, then come and show it to me."

When Kazem Khan had finished his pipe, he went upstairs.

"Where are you, Akbar? Haven't you written anything yet? It doesn't matter. I'll teach you. You see that bed? From now on, it's your bed. Open the window and look out at the mountains. That beautiful view is all yours. Open the cupboard. That's yours, too. You can keep your things in it. Here, this is the key to your room."

It was impossible to concentrate on reading or writing when you were sitting by the window in the room, Kazem Khan complained, because you would be mesmerised by the view, by nature. You had no choice but to lay down your book, put away your pen, go and get your pipe, chop up some opium, put a piece of it in your pipe, pick up a glowing coal with a pair of pincers, light the pipe, then puff, puff, puff on it, blow the smoke out of the window and stare at the view.

The first thing you saw were the walnut trees, then the pomegranate trees and, beyond that, a stretch of yellow wildflowers and a field dotted with opium-coloured bushes. The yellow flowers and the brownish-yellow bushes merged at the foot of Saffron Mountain, which rose majestically into the sky.

If you could climb to the top of Saffron Mountain, stand on its craggy peak and peer through a pair of binoculars, and if there happened to be no fog that day, you would be able to make out the contours of a customs shed and a handful of soldiers, because that's where the border is. Back when Aga Akbar and Kazem Khan were standing by the window, however, no villager could have reached the mountain peak.

Saffron Mountain is famous in Iran, not so much because of its nearly inaccessible peak, but because of its historically important cave. Saffron Mountain is a familiar name in the world of archaeology. The cave, located halfway up the mountain, is extremely difficult to reach. Back in those days, wolves slept in it during the winter and gave birth to their cubs in it during the spring.

If you scaled the wall with ropes and spikes, like a mountain climber, you'd find bits of fossils everywhere, along with the bones of mountain goats devoured by the wolves.

If you came in the spring, you might see the cubs at the mouth of the cave, calling to their mothers. Deep inside the cave, on a dark southerly wall, is an ancient stone relief. More than 3,000 years ago the first king of Persia ordered that a cuneiform inscription be chiselled into the rock, beyond the reach of sun, wind, rain and time. It has never been deciphered.

Sometimes when you looked out of Kazem Khan's window, you saw a cuneiform expert—an Englishman or a Frenchman or an American—riding into the cave on a mule, which meant that another attempt was being made to decipher the cuneiform.

"Come! Get the mules ready," Kazem Khan gestured to Akbar.

"Where are we going?"

"To the cave."

"Why?"

"To learn how to read. I'm going to teach you to read," signed Kazem Khan.

They put on warm clothes, mounted two strong mules and headed up Saffron Mountain. There was no path going up to the cave. The mules simply sniffed the ground, followed the tracks of the mountain goats and slowly climbed higher and higher. After three or four hours, they reached the entrance to the cave.

"Wait!" Kazem Khan signed. "First we have to scare off the wolves."

He took out his rifle and fired three shots into the air. The wolves fled.

They got down from their mules and entered the cave. Once inside, Kazem Khan lit an oil lamp. They walked deeper and deeper into the cave, with the mules trotting along behind.

"Come on, Akbar, follow me."

"Why are you going into the darkness?" Akbar signed.

"Be patient a bit longer. Come with me. Look! Up there!" Kazem Khan said, and he held up the lamp. "Can you see it?"

"See what?" Akbar signed. "I don't see anything."

"Wait, I'll go and look for a stick."

He hunted around in the cave for a stick, but didn't find one.

"Here, hold the reins."

Kazem Khan sat on top of the mule and held up the lamp again.

"Can you see it now? That thing on the wall, *in* the wall. Go and stand over there, so you can see it better. Wait, let me get down from the mule. Look carefully, Akbar. Do you know what that is? It's a letter. A letter written by a king. A great king.

