

The Argan Tree

She used to come every day to reflect at her husband's grave. At the end of the day, the desert heat was less oppressive and she could squat for a long time in front of a stone that was slightly larger than the others. This marked a resting place that hardly stood out from the surrounding landscape of stones, sand, thistles, various types of desert lavender and an argan tree. The argan loses its leaves and shuts down during periods of prolonged drought. It pretends to be dead...and can wait this way for several months or even years, ready to bud at the coming of the first rains.

The woman wore a blue cotton veil decorated with silver and copper coloured round patches that partly hid her face yet emphasised the beauty of her eyes. Only a brown strand of hair, a delicate tattoo on the forehead and flashing black eyes were visible. It was hard to guess her age. Even so, it was possible to make out that she was talking and sometimes it seemed as though a tear was forming in the corner of her eye. She was recounting her day in minute detail. How many eggs had the hens laid? What was the state of the market-garden? How many argan-tree nuts had she cracked to get at the kernels? She talked at length. When she felt that she had said everything, she spoke of the past. Do you remember... Do you remember... Do you remember... Moreover, it seemed that she stopped talking in order to listen to or wait for unlikely answers. And then, at sunset, she would head home all the while singing softly to herself.

In order to reach her house, it was necessary to pass through the Ksar¹ ramparts using one of the two access openings then walk along the narrow network of alleyways along which houses huddled together as though illustrating a determined connection, cohesion and solidarity between the members of the village community. In fact her house was a tiny building made of sundried clay bricks, with three floors and a terrace, the use of which changed with the season. In summer, the ground and first floors were used during

¹ Ksar: Fortified oasis village. Invariably enclosed within outer walls that serve as protection against enemy attack

the day and the upper levels at night. In winter, this system was reversed in a vertical migration in order to adapt as much as possible to the cold temperatures. It was summertime, and the ground floor had become a stable. A few goats and some hens were patiently awaiting their keeper. Once she had fed her animals, she went upstairs to the second floor to sleep.

She slept soundly on her straw and wool bedding. And that night, she dreamed as she had never dreamed before. Her husband was there, standing in front of her in his finest clothes, tenderly watching her sleep.

And so she dared to say to him: "Is that you? You are so handsome, you look so well! But you know you're dead? Where have you been all this time?"

To her great surprise, she found the strength in her dream to hear the answer. He said: "You're right! I am dead but I have come to visit you tonight in your dream because I felt that you needed me, and my love for you will never die - it transcends time, and life, and death...".

She started awake for an instant, then just as quickly, and with a contented smile, she fell asleep again.

The following day, she took water to the argan tree.

Traduction : ***Christine Scott-Fox***