

PATRICIA ST JOHN

STAR OF
LIGHT



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Part 1

1

A little girl came running down the side of the mountain one afternoon in spring. Gathering her cotton gown round her knees, she skipped as lightly as a lamb on her bare brown feet, leaping over drifts of wild marigold that shone up at her. In the water meadows below her, the plum blossom was out, and from the hilltop above, it looked like a sea of white foam along the riverbanks. Baby goats gambolled among the flowers, and the storks had begun to build on top of the thatches.

Rahma, who had taken a short cut across the hillside, reached the path with a bound, and went on dancing down it. She was 7 years old, and small, because she seldom had enough to eat. Her stepfather and his older wife disliked her, and sometimes beat her. Rahma's clothes were very ragged, and she worked as hard as a woman with a big family might work in England. Yet all her troubles could not spoil her joy when a treat occasionally came her way. And today she was to look after the goats alone while her brother went on some mysterious expedition with their mother. Free and alone for two whole hours with no other company but the storks and the goats! Two whole hours to play in the sunshine with the kids, and no one would scold her, or make her grind the millstone, or carry heavy buckets of water.

She spied her brother from afar, rounding up a couple of mischievous black kids who were trying to get into a patch of young wheat. Spring was making them feel all

excited and they gambolled in every direction except the right one, giving merry little bleats and skipping high in the air. Hamid, their keeper, did not mind at all, for he felt exactly as they did. At the margin of the field of young wheat, the three of them pranced together. And Rahma came bounding in among them, her smooth dark hair blown in wisps about her face, her black eyes very bright.

Laughing and shouting together they steered the kids on to the open hillside where the rest of the flock was scattered. Then Hamid turned, surprised, to look at his happy little sister. He had not often seen her so bright and carefree, for country girls were taught to walk sedately and to listen to their elders and betters. Besides, Rahma was 7 years old, and almost a little woman.

"What have you come for?" he asked.

"To look after the goats. Mother wants you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She wants you to go somewhere. She has been crying and looking at little sister. I think perhaps little sister is ill."

Her sparkling eyes clouded as she remembered her mother's tears, for she loved her mother. The sunshine and freedom had made her forget all about those tears. Besides, her mother often wept when no one but Rahma was with her, so Rahma was almost used to it.

"All right," said Hamid, "but take good care of the goats. Here's a stick for you." And he turned away and climbed the valley between the two green arms of the mountains. He walked fast because he did not want to keep his mother waiting. But he did not skip or look about him as Rahma had done, for his mind was full of wondering.

Why did his mother look so worried these days, as though she were carrying some secret load of fear? And

why was she always hiding away his baby sister, keeping her out of sight whenever she heard her husband or the older wife approaching? Of course, neither of them had ever particularly liked baby sister, but they knew she was there, so why hide her? Mother even seemed afraid of Hamid and Rahma playing with the baby nowadays. She would drive them away, and retreat into a corner of the room, her little daughter clasped against her, and always that fear in her eyes. Was it evil spirits she feared? Or poison? Hamid did not know, but perhaps today his mother would tell him. He walked faster.

He sighed as he climbed the hill. Until quite recently, his mother had never looked frightened, and he and Rahma had never been knocked about. They had lived with their mother and with their own father, who loved them, in a little thatched home down the valley. There had been three other brown tousled-headed children younger than Rahma, but they had started coughing and grown thin. When the snow fell, and fuel and bread were scarce, they grew weaker and died within a few weeks of each other. Their little bodies were buried on the eastern slope of the mountain facing the sunshine, and marigolds and daisies sprang up on their graves.

Their father coughed that winter too, but no one took any notice, because after all a man must earn his living. So he went on working, and ploughed his spring fields, and sowed his grain. Then he came home one night and said he could work no more. Until the following autumn he lay on the rush mat and grew weaker. Zohra, his wife, Hamid and Rahma garnered in the ripened corn, and gleaned what they could in order to buy him food. But it was no use. He died, leaving his wife, still young and beautiful, a penniless widow with two little children.

They sold the house and the goat and the hens and the patch of corn, and went to live with their grandmother. Then, a little sister was born, bringing fresh hope and sunshine to the family. They called her Kinza, which meant "treasure", and never was a baby more loved. Yet, strangely, she never played or clapped her hands like other babies. She slept a great deal, and often seemed to be staring at nothing. Hamid sometimes wondered why the bunches of bright flowers he picked for her seemed to give her no pleasure. When Kinza was a few months old there came a fresh offer of marriage for their mother. She accepted at once, because she had no work and no more money to buy bread for her children. So the family moved to their new home.

It was not a very happy home. Si Mohamed, the husband, was already married to an older wife, but she had never had any children, so he wanted another. He did not mind taking Hamid too, because a boy of 9 would be useful in looking after the goats. Nor did he object to Rahma, because a girl of 7 could be a useful little slave about the house. But he could not see that a baby was the slightest use to any of them, and wished to give Kinza away.