"Back in the old days, people couldn't read or write. Paper hadn't been invented yet. So the king ordered that his words be chiselled into the wall of the cave. All those foreigners who come up here on mules actually want to read the king's letter, the king's story. Now get out your pen and notebook. I'm going to hold the mule against the wall and I want you to stand on its back. Yes, on the mule's back. Good. Are you comfortable? Look, there's a place for you to hang up the lamp, so you can see better. Now I want you to write down the text. Look carefully at all the symbols, at all those cuneiform words, and write them down on the paper, one by one. Go ahead! Don't be afraid. I'll hold the mule. Just write!"

Aga Akbar may or may not have understood what his uncle had in mind, but in any case he started copying the text. He stared at the cuneiform script and did his best to draw each character, one by one in his notebook. Three whole pages.

"It's finished," he signed.

“Good. Now put it in your pocket and get down. Be careful.”

That evening, when Kazem Khan was at home again, smoking his opium, he signed to Akbar, “Come and get your book and come sit here by the brazier. Now give me your pen and listen carefully. You’ve copied the letter written by the king. Do you know what it says?”

“No.”

“That letter is something that used to be inside the king’s head. Nobody knows what it says, but you must say something. Now you, yes *you*, can also write a letter. Here, on the next page of your notebook. Some other time, you can write another letter on another page. You can write down what’s inside your head, just like the king did. Go ahead and try it!”

Years later, when Ishmael, the son of Aga Akbar, was sixteen and living in the city, he went to visit his uncle in the mountains. “But Uncle Kazem Khan,” he asked him one evening at dinner, “why didn’t you teach my father the normal alphabet, so he could read and write like everyone else?”

“What do you mean ‘like everyone else’? Nowadays you have to learn to read, but you didn’t have to back then. Especially not here in the mountains. Even the village imam could barely write his name. Who could have taught the alphabet to a deaf-mute child? I wasn’t the right man for the job. I simply didn’t have the patience. I’ve never liked sitting around the house. I’m always on the go, always riding off somewhere on my horse.

“To teach a child like that, you need a capable father and a strong mother. I didn’t want to teach him how to write, but I felt—or, rather, observed—that Aga Akbar was forming sentences in his head, that he was thinking up stories. Do you understand?”

“Those sentences in his head, that storytelling talent, could have destroyed him. He had headaches all the time, and I was the only one who knew why. That’s the reason I taught him to write in cuneiform. To write for the sake of writing. I didn’t know if he’d be able to do it, or even if it would help. I was simply trying to solve a problem. Anyway, no one can read the king’s cuneiform inscription. Maybe the puzzle will never be solved. But the king did write down his thoughts.

“Did I steer Akbar in the right direction or not? You’re entitled to your opinion, but I think my method worked. Your father still writes, to this day. And cuneiform is a beautiful and mysterious script. Your father has his own language, his own written language. Do you ever look in his notebook?”

“No. I see him writing in it sometimes.”

“Have you ever tried to read it?”

“I can’t read a word of it.”

“You could ask him to teach you how.”

“What about you? Can you read it?”

“No, but I know what he’s writing about. One time ... God, how long ago was it? I went to his room and found him sitting at his desk, writing. I think he was about as old as you are now. Except that he was stronger. Big shoulders, dark hair, clear eyes. Anyway, I saw that he was writing. ‘Show it to me,’ I said. ‘Tell me what you’ve written.’

“In those days he had quite a bit of contact with the foreigners who went to the cave, the ones who were trying to decipher the text. I think he’d learned something from those experts—something about other reliefs, or maybe even a likely translation. ‘Explain to me what you’ve written,’ I said. At first he didn’t want to. He was embarrassed, but I kept pressuring him. I wanted to know if my method had worked.

“So he read. I can still recite his words from memory. Listen, it’s beautiful: *I, I, I am the son of the horseman, the horseman from the palace, the palace on the mountain, the mountain across from the cave. In that cave is a letter, a letter from a king, a letter carved in the rock, from the time when the*

were no pens, only hammers and chisels.”

