

Fons Elders

## The Last Flying Carpet

## The Adventures of Jean-Pierre

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#### Chapter 1. Meeting the Owl

Not far away from a river which has been flowing south for thousands of years, a boy creeps through the undergrowth. He has heard the hooting of an owl many times from his attic room at night. The oo-hoo sound came from the direction of these bushes. He is sure that the owl wants to tell him something. Just what, he doesn't know. He crawls over the ground in the hopes of getting a sign. The undergrowth is getting denser, and the silence deeper. The sunlight only peeks through in tiny ribbons.

Suddenly, his breath sticks in his throat. Right in front of him two large, round eyes are staring at him, steadfast and fearless. Jean-Pierre stops short, not uttering a sound. Only when the owl shuts her eyes can he breathe again and dare to take a good look.

The owl is whitish-gray. She looks very old. Perhaps this owl knows where Jean-Pierre comes from.

Jean-Pierre carries a big secret in his heart. He doesn't know who his parents are. He only knows that he's six years old and that he was born in a country far away from here. A country on the other side of a big sea called the Mediterranean. Every night he dreams of strange landscapes, but he doesn't know where they are. That is why he spends his days looking at the birds who fly effortlessly over the hills and valleys. They can cross the river just like that, and when they get thirsty, they light on the bank to have a drink.

The owl opens her eyes again. She looks right at him, as if to say, here I am. Finally Jean-Pierre can breathe easily again. He even dares to move a little. The owl doesn't seem afraid. She just sits there, as if she wants to say: come closer.

Jean-Pierre sticks his arm out toward the owl. Nothing happens. He crawls forward a little, so that his hand can touch the owl now. Should he try it? Won't the owl peck at him?

At that moment he remembers the oo-hoo call of last night. When he heard it, he knew he was being called. This bird made that sound for him. He gathers all his courage and he strokes the owl. The owl closes her eyes again. Now Jean-Pierre knows for sure he is right.

He has to get the owl to sit on his hand, and then try to crawl carefully backwards out of the bushes. If the owl stays on his hand and does not peck at him, then he will know for sure that she wants to stay with him. Then he will have a bird to show him the way to that faraway country from which he comes.

Jean-Pierre pushes his hand under the legs of the owl, whose claws immediately grasp onto his fingers. It scares him. He crawls backwards ever-so-carefully until he comes out into the open field. He stands up. The owl stretches proudly, shakes her feathers and looks around as if she wants to say: we're beginning a new life now.

Jean-Pierre would like to run home, but he decides to walk as calmly as possible, with his right arm in front of his chest and the owl on his hand. He

follows a path that leads to the farm through the vineyards. A short time ago, he was here with his step-father who was pruning the grape vines. He knows precisely which path to follow to reach home unseen. He doesn't want anyone to see him before he has reached his attic room with the owl.

The secret of the night and the faraway country is for him and the owl only. His step-parents must see with their own eyes that the owl wants to stay in his room and does not fly away, even with the window open. Only then will they be convinced that this bird belongs to him, and that he belongs to this bird.

When he is close to his house, he holds his left hand in front of the bird as if to protect her from curious or unfriendly eyes. It is quiet around the farm. His step-parents are probably taking a nap. He enters the side door and climbs the stairs that lead to the attic. He pushes the door to his room open and looks in, seeing it in a way he never has before. It is now a room with a secret known only to him and the owl.

As soon as he puts the owl on the arm of his chair, she seems to grow to twice her size. All her feathers are standing on end. She stretches herself out as if to fly.

Jean-Pierre looks at the open window, not knowing what to do.

The owl flaps her wings and flies to the window sill. She peers outside, then turns her head around and stares long and steadily at Jean-Pierre, who feels nailed to the ground.

At that moment, they hear a voice from downstairs.

"Jean-Pierre, come here!"

It is his step-mother. She is a farmer and she says things only once. She is kind, but does not tolerate any back-talk. Softly, Jean-Pierre says to the owl:

"Will you wait until I'm back?"

