

Contents

1. Kinza	9
2. The Secret Revealed	17
3. Si Mohamed Makes a Deal	23
4. Zohra Makes a Plan	29
5. Hamid Agrees to Help	35
6. Adventures on the Way	43
7. Hamid Completes His Mission	53
8. Doughnuts and Street Boys	61
9. Supper at the Nurse's Home	67
10. Hamid Learns a Lesson for Life	75
11. Christmas	83
12. Jenny	91
13. The Holiday Begins	95
14. A Light Begins to Shine	105
15. Jenny Learns a Hard Lesson	115
16. Rescue Plans	125
17. An Exciting Night	137
18. New Beginnings	149
19. Aunt Rosemary Explains	155
20. Partings and Plans	163

Kinza

A little girl came running down the side of the mountain one midday in spring. Pulling her cotton dress up around her knees, she skipped as lightly as a lamb on her bare brown feet, leaping over the bright orange marigolds that shone up at her. Baby goats jumped among the wildflowers, and the storks had begun to build their nests on the tops of the thatched houses.

Rahma was seven years old. She was small because she never had enough to eat. Her stepfather and his elder wife didn't like her and sometimes beat her. Her clothes were very ragged, and she had to work very hard. But today she was going to have a treat, and nothing could spoil her happiness. She had been asked to look after the goats alone while her brother went on some mysterious trip with their mother.

She was free and alone with just the goats and storks for company—two whole hours to play in the sunshine with the

goat kids, with no one to shout at her, or make her grind the millstone, or carry heavy buckets of water.

She spotted Hamid, her brother, rounding up a couple of mischievous black kids who were trying to get into a patch of young wheat. Spring was making them feel excited, and they were jumping about all over the place. Hamid joined in with them and then Rahma, too, her smooth dark hair blowing about her face, her black eyes shining brightly.

Laughing and shouting together, they steered the kids away from the patch of wheat and on to the open hillside where the rest of the flock was scattered. Then Hamid turned, surprised, to look at his little sister. He had not often seen her so happy and carefree, for country girls were taught to behave themselves properly.

“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 looked sad as she remembered her mother’s tears, for she loved her mother—only the sunshine and freedom had made her forget all about them.

“All right,” said Hamid, “but take good care of the goats. Here’s a stick for you.”

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 questions.

Why did his mother look so worried and full of fear these days? 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 really 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 hide in a corner of the room, her little daughter clasped against her, and always with 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, because until a few months ago his mother had never looked frightened, and he and Rahma had never been knocked about or considered in the way. They had lived with their mother and their father, who loved them, in a little thatched home down the valley. There had been three other curly-headed children younger than Rahma, but they had started coughing and grown thin. When the snow fell, and there was hardly any bread or fuel, 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 grew 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 plowed his fields in spring 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, and Hamid and Rahma gathered in the ripened corn and gleaned what they could so they could buy him food, but it was no use. He died, leaving his wife, still young and beautiful, a poor widow with two little children.

They sold the house and the goats and the hens and the patch of corn, and went to live with their grandmother. A few months later Little Sister was born, bringing fresh hope and sunshine to the family. They called her Kinza, which means “treasure,” and everyone loved and cuddled her. Yet, strangely, she never played or clapped her hands like other babies. She slept a lot and often seemed to lie staring at nothing. Hamid sometimes wondered why she didn’t seem pleased with the bunches of bright flowers he picked for her.

When Kinza was a few months old, a man offered to marry their mother. She accepted at once, because she had no work and no more money to buy food for her three children, and 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 wife. He did not mind taking Hamid, too, because a boy of nine would be useful to look after the goats. He also thought Rahma could be a useful little slave girl about the house. But he could not see that

a baby was any use at all, and he wanted 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 Zohra had burst into tears and refused to do any work until he changed his mind, so he rather crossly agreed to let Kinza stay for a while. 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 Hamid called to him to run, and he looked up. His mother was standing under an old, twisted olive tree that threw its shade over a well. She carried two empty buckets, and baby Kinza was tied on her back with a cloth. She seemed in a great hurry about something.

“Come quick, Hamid,” she said impatiently. “How slowly you come 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 little boy, very surprised.

“Wait till we get around 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 tell you soon.”

They hurried on until they were hidden from the village and were overlooking another valley. Zohra sat down and laid her baby in her lap.

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

Hamid stared long and hard 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 did not see him at all. Suddenly feeling very afraid, he flicked his hand in front of her eyes, but she didn’t move or blink.