Later, when Aga Akbar was a young man, he became a guide. He led the cuneiform experts—the Americans, the British, the French and the Germans—up to the cave on mules. Then he stood on a mule and held up the oil lamp, so they could take pictures or copy the text for the umpteenth time.

Anyone interested in cuneiform or in decoding old inscriptions is sure to own books on the subject. And those books are sure to have a couple of pictures of the cuneiform inscription in the cave on Saffron Mountain. And one of those pictures is bound to show a youthful Aga Akbar, standing on a mule and holding up an oil lamp to illuminate the cuneiform relief.

The Train

*We can't understand Aga Akbar's notes
without knowing about Shah Reza Khan.
We look at the background to the story,
at the details not given in the notebook.*



Saffron Village was famous not only for its ancient cuneiform inscription, but also for its beautiful carpets, its genuine Persian rugs. Americans and Europeans who have a Persian carpet in the living room don't realise that it might have been made in Saffron Village. You can tell by the pattern. If it has a strange bird with an odd-looking tail, it no doubt comes from the village where Aga Akbar grew up.

In the middle of winter, hundreds of strange birds suddenly flew in from the other side of Saffron Mountain, from the former Soviet Union. Since it was cold, the birds were hungry and thirsty. The villagers always knew when the birds were about to arrive: early in the morning, on one of the first days after the full moon had appeared to the left of the mountain peak. The women leaned their ladders against the walls in expectation.

At the first sign of the birds, the women climbed up onto the rooftops and set out bowls of warm water and bits of leftover food.

The strange birds landed on the roofs. The women and children watched from the windows and saw the birds walk across the roofs with their strange long tails, bobbing their heads in thanks. The birds rested for a few hours, then flew off. And the women, who spent the whole day, the whole month, the whole year, the whole of their lives in the village, weaving rugs, the women who never got a chance to leave Saffron Mountain, wove those birds into the patterns of the carpets.

Another motif that made its way into their carpets was the cuneiform script.

The illiterate women of Saffron Village used the secret language of the cave's relief to weave their hopes and longings into their carpets.

Sometimes the carpets depicted a foreigner in a hat riding to the cave on a mule and holding a sheaf of paper filled with cuneiform.

At the end of the 1930s the women suddenly began weaving a completely new pattern into their carpets—a train. A train trailing smoke as it snaked its way up Saffron Mountain.

Nowadays the carpets show a bomber flying over the village, dropping its deadly cargo.

Though the women didn't realise it, the train and its trail of smoke symbolised a shift in power. In those days Reza Khan, the father of the last shah of Iran, had the country firmly in his grip. There was a centralised dictatorship. Reza Khan was a simple private who had worked his way up to general

What he lacked in education, he made up for in ambition.

In 1921 he staged a coup. Announcing that the Qajar dynasty had come to an end, he declared himself the new king of Persia. From then on, it was to be known as the Pahlavi kingdom.

Reza Shah wanted to weave the country into a new pattern. He wanted to transform the archaic kingdom of Persia into a modern nation orientated towards the West. That meant new businesses, modern schools, printing presses, theatres, steel bridges, roads, buses and taxis, not to mention radiograms and radio stations that would broadcast, for the first time in Persian history, the magical voice of a singer:

*Yawash, yawash, yawash, yawash
amadam dar khane-tan.
Yek shakh-e gol dar dastam
sar-e rahat beshastam.
Be khoda' yadat narawad az nazram.*

*Softly, softly, ever so softly,
I walked past your house and
Sat on the roadside with a flower
In my hand as you passed by.
God knows I shall never forget you.*

Reza Shah wanted more. He wanted to change women's lives overnight. From one day to the next women were forbidden to wear chadors. Whenever they went out, they were expected to wear hats and coats instead.

He wanted everything to happen quickly, which is why he governed the country with an iron hand and stifled all opposition. On his orders, the poet Farokhi had his lips sewn shut because he'd recited a poem about women who stumbled and couldn't walk without their chadors. During Reza Shah's reign many writers, intellectuals and political leaders were thrown in jail or murdered, and others simply disappeared.