The owl does not move. Only her eyes answer, but Jean-Pierre is not sure what they are saying.

He walks backwards out of the room, pushes the door closed and stumbles down the stairs.

"What are you doing upstairs?" he hears from the kitchen. He feels caught.

The question sounds as if his step-mother knows everything, has seen everything already.

"I found a bird," answers Jean-Pierre.

"What kind of bird?"

"An owl."

His step-mother's eyes are now almost as big as those of the owl upstairs.

"What? An owl?"

Jean-Pierre nods.

His step-mother feels that something unusual is going on, but she doesn't say anything. A child is difficult to understand, and the more so if it is not your own child. Since the first time he entered the house six years ago, she had always had the feeling that Jean-Pierre was a special child. From the beginning, he looked at her in a way which said to her: I come from another place.

They had only told her:

"His mother is dead, and his father lives in a country far away from here."

She never tried to find out which country. It would not mean anything to her anyway, and only make everything more difficult. But now that he has a bird in the house, and an owl at that, all the old feelings are aroused in her again. She looks at him now questioningly, but also with love.

"What are you going to do with the bird?"

"I want to keep her."

Jean-Pierre says it as if he knows exactly what he wants. His step-mother looks surprised. He never spoke this way before. She nods her head.

"Go ask your father."

That's all Jean-Pierre needs to hear. He runs outside and looks in the direction of the river. His step-father often mows grass there for Anna, the cow. But before Jean-Pierre starts to search for him, he turns around and races into the house and up the stairs. Cautiously, he opens the door. The owl is still sitting on the window sill and peering outside. As soon as he closes the door, the owl turns her head, nods a few times, hops onto the arm of the chair, and back again to the window sill. Jean-Pierre feels that she wants to tell him something, but he does not know what. He stands very still, hoping that it will become clear. The owl moves her head again, up and down, up and down, up and down, then spreads her wings and flies away, out the window, in the direction of the river.

Jean-Pierre doesn't hesitate. He runs down the stairs, out of the house, and towards the river, not to look for his step-father any more, but to find his owl. Out of breath, he reaches the river. On the other side of the fast-flowing water are woods. Is the owl hiding in there, like she did in the other woods? He paces back and forth along the river bank, peering at the other side the whole time, but no matter where he looks and how he calls, he does not see or hear the owl. The mysterious bird is gone without leaving a trace.

While he is searching, he sees his step-father mowing grass upstream. His step-father has already seen him and is waiting for Jean-Pierre to notice him. As Jean-Pierre walks towards him, he decides to ask his step-father to help him look for the owl.

His step-father listens to the story with growing amazement. An owl isn't easy to catch. The bird must have been stunned, he thinks to himself. But to his son he says:

"An owl is a wise creature. In the old stories, the owl is often wiser than the man. That's why the ancient Greeks used to ask the owl for advice. It's always been that way. If you are right, then the owl will surely come back, just the way they always return to the church tower, once they've made a nest there."

There is silence now between father and son. The call of a single bird and the streaming water of the river are the only sounds. The man looks at his step-son and feels a strange tension in his stomach. He knows that Jean-Pierre's father is still alive, even though he doesn't know where.

His step-son's story about the owl brings back all sorts of memories. The woman who brought the child to him six years ago, asking him to take care of it for a few days, had large, shiny eyes behind enormous, round glasses. She was a school teacher, asked by a father to find shelter for his child. Those few days became a few months, and the few months had become six

years. His wife and he had grown to love the child now. But they knew that every day could bring a change in the situation. Nothing was officially settled. The man often said to his wife, as she began to talk about it:

"What can we do about it? Let's bring the child up and let him go when it's time. You can't force the important things in life anyway. Otherwise we would have had our own child."

Even though he knew those were hard words to hear, he thought it was better to say them. As their pastor often said:

"Man proposes; God disposes."

His father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather had always worked on the land. Sometimes the wine was harvested just in the nick of time, and sometimes it was lost because of unexpected hail storms. That had taught him that humans were not in control of everything.