"Many childless women will be glad of a girl," he said, "and why should I bring up another man's baby?"

But young Zohra had burst into a passion of weeping and refused to do any work until he changed his mind, so he rather sullenly agreed to let Kinza stay for a time. No more was said about it – unless perhaps something had been said during the past few weeks, something that Hamid and Rahma had not heard. Could that be why their mother held Kinza so close and looked so frightened?

A voice above him called to him to run, and he looked up. His mother was standing under an old twisted olive

tree that flung its shade over a well. She carried two buckets in her hand, but she had not filled them. Baby Kinza was tied on her back with a cloth. His mother seemed to be in a great hurry about something.

“Come quick, Hamid, she said impatiently. “How slowly you came up the path! Hide the buckets in the bushes. I only brought them as an excuse to leave the house, in case Fatima should want to know where I was going. Now, come with me.”

“Where to, Mother?” asked the boy, very surprised.

“Wait till we get round the corner of the mountain,” replied his mother, leading the way up the steep, green grass, and walking very fast. “People will see us from the well, and will tell Fatima where we have gone. Follow quickly. I’ll soon tell you.”

They hurried on until they had turned the corner of the arm of the mountain, were hidden from the village, and were overlooking another valley. The young mother sat down, unhitched her cloth, and laid her baby in her lap.

“Look well at her, Hamid,” she said. “Play with her and show her the flowers.”

Hamid, wondering, stared long and earnestly into the strangely old, patient face of his little sister, but she did not stare back or return his smile. She seemed to be looking at something very far away, and not seeing him at all. With a sudden thrill of fear, he flicked his hand in front of her eyes but she neither moved nor blinked.

“She’s blind,” he whispered at last. His lips felt dry, and his face was pale.

His mother nodded, and rose quickly to her feet. “Yes,” she replied, “she’s blind. I’ve known it for some time, but I’ve kept it from Fatima and my husband because when they know they will probably take her away from me.

Why should they be bothered with another man's blind child? She can never work, and she will never marry..."

Her voice broke and, blinded by her tears, she stumbled a little on the rough track. Hamid caught her arm.

"Where are we going, Mother?" he asked again.

"To the saint's tomb," answered his mother, hurrying on, "up behind the next hill. They say he is a very powerful saint and has healed many, but Fatima has never before given me the chance to go. Now she thinks I'm drawing water, and we must return with the buckets full. I wanted you to come with me, because it's a lonely path and I was afraid to go by myself."

They climbed in silence, too breathless to talk any more, until the green, flower-starred turf gave place to rock. Here, hollowed from a boulder, was a small cave shaded by a bush. The bush was festooned with dirty little screws of paper tied to its branches. Every little screw carried its tale of sorrow. The sick, the broken-hearted, the childless, the unloved... all brought their burdens to the bones of this dead man, and they all went home unhealed and uncomforted.

They laid little sister at the mouth of the cave. Her mother bowed down and lifted herself up again, calling on the name of God about whom she knew nothing, and on the prophet Mohammed. It was her last hope. But as she prayed a cloud passed across the sun, and a cold shadow fell on the baby. She shivered and began to cry, and groped for her mother's arms. The woman gazed eagerly into her daughter's face for a moment, and then picked her up with a disappointed sigh. God had not listened, for Kinza was still blind.

Hamid rose from where he had been squatting, and he and his mother almost ran down the hill. They were late,

and already the sun was setting behind the mountains. The storks flew past with their rattling cry, black against the sky. Hamid, rebellious and bitterly disappointed, scowled into the sunset. What was the good of it? Little sister would never see it. God apparently did not care, and the dead saint would do nothing to help. Perhaps baby girls were beneath his notice.

They reached the well in silence, and Hamid drew the water for his mother, gave her the buckets, and dashed off down the valley to collect Rahma and the goats. He met them halfway up the hill, for Rahma was afraid of the lengthening shadows and wanted to go home. She slipped her small hand into his. The goats, who also wanted to go home, huddled against their legs.

“Where did you go?” asked Rahma.

“To the saint’s tomb,” answered Hamid. “Rahma, little sister is blind. Her eyes see nothing but darkness. That’s why Mother hides her away. She does not want Fatima and Si Mohamed to know.”

Rahma stood still, horrified. “Blind?” she echoed. And then, as the thought struck her, she added quickly, “And the saint – couldn’t he make her see?”

Hamid shook his head. “I don’t think that saint is much good,” he said boldly. “Mother went there before when Father was very sick, but nothing happened. Father died.”

“It is the will of God,” said Rahma, and shrugged her shoulders. Then, clinging close together, because night was falling, they climbed the hill, and the goats’ eyes gleamed like green lanterns in the dark.

“I hate the dark,” whispered Rahma with a little shiver. But Hamid stared up into the deep blue sky, through a filigree of olive leaves.

“I love the stars,” he said.