According to the opposition, Reza Shah was a lackey of the British Embassy in Tehran and had been ordered to modernise the country for the benefit of the West. In the eyes of the imperialists, he was merely a soldier, a pawn to be used in the struggle against the Soviet Union.

Whether or not he was a British puppet, one thing is certain: he wanted things to change. In his own way, he was determined to radically reform the country, but he was a soldier, a brute. Everyone was terrified of him.

Reza Shah hoped that his most important projects would be finished before his son succeeded him.

The train was one of his pet projects.

During the twenty-five hundred years in which various kings, sultans and emirs had ruled the Persian Empire, no government official had ever come to the mountains to take a census of the inhabitants. Now that Reza Khan was shah, however, he wanted his subjects to carry identity cards.

Throughout the ages the imams had controlled the mountains and the countryside. Now the populace had to contend with a gendarme, a man in a military cap emblazoned with one of Reza Shah's slogans, a man who answered to no one but His Majesty.

Reza Shah needed an army that obeyed him unquestioningly. And that army needed soldiers whose names and dates of birth were listed on identity cards. So, for the first time in history, the exact number of boys in Saffron Village was recorded. The vital statistics were entered in a book, which the

gendarme kept in his cupboard.

Thanks to Reza Shah, Aga Akbar also was issued with an identity card. At last, his full name was officially on record.

• • •

To realise his great dream, Reza Shah ordered that a railway be built from the southernmost part of the country to its northeastern border. Right up to the ear of the giant Russian bear, to be exact. He knew that the Europeans had the most to gain from this route, but he also knew that the rails would be left behind long after those Europeans were gone.

The railway tracks crept through the desert, over the rivers, up the mountains, down the valleys and through the towns and villages until they finally reached Saffron Mountain.

The iron monster started to climb the mountain, but was forced to stop halfway, when it came to the historic cave with the cuneiform inscription. The building of the railway had disturbed the cave's eternal rest. More importantly, the engineers were afraid that if they blasted through the rock with dynamite, the cave would collapse.

The cuneiform inscription, their ancient cultural heirloom, was in danger. The engineers feared it would crack. They panicked. The chief engineer didn't know what to do. He didn't dare take a single risk. He knew the shah would have him beheaded if anything went wrong.

With trembling hands, he sent a telegram to the capital: CANNOT PROCEED WITH RAILS. CUNEIFORM BLOCKING ROUTE.

The shah read the telegram, hopped into his jeep and had himself driven to Saffron Mountain. After a long night's drive, the jeep stopped at the foot of the mountain. The local gendarme offered the shah a mule, but he refused. He wanted to climb the mountain himself. Early in the morning, before the sun had struck the mountain peak, Reza Shah stood at the entrance to the cave. Wearing a military tunic and carrying a field marshal's baton under his arm, he checked on the progress of his dream.

• • •

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"Your Majesty—" the chief engineer began, trembling. He didn't dare go any further.

"Explain it to me!"

"Th-th-th-the rails have to go past here. I'm afraid that ... that ... that ..."

"Yes?"

"I-I-I would like Your Majesty's permission to ... to ... to relocate the cuneiform relief."

"Relocate it? Shut up, you stupid engineer! Find another solution!"

"We've done all the cal-cal-cal-culations, checked out all the options. No matter how we do it, the dynamite could destroy the cave."

"Find another route!"

"We've explored every alternative. This is the best route. The others are virtually impossible. We could make a huge detour, but ..."

"But what?"

"It'll take longer."

"How much longer?"

"A number of months, Your Majesty. Six or seven months."

"We haven't got that much time. We can't lose a day. Or even an hour. As for you—get out of my sight, you idiot! 'Impossible'—is that the only word you engineers know? Six or seven months? You

must be joking!”

Furious, the shah marched into the dark cave. Outside, no one dared to move. After a while he came out again. He looked down at the hordes of peasants—young men who’d climbed up the mountain to catch a glimpse of Reza Shah. When they saw him emerge from the cave, they leapt onto the rocks and began to shout, “Jawid shah! Jawid shah! Jawid shah!”

The shah thrust his field marshal’s baton under his arm and slowly made his way down the mountain. Just as the gendarmes were about to chase away the peasants at the bottom, a group of elders from the surrounding villages appeared. Dressed in their most festive garments, they walked towards Reza Shah, carrying a bowl of water, a mirror and the Koran. When they were a hundred yards away, the oldest man threw the water in the direction of the shah and the other men bowed their heads.

“Salaam, sultan of Persia!” the man exclaimed. “*Salaam*, God’s earthly shadow!”

He knelt and kissed the ground.

“Come forward!” commanded the shah, pointing his baton at the place where he wanted the old man to stand.

“Listen, graybeard! I don’t need your prayers. Use your head and give me some advice. That idiot engineer doesn’t know how to route the railway track. How can I get the train past the cave without doing any permanent damage?”

The old man turned and went back to confer with the others.

After a while he came back.

“Well?”

“For centuries our fathers have built houses here on Saffron Mountain, using only a pick-axe and spades. No one has ever damaged the mountain. They chipped away the rock only in places where it was absolutely necessary. If Your Majesty wishes, I will call together all of the young men in the village. They will clear a path for your train.”

A look of relief spread over the shah’s face. Then it clouded over again.

“No, it’ll take too long. I don’t have that much time. I want it done fast.”

“As Your Majesty wishes. In that case, I will call all of the young men on Saffron Mountain and, if necessary, all of the young men from the neighbouring mountains. We have experience, we know the mountain. Give our men the opportunity to prove themselves.”

The shah was silent.

“Give us the strongest pick-axes in the country.”

“And then?”

“Then we will clear a path, so the train can go around the cave and reach the other side of the mountain.”

That evening the muezzins from all the villages called from the roofs of their mosques, “Allahu akbar! *La ilaha illa Allah*. In the name of Allah, our forefathers and Reza Shah, we call on all strong men. Hurry, hurry, hurry to the mosque. Whatever you’re doing, stop right now and hurry to the mosque.”

All evening and all night young men from the neighbouring villages poured into the mosque in Saffron Village.

Early the next morning hundreds of men walked behind the village elder and stood in the designated spot at the foot of the mountain. One of those men was the seventeen-year-old Aga Akbar. He didn’t have the faintest idea who Reza Shah was or what he had in mind, much less what his plans for the country were. Like the other men, he had no idea why the railway tracks had to reach the other side of the mountain so quickly. All he knew was that a train had to go around the cave and that it was the job to save the cuneiform inscription.

Reza Shah stood high on a rock and looked down at the men. The villagers had heard the legends about the shah.

In those days the people in the towns and villages thought of him as a saviour. A powerful man. A champion of the poor. A reformer who wanted to give the country a face-lift.

But his reputation in Tehran was very different. There he was known for his brutal treatment of the opposition.

The shah had ordered that all the opium, tea and sugar be removed from the house of an important mullah, and had kept him under house arrest for three weeks. To the mullah this was tantamount to the death penalty. The shah had ordered the imams to remove their turbans and appear in public with their heads bare. His policemen went through the streets plucking chadors off the women who were still wearing them. When the imams in the holy city of Qom rose up in revolt, Reza Shah ordered that their cannon be placed at the gates of the golden mosque. Then he taunted the leader of the Shiites: "Come out of your hole, you black rat!"

A rat? A black rat? What did he mean by that? He just called our great spiritual leader a black rat. Suddenly hundreds of young imams with rifles appeared on the roof of the golden mosque.

"Fire!" the shah screamed at his officers.

Dozens of imams were killed and dozens arrested. The sacred shrine was partially destroyed. A wave of shock ran through the Islamic world. Shopkeepers turned off their lights. The bazaar closed. People wore black. But the shah wouldn't listen to reason.

"Are there any more out there?"

No, not a soul was left on the streets and rooftops. Everyone was sitting inside, behind locked doors.

Aga Akbar knew none of these stories. He thought the shah was simply a high-ranking military officer. A general in a strange-looking tunic, with a stick under his arm.

The village elder walked over to the shah, bowed and said, "The men are prepared to sacrifice themselves to realise Your Majesty's dream."

Reza Shah didn't answer. He looked at the peasants. His face was filled with doubt. Would they really be able to solve his problem?

Just then a pair of armoured cars drove up and stopped near the men. Two generals leapt out and raced over to the shah, each holding his cap in one hand and his rifle in the other.

"Everything is ready, Your Majesty!" called one of the generals.

"Unload them!" ordered the shah.

The generals hurried back to the armoured cars.

The soldiers threw open the doors and unloaded hundreds of English pick-axes.

"You!" the shah yelled at the village elder standing before him. "Here are the pick-axes you asked for! If any of your men are lazy, I'll put a bullet through your head!"

He wheeled around. "Don't just stand there," he said to the chief engineer. "Get started!"

The shah headed for his jeep. Suddenly he stopped, as if he'd forgotten something. He returned to his elevated position on the rock and beckoned one of the generals with his baton. In turn, the general beckoned seven soldiers, who were lined up with seven bulging bags in their arms. The soldiers marched over to the shah, deposited the bags on the ground in front of him and snapped back for attention.

"Open them!" he commanded one of the soldiers.

The soldier opened the bags, one by one. The shah took out a handful of brand-new bills.

He turned to the peasants. "Start smashing those rocks!" he ordered. "This money will be your reward. I'll be back next week!"

“*Jawid shah* ... Long live the shah!” the men shouted three times.

The shah climbed down again and went over to his jeep.

The engineer quickly led the peasants, each equipped with a pick-axe, to the place where the work on the tracks had come to a halt. The peasants made jokes, flexed their muscles and swore they would reduce even the hardest rocks on Saffron Mountain to rubble. They had no idea what was in store.

Years later, a faded black-and-white photograph proudly displayed on Aga Akbar’s mantle showed him with a pick-axe resting on his right shoulder and a spike—as thick as a tent stake—between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

Akbar is turned at a slight angle. The photographer had focused on the pick-axe and spike, but the young Aga Akbar had flexed his muscles, so that your eye is drawn to his bulging biceps rather than to the tools.

When Ishmael was little, Aga Akbar told him a long story about the picture. A story that was actually about his biceps and about the money—the large sum of money—he had earned.

“Come here!” he gestured to his son. “Tell me! Who’s the man in the picture?”

And he launched into a story. “I, Akbar, was very strong. I—and only I—could break that rock with the pick-axe. Can you see the rock? There, in the background. No, you can’t see it, the picture’s not good, it’s old. But there, behind me. Sure you can’t see it? Never mind. That rock had to go, all the rocks had to go. They couldn’t use those exploding things. They were bad for the cuneiform inscription.

“One day I’ll take you to the cave. Wait a minute. Don’t you have a ... where’s your schoolbook? Have you ever seen a picture in your schoolbook of an officer, a man in a military tunic with a crown on his head? Isn’t there one in your schoolbook? ... Seven, yes, seven potato sacks full of money. And that money was for us. Because of the train.”

Did Ishmael understand what his father was talking about in his rudimentary sign language?

One thing little Ishmael did know was that his life was interwoven with that of his father. Everyone—his mother, his uncles, his aunts, the village imam, the neighbours, the children—made him stand and walk beside his father. His job was to be his father’s mouthpiece.

Later the missing bits of information would be supplied by his aunts and uncles, or by the old men of Saffron Mountain. Or he himself would look up the facts in history books and novels.