He begins to talk to Jean-Pierre again about nature, about the weather, about autumn, when the swallows flying over the big sea - the Mediterranean Sea - go on to fly over more than a thousand miles of desert to spend the winter in the heart of Africa. It is still warm there when it is ice cold here. In the springtime, they return, often to the same barn and the same nest they built the year before. He ends his story by saying:

"If such a little bird can find his way so well, your big, wise owl will surely be able to find you again, if she wants to. And if she doesn't want to, that's all right, too. After all, who can really say what is right and what is not?"

Jean-Pierre always gives his undivided attention to his step-father. His step-father is never angry or impatient. It seems like he has an answer for every question, while he always says he doesn't know anything.

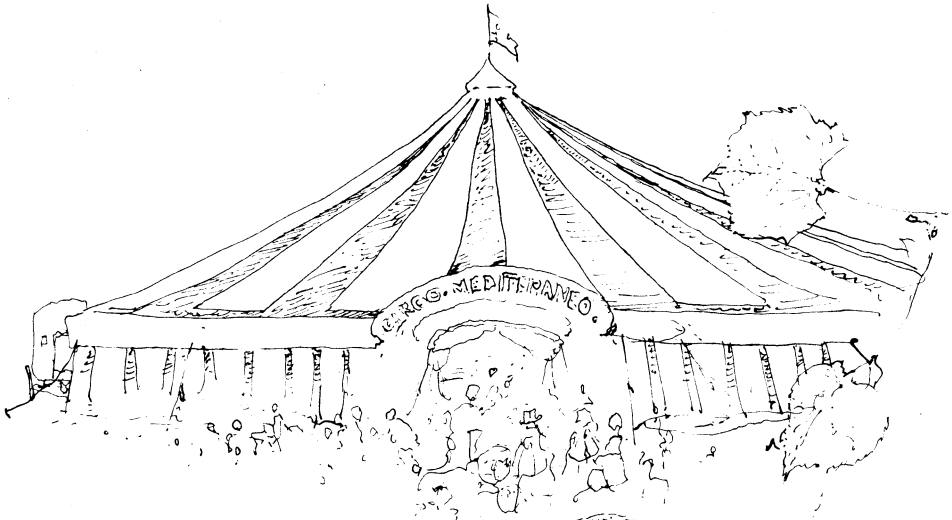
Sometimes the village people call him Socrates.

He heard this name from other boys and he asked his mother what it meant. His mother smiled and answered that it wasn't a bad name, but the name of a Greek philosopher. Everyone used to come to him with all kinds of questions about life because he used to say that he knew nothing. And she added:

"Actually he knew more than all the other people who claimed to know so much." Then they both smiled.

While Jean-Pierre is thinking about everything that has happened, his step-father rakes the mown grass into one large heap and one small heap. He asks Jean-Pierre to carry the small heap home as he lifts the large heap onto his pitchfork. And so they walk silently home together, each with a bundle of grass.

They don't talk about the owl the next day. The grown-ups have almost forgotten about it, and Jean-Pierre doesn't dare to bring it up again. But every night, before he falls into a tired sleep, he listens to the sounds from outside, with his window wide open, hoping amidst the sounds of the birds, to hear the oo-hoo of the owl. But it was in vain.



## Chapter 2. Circus Mediterraneo

At the end of the summer, there is always some excitement in the village on the river. According to time-honored custom, the circus comes to the nearby city of Valence. People come from near and far to have a good time and to buy all sorts of things, because it is also the time of the yearly market.

Jean-Pierre can still remember the circus tent with magnificent horses and acrobats high in the air.

The evening before he goes to town with his parents, he has to go to bed early so that he can get up on time the next morning. They will leave the house even before the sun rises. First they'll have to walk and then the big bus will carry them the rest of the way. Although Jean-Pierre tries, he cannot sleep. The moon conjures magical spots of light on the wall and the floor of his attic room. Now and then a cloud drifts past the moon. Then it is dark. When he is finally almost asleep, floating lightly between dreaming and waking, he is awakened by a soft sound from nearby:

"Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo."

