

Long ago in Persia there lived a boy named Ali ibn Ali. His father was a wealthy merchant. His mother was a woman of beauty and kindness. His home was a palace where fountains overflowed into deep reflecting pools. As he had no brothers or sisters, he was the apricot of his parents' eyes.

Fortunate as Ali ibn Ali was in worldly gifts, he was also most unfortunate, for he had grown spoiled and selfish.

"Disgusting grapes!" A handful of fruit flew through the air. Ali was sitting cross-legged with Layla, his small black monkey, on his shoulder. "They are fit only for the beggar who fouls our gate!"

At that moment Ali's parents entered. If Ali had one spot in his heart that raced with love, it was for his parents.

"What are we hearing?" His father peered at his son. "That is no way to speak, beloved child." His mother kissed him.

"These grapes are rotten, Father." Ali threw his arms around his father's neck. "They are fit only for the bowl of that beggar who crowds our gate. Why do you allow him to sit here?" Ali stroked his father's cheek.

His mother took Ali's slim, ringed fingers in hers. "A true Muslim gives to the poor, the crippled, the homeless, the hungry. This man is all of these."

"And," his father put palms together before his face, "as he chooses to bless our gate, there he shall remain. Now, I have something to tell you."

Ali jumped up, his face flushed. "Father, are you going away? Mother, tell him he mustn't go away again so soon. We're lonely when he's gone. So is Layla." His mother said nothing, but Ali knew she, too, wished her husband to stay.

"Only a few days, my son. Take care of your mother. And no more ugly tempers. Such behavior is unacceptable at any age!"

That evening Ali and his mother watched as the merchant galloped off on his favorite horse, followed by three servants, their saddlebags bulging with spices and gems. But in two days he was brought back on a litter, racked with fever and pain in all his limbs.

During the next hours doctors and wise men examined the suffering merchant. Each emerged bewildered, leaving mixes of herbs and potions.

Ali held Layla close. Whenever his eyes overflowed with tears, the monkey wiped the boy's cheeks with her small paws.

"What shall we do, Layla? Mother sits by Father's bed day and night cooling his face with rose water. We must help."

Ali tiptoed to the door of his father's room and knocked softly. "Come," his mother answered. His father lay in a high, canopied bed. His skin was the color of ivory. Ali had never seen his mother's face so sad, so pale.

"The fever is raging," she whispered. "He does not eat or drink. And his words ..." She stifled a sob. "He mutters, but ..."

Ali leaned close to his father's mouth. "Father, do you

wish to tell us something?" The invalid made a move to lift his hand, but it fell limply onto the coverlet.

"Shhhh ... llla." It was barely audible. "MMMMMba, kah ... kah ... la ... ba ..."

Ali turned to his mother. His eyes were bright. "I think, Mother, that father is trying to say *shula kalambar*. Would he ask for this? It's a tasty stew, but ..."

"Shula kalambar. It isn't a favorite of his. It *is* tasty, but there are many delicacies he enjoys far more. Honey cakes and rice creams and grilled lamb with allspice."

Ali knelt beside the bed. "Am I right, Father? Shula kalambar?" There was a slight but distinct move of his father's head.

Ali raced from the room, across the courtyard to the kitchens.

"Cook, we must have shula kalambar," he commanded in his imperious tone. "My father requests it!"

"Regrets, young master!" The cook bowed. "We have lentils and garlic but not spinach and coriander. These must be of the freshest."

Ali stamped his foot. "Get them!"

The cook answered. "My kitchen boys are not here, and I cannot leave. There is baklava in the oven for your honored mother. I—"

"I don't care about *you*!" Ali shook with rage. "Very well, I

shall get them myself!"

He ran to his chamber, where he took gold coins from a bronze box and tucked them into the pocket of his silk tunic. Then he raced to the outer gate. As he passed through, he tripped over the beggar's bowl. "Pig!" Ali could feel the blood oozing from his knee. With a sharp intake of breath, he pulled up against the gate, brushing the beggar's shoulder.