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

His mother nodded and quickly stood up. “Yes,” she replied, “she’s blind. I’ve known it for some time, but I haven’t told Fatima or my husband because 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.”

She started to cry, and tears blinded her as she stumbled on the rough path.

Hamid caught hold of her arm. “Where are we going, Mother?” he asked her 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 people, but Fatima has never 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 silently to a small cave that had been hollowed out of the rock. There was a bush outside with many dirty, rolled-up pieces of paper tied to its branches. These all

told tales of sorrow and sickness. People brought their burdens to the bones of this dead man, and they all went home unhealed and uncomforted.

They laid Kinza at the mouth of the cave, then Zohra lifted herself up again, calling on the name of a god whom she didn't know, and the prophet Mohammed. It was her last hope. As she prayed, a cloud passed over the sun and a cold shadow fell on the baby. Kinza shivered and began to cry and reached out for her mother's arms. Zohra gazed eagerly into her little 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 and his mother almost ran down the hill. They were late, and the sun was already setting behind the mountains. The storks flew past with their rattling cry, black against the sky. Hamid was angry and bitterly disappointed. What was the good of it? Kinza would never see. God did not seem to care, and the dead saint would do nothing to help. Perhaps he wasn't interested in baby girls.

They reached the well in silence. Hamid drew the water for his mother, gave her the buckets, then dashed off down the valley to collect Rahma and the goats. He met them halfway up the hill, for Rahma was afraid of the evening shadows and had wanted to get home. She held her brother's hand, and 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, our 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 the saint—couldn’t he make her see?”

Hamid shook his head. “I don’t think that saint is much good,” he said rather boldly. “Mother went there before, when Father coughed, 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.

Hamid stared up into the deep blue sky. “I love the stars,” he said.

The Secret Revealed

They reached the village ten minutes later and passed by the dark huts. Through open doors, glowing charcoal gleamed cheerfully in clay pots, and families squatted around their evening meal by dim lamplight. But as they came near their own house they could hear the angry voice of Fatima, the older wife, shouting at their mother.

Fatima hated the new wife and her three children and made life as hard as she could for them in every possible way. She was bent and wrinkled by long years of hard work, and Zohra was still young and beautiful. Fatima had longed in vain for a baby, while Zohra had had six. So perhaps it wasn't surprising that the older woman was so jealous and had been so angry at their coming to live in the house. She showed her hatred by sitting cross-legged on the mattress like a queen all day and making Zohra and Rahma work like slaves. Zohra had only escaped to the well because Fatima had fallen asleep—but

unfortunately she had not slept for long. Furious at finding the young woman not there, she had sent a neighbor's child to spy out for her. So Zohra, carrying her buckets, had arrived home to find that Fatima knew all about her expedition. "Wicked, deceitful, lazy one!" shouted Fatima. "You can't deceive me. Give me that child! Let me see for myself why you hide her away, and hold her so secretly, and creep with her to the tomb. Give her to me, I say! I insist on having her."

She snatched the baby roughly from Zohra's grasp and carried her to the light, and the mother sighed and let her empty arms fall to her sides. After all, Fatima must know soon. They could not hide it much longer, and she had better find out for herself.

The frightened children squatted in the shadows by the wall, their dark eyes very big. The hut was silent as Fatima passed her hands over the baby's limbs and stared into Kinza's still face. Hamid, holding his breath, heard little sounds he had never noticed before—the slow, rhythmical munching of the ox in the stall, the rustle of straw as the kids nuzzled against their mothers, and the soft crooning of roasted hens.

Then the silence was broken by a triumphant cackle of laughter from the old woman, and Kinza, whose ears were very sensitive to loud noises and angry voices, gave a frightened cry. Fatima picked her up and almost flung her back into her mother's lap.

"Blind," she announced, "blind as night! And you knew—you knew all the time! You brought her here to your husband's house to be a burden on all of us forever—never to work, never

to marry. You hid her away in case we found out. Oh, most deceitful of women! Our husband shall know about this tonight. Now—get up and prepare his supper, and you, Rahma, fan the charcoal. When he has eaten his food, we shall hear what he has to say.”

The frightened little girl jumped up and set to work with the bellows till the flames leaped from the glowing coals and flung strange shadows on the walls. Zohra, trembling, laid her baby in the swinging wooden cradle that hung from a beam, and set to work to mash the beans and beat in the oil, for her husband had gone to speak to a neighbor and would be home anytime now.

Supper was just ready when they heard his firm steps coming along the path, and a moment later he appeared in the doorway—a tall man with black eyes and a black beard and a hard, cruel mouth. He wore a long garment made from dark homespun goat’s wool, with a white turban wound around his head. He did not speak to his wives or his stepchildren but sat cross-legged in front of the low, round table and signaled for the food to be set before him. If he noticed Fatima’s triumph, and the white, scared faces of Zohra and the children, he said nothing.

Zohra set the hot dish in the center of the table, and the silent family gathered around. There were no spoons, but she broke two large pieces of bread for her husband and Fatima and three small pieces for herself, Hamid, and Rahma.

“In the name of God,” they murmured as they scooped their bread in the center dish, for they hoped the words would drive away evil spirits that might be lurking around the table.

Sometimes at midday when the sun was shining, Rahma forgot to say them, but she never forgot at night, because the flickering shadows and dark corners made her feel afraid. Evil spirits seemed very real and near after the lamps had been lit. And certainly tonight the little home was full of evil spirits—dark spirits of jealousy and anger and hatred and cruelty and fear. Even little Kinza in her hanging cradle seemed to feel the atmosphere and wailed fretfully.

Si Mohamed frowned. “Stop that noise,” he growled. “Pick her up.”

The mother obeyed and sat down again with her baby held very closely against her.

Fatima waited a moment until her husband had finished eating, then she held out her arms. “Give that child to me,” she said threateningly.

Zohra handed over her baby and burst into tears.

“What is the matter?” said Si Mohamed irritably. His wives might quarrel all they pleased—wives always did quarrel—but he disliked them doing it in front of him. He had been plowing all day and was tired.

“Yes, what is the matter, indeed!” sneered Fatima, and she held out the baby at arm’s length so that the lamplight suddenly shone straight onto her face. But Kinza neither squinted her eyes nor turned away from it. Si Mohamed stared at her directly.

“Blind!” cried Fatima, as she had shouted before. “Blind, blind, blind! And Zohra knew it—she has deceived us all.”

“I didn’t,” sobbed Zohra, rocking to and fro.

“You did,” shouted the old woman.

“Silence, you women,” said their husband sternly, and the quarrel stopped immediately. Once again, there was silence in the dim hut. Rahma suddenly felt cold with fear and crept closer to the dying charcoal. Her stepfather looked very closely at Kinza’s tiny face, flashed the light in front of it, and jerked his hand toward her face until he was satisfied that the old woman spoke the truth.

“Truly,” he agreed, “she is blind.”

But the dreaded outburst of rage never came. He handed Kinza back to her mother, half-closed his eyes, and lit a long, thin pipe. He sat puffing away in silence for some time, until the hut was filled with sickly fumes, and then he said, “Blind children can be very profitable. Keep that baby carefully. She may bring us much money.”

“How?” asked Zohra nervously, her arms tightening around her baby.

“By begging,” replied her husband. “Of course, we cannot take her begging ourselves, for I am an honorable man. But there are beggars who would be glad to hire her to sit with them in the markets. People feel sorry for blind children and give generously. I believe I know of one who would pay to borrow her when she is a little older.”

Zohra said nothing—she dared not. But Hamid and Rahma gave each other a long, rebellious look across the table. They knew the beggar of whom their stepfather spoke—an old man dressed in filthy old rags who swore horrible oaths. They did

not want their precious Kinza to go to that old man. He would certainly mistreat and frighten her.

Their stepfather saw the looks through half-closed eyelids. He clapped his hands sharply. "To bed, you children," he ordered, "quickly!"

They got up hurriedly, mumbled good night, and scuttled into dark corners of the room.

There were low mattresses laid along the wall. Curling themselves up on these, they pulled strips of blanket over them and fell fast asleep.

Hamid never knew why he woke that night, for he usually slept soundly till sunrise. But at about two in the morning, he suddenly sat up in bed, wide awake. A patch of bright moonlight was shining through the window onto Kinza's cradle, and she was moaning and stirring in her sleep.

Hamid slipped from his mattress and stood beside her. Suddenly, a great wave of protective tenderness seemed to come sweeping over him. She was so small, so patient, and so defenseless. Well, he would see to it that no harm came to her. All his life he would guide her through her darkness and protect her with his love. His heart swelled for a moment, and then he remembered that he was only a boy himself and completely under his stepfather's control. They might take Kinza away from him, and then his love would be powerless to reach her.

Was there no stronger love to shelter her, no more certain light to lead her? He did not know.

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