Jean-Pierre springs up. He sits dead-still in his bed. This is his owl. It is exactly the same sound he heard the first time. He holds his breath and for a few seconds he doesn't move a muscle, afraid that the owl won't go on. His patience is rewarded. Again the sound: "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo." He creeps out of bed and tiptoes to the window. Sitting directly across from him, high in the chestnut tree, is the whitish-gray owl. The moonlight is reflected in her feathers. She looks even bigger than the first time. Her eyes are wide open.

Jean-Pierre waves his hand. The owl lifts herself without taking her eyes off Jean-Pierre and flies to the window. Jean-Pierre jumps at the sudden movement and takes a step backwards. Without a sound, the owl lands on the window sill and looks smaller again. She closes her eyes, and then opens them again. When the owl closes her eyes, Jean-Pierre closes his, too, and then opens them again to see what the owl is doing. The owl's eyes are still closed, but not for long. She opens them only to close them again slowly. Jean-Pierre imitates her. At that moment, he feels himself getting sleepy. He feels irresistibly pulled to his bed. The owl will wait for him.

When he awakes the next morning, the moon is still in the sky. His window is open. The window sill is empty. He can hear his step-mother's voice from downstairs.

"Jean-Pierre, time to get up!"

His step-mother's voice sounds happy. But Jean-Pierre feels sad. The owl has gone away for the second time, while Jean-Pierre thought for sure she would wait for him this time. Just then he remembers his step-father saying that the owl, herself, knows best what she wants, and that he should have faith in her.

He gets dressed quickly. His step-parents are having breakfast already. Jean-Pierre's step-father looks at him as if he guesses something has

happened, but he doesn't say anything. The basket filled with food for the whole day is standing by the door.

During the walk to the bus, Jean-Pierre doesn't say much. His step-parents think he is grumpy because he didn't get enough sleep. But Jean-Pierre still sees the owl with all her feathers, sitting straight up on the window sill and slowly closing her eyes, and opening them, and closing them again. He vaguely remembers falling asleep. After that, there is only a black hole in his memory.

The trip with the bus cheers him up. He can't take his eyes off the beautiful river, whose banks are familiar to him in his village. Now he sees it from above, from the highway. The people in the bus are in a holiday mood. They are drinking wine and singing songs.

When they arrive in Valence, they go to the market first to do the shopping: his step-father buys a new pruning knife, and his step-mother buys a blue linen blouse. Jean-Pierre looks at the toys. There are some really nice bows and arrows, displayed in size from small to large. There are kites, too. He looks up at the blue sky and sighs. In his memory he sees the owl again on the window sill of his room. No bow and arrow, no kite, he thinks. I only want the owl.

After the market, they finally go to the circus. Outside, they can already hear the sounds of the musicians. People waiting in line are growing more excited. Now and then they hear the enthusiastic shout of someone entering the big tent.

When Jean-Pierre steps into the tent with his parents, he lets out a shout, too. Above the entrance, on the inside of the circus tent, is the whitish-gray owl. As soon as she sees Jean-Pierre, she calls: "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo, hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo, hoo-oo?"

Jean-Pierre begins to wave at the owl frantically. The owl nods her head up and down. Jean-Pierre feels better now. He whispers in his step-father's ear:

"There is the owl I told you about. She came to me again last night, and this morning she was gone."

Even his step-mother can't control her curiosity any longer.

"Jean-Pierre, is that the bird you were telling me about? The bird that was in your room?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head. His eyes are beaming so that his step-parents know the answer. There is something special between this owl and their boy.

Jean-Pierre enjoys the circus, and especially the acrobats and the beautiful circus horses, but his thoughts are on the owl, who is now sitting on a perch at the very top of the tent. The perch is apparently meant for her. By the time all the circus artists take their last bow, Jean-Pierre has made his decision: I am staying with the circus. ( or - He will stay with the circus.)