More often, however, he would go and visit his father’s elderly uncle. He would sit down by Kazeem Khan and listen as he filled in the missing parts of the stories. “Your father was strong. I told him that a railway track was being built. Personally, I’ve never cared for aristocrats and generals and shahs, but I’d heard a lot about Reza Shah. Though I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the man, I didn’t see him.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was stubborn. I rode over there on my horse, but the gendarmes wouldn’t let me through.”

“Why not?”

“Because people weren’t allowed to approach the shah on horseback. You were supposed to go on foot, to grovel on your hands and knees. I refused to do that. I turned around and went home, but I came back the next day, because I wanted to see what the men of Saffron Mountain were doing.”

“Did you go on foot or on horseback?”

“Nobody’s ever seen me go anywhere on foot. I looked at the men from a distance. They were working in shifts, around the clock, smashing the rocks and clearing a road for the train.”

“Did the men manage all right with the pick-axes? I mean, did they finish the road on time?”

“Oh, no. Or, actually, they did. At first everything was going fine. They were banging away with all their might, and you could see the road taking shape. Then, just below the southern wall of the cave, they ran into a rock that was unusually hard. The men pounded at it—first one shift, then another—barely made a dent. The work had gone well the first two weeks. After that, their strength was gone. The men were thin and worn, exhausted, barely recognisable. The engineers were so terrified of the shah that they hadn’t realised the men were broken. They panicked. Reza Shah would be arriving soon and the men would still be banging away at that one rock.

“The shah wasn’t an educated man, nor did he come from a family of book readers, but he was smart, especially when it came to ordinary people. He took one look at the workers and knew what the problem was. He fired the chief engineer. ‘Go and pack your bags, bookworm. You don’t know what work is. All you can do is read, read, read.’

“Reza Shah ordered ten big kettles to be brought from the army barracks. He knew that a worker needed more than bread and goat cheese if he was to smash rocks for weeks at a time. So ten fat cooks came running up with ten big kettles. The soldiers were ordered to shoot five mountain goats and hand them over to the cooks.

“Work was suspended for the day. All that the men had to do was eat, drink, smoke and rest.

“That same evening the shah returned with a new engineer. He was determined not to go back to Tehran until the railway tracks had reached the other side of the cave.

“Early the next morning, even before the sun was up, the shah climbed up to the cave. A soldier carrying a bag of money, trotted along behind.

“The men were lined up with their pick-axes resting on their shoulders. They waited for the shah to reveal his new plan.

“The shah took off his tunic, grabbed a handful of money and positioned himself on top of a rock. He pointed his baton at one of the men.

“‘You!’

“The man stepped forward.

“‘And you—’

“‘No, not you, the man next to you.’

“The other man stepped forward. It was your father. Of course, he hadn’t heard the shah, but his fellow workers had tapped him on the shoulder.

“The shah selected eleven strong men.

“‘Listen!’ the shah said. ‘After today, I don’t want to see this rock ever again. Every time you chip off a piece, I’ll give you one of these bills. Who wants to go first?’

“Of course, your father didn’t know what the shah was saying, so he couldn’t be first. But the first man brought the pick-axe down with all his might and chipped off a piece. ‘Here’s your money,’ the shah said. ‘Now you!’ He pointed at your father. Only then did your father understand what was going on. He slammed his pick-axe down so hard that a huge chunk of rock flew off. The shah smiled.

“‘Here, young man, I’m giving you two bills. Next!’

“And so it went. The rock was smashed to pieces, and those eleven men went home utterly broken and exhausted. But that night, everyone in the village knew that Reza Shah had tucked a wad of bills into your father’s pocket. And that Aga Akbar had then collapsed.

“There was a newspaper photographer, whose job it was to record the work on the railway. The shah pointed at your father, lying there on the ground. The moment he saw the shah point, your father grabbed his pick-axe and leapt to his feet.

“‘Put the pick-axe on your shoulder,’ the photographer instructed him. ‘Hold up one of those spikes. Right, that’s good. Now don’t move.’ But your father turned and angled himself slightly so that his biceps showed up better in the picture.

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