"Steady, Ali ibn Ali." The beggar's voice was musical. "There is time before the stalls close."

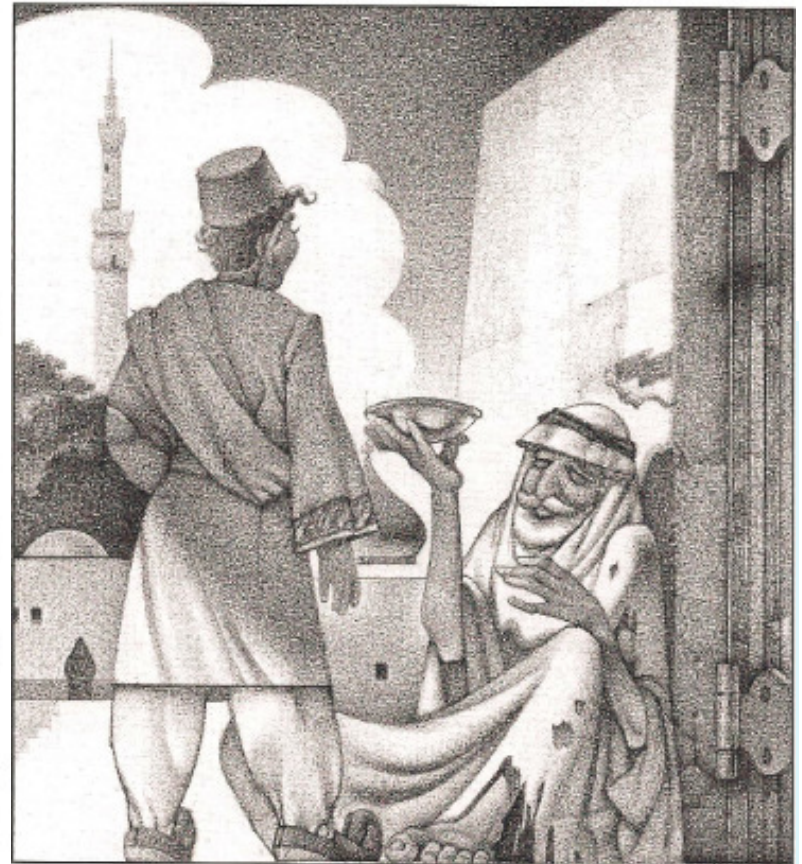
The words stunned Ali. "How do you know I am going to the market stalls?"

The man shifted position. "I know. I also know that you are correct; your father did ask for shula kalambar. The stew has great healing powers, but," he raised a knobbed finger, "for it to work, *all* ingredients must be purchased with coins begged from the street. Garlic, coriander, spinach, lentils ... all."

"Begged from the street!" Fear and fury shot through the boy's slight frame. "Then give me what you have. I will give you gold coins in exchange."

"Ah, Ali ibn Ali, it is not that simple. The coins must be obtained by a family member for the healing to work."

A family member! He looked down at the beggar. "Why should I believe you? You sit here in the dust by my father's grace. What do you know of the world?"



The beggar looked up, his heavy-lidded eyes half closed. "There is no reason to believe me, young master. But if you wish to save your father, heed my words."

Layla was racing around and around Ali's feet, chattering and pulling his trousers. Ali's head whirled. Strangely, every bone in his body was suddenly pushing him to do as the beggar instructed. However much he abhorred this creature, he must carry out the necessary actions so that his father would again be well and roses would again bloom in his mother's cheeks.

"Then I shall beg," he replied. Ali threw back his shoulders and straightened his turban with its diamond plume. "No one will deny me. I have only to ask."

As he turned to leave, the beggar caught him by the belt of his tunic. The boy recoiled, but the beggar held fast. "Begged from the street, in the clothes of a beggar, hunched as a beggar, with a beggar's bowl." The beggar closed his eyes.

Fine blue veins rose up under the skin of Ali's temples. Quickly he removed his turban and tunic. As he did so, the beggar threw off his ragged cloak with an agility that belied his wizened appearance and handed it to the boy. Ali laid the tunic and turban next to the beggar. Then he smeared his face with dust, threw the cloak over his head, put Layla on his shoulder, took up the bowl, and set out.

Bent over, Ali held out the bowl, his eyes averted from the scornful gaze of passersby. "Please, sir," Ali ran toward a richly

dressed man and woman, "please, lady, for my father who is dying. For a stew to heal him. Please, for the love of Allah."

The couple sneered, but the woman opened her gold-mesh purse and dropped a coin into the bowl. As Ali leaned forward, the man shoved him aside with a force that sent the boy and monkey across the cobbles. The coin flew from the bowl.

"A dying father! There's a new one! What lies these pigs invent to take our gold."

Ali crawled after the coin, heedless of the jeers. "Out of sight, son of filth," the man called after him.

It was Layla who retrieved the coin. Ali stood up. The tears that had been brimming in his eyes ran down his cheeks, leaving streaks through the grime and dirt. He felt a soft paw touch each eye. "It's all right, Layla. We *must* beg enough to buy lentils and garlic and spinach and coriander. We must. But how can people be so cruel? I've feelings, too, under these rags."

So Ali ibn Ali started out again, repeating his pleas until the sun was low behind the mountains and his limbs could barely crouch. Jeers of "Fool" and "Filth" and "Useless flesh," scenes of shame were repeated again and again. Finally, as darkness fell, there was a handful of coins in the bowl. Ali raced to the market. He found one tiny stall open. His hands trembled as he paid. Layla clung to his arm, her tail wound loosely around his neck. With the precious items in a sleeve

of the cloak, he raced back to the palace.

The beggar opened one eye. "And because you have begged and have the ingredients for the stew, you had better have the shula kalambar prepared immediately, Ali ibn Ali."

Ali shot to the kitchen where the chief cook was about to toss him out until he revealed himself. Ali requested politely, to his own astonishment as well as to everyone else's, that the stew be prepared instantly.

With Layla on his back, Ali carried the steaming dish past the fountains to his parents' room.

He put a finger to his lips in reply to his mother's amazement at the sight of him in rags, his face a smudge of dust and grime. "I'll tell you later, beloved Mother. Now Father must eat."

Ali's mother put a hand under her husband's head. "Eat, beloved, eat," she urged as Ali put a spoonful of stew to his father's lips.

"Eat, Father. For Mother, for me, for Layla, for yourself above all." To himself he added, "Please, Allah, let this stew heal my father. Let the beggar be right. I will give him anything he desires. I have learned so much in these last hours. I—"

"Ali!" His mother gave a cry. "Look at his face! Is there not a rosy hue blushing his cheeks?"

It was true! The invalid was breathing more lightly. His eyelids fluttered, then a smile began to play about his lips. A moment later his eyes opened. Ali could barely hold steady the next spoonful.

"Give me the bowl." His mother took the stew from Ali. "I will feed him now. You must wash from head to toe and throw away that rag you are wearing. Where in Allah's name ..."

"No, my son!" It was his father, in a clear, strong voice. "Do not throw away the cloak. Let it ever be a reminder that the gentle heart brings life and joy."

"I will never forget, Father." Ali kissed his father's hand and, leaving the room, ran back to the gate of the palace and fell on his knees before the beggar. "May I keep your cloak? My father will provide you with a new one. Two. As many as you wish."

The beggar took up a stick that lay beside him and, with great effort, started to pull himself up.

"Keep the cloak, Ali ibn Ali. Keep it as a reminder of the pain unkindness brings. And don't forget to take your own clothes back. And tell your honorable father I accept his gifts."

Ali put his arms around the man's shoulders to steady him. "Where are you going? I want you to stay."

"I am going and I am staying," the beggar said, nodding gravely. Then his face burst into a mass of smiling creases. "I