He looks first at his step-father and then at his step-mother, sitting to the right and the left of him: will they approve?



His step-father looks at him then, as if he feels what Jean-Pierre is thinking. He bends closer to him and says:

"Do you want to look at the stables before we go home?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head excitedly in agreement.

While most of the audience moves towards the exit, they find their way to the doors behind the ring. Just before they reach them, they hear a fluttering behind them and the owl perches on Jean-Pierre's shoulder. His step-parents are startled. They look at each other with an expression which says the whole thing is too much for them.

At the same time, the woman who trains the horses comes to meet them. She is dressed in a shiny, black, sequined costume. She bows gracefully to Jean-Pierre's parents, and then to Jean-Pierre.

"May I introduce myself? I am Aurelia Soleri, directress of Circus Mediterraneo."

Jean-Pierre's step-father and step-mother are taken by surprise, but they shake hands anyway, followed by Jean-Pierre, who is watching the directress expectantly.

Mrs. Soleri says she could not help but notice the owl's fondness for the boy. And she goes on to say that it could have a very special meaning. Before she goes on, she glances around her. When she is sure that no one else can hear her, she continues her story.

"Actually, it is so special that I want to talk with you about this further. But in quieter surroundings. Will you have dinner with me, while my crew finishes up for the evening?"

She is so self-confident and friendly, that Jean-Pierre's step-parents immediately accept the invitation, even though it is almost time for the trip back home.

Mrs. Soleri walks with the family to her luxurious caravan and asks the cook to prepare a meal for them. She says:

"We have a special occasion to celebrate, so that's why I want you to make something special for us."

Then she arranges for them to be left alone so they can talk.

Aurelia Soleri gives a friendly nod at the owl, who is still sitting on Jean-Pierre's shoulder, and she says:

"Although the owl hardly ever says anything, she understands so much that she is called Delphi. As you perhaps know, in ancient Greece there was the oracle at Delphi, where the priestess was consulted about difficult problems. The owl is named for that oracle.

Delphi has been with this circus for as long as I know her. Her intelligence is exceptional. I'll give you two examples.

After the death of the former director, there were arguments about who would take over, and there was so much dissension that it looked like the group would fall apart. During one particularly vehement argument, Delphi began to hoot.

It sounded so gentle and impressive that the men stopped shouting and looked up to see what Delphi would do next. It became so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Then she flew over the heads of everyone present three

times, and landed on my shoulder. They all looked at me, as if the magic word had to be spoken. Popov, the clown, laughed and said:

'Delphi has spoken. Aurelia is the new director.'

Just at that moment, we again heard: 'Oohoo-ooohoo-ooohoo.' Then everyone cheered. They accepted Popov's judgement which Delphi apparently supported.

The second example is even more unusual. After I became directress, I was the first to read the old director's testament. In that testament, I read that Delphi should always be listened to. It stated that she not only had an especially good insight into people, into their abilities and their character, but that she also knew about certain treasures, gold, gems and the last flying carpet still remaining on the earth. This carpet could only be used by a boy who would be chosen by Delphi. How that would happen, was not mentioned."

It remains quiet for some time in the room, after Aurelia Soleri finishes speaking.

Jean-Pierre is the first to break the tension.

"How can you know that about the owl, if she doesn't speak?"

Everyone laughs. Mrs. Soleri says it is a sensible question, but a variety of answers is possible.

"First of all," she says, "we are not sure that the owl doesn't speak.

Perhaps she used to speak, and perhaps she will speak again."

While she says this, she looks at the owl who is staring steadily ahead.

"Secondly, Delphi clearly showed us that you were in the circus tent this afternoon. She wanted us to meet you. She has never flown onto the shoulder of someone in the audience before. Did you know each other?"

Jean-Pierre blushes. He doesn't answer.



### Chapter 3. Leave-taking

Jean-Pierre's step-parents exchange a meaningful glance. His step-mother begins.

"Jean-Pierre, before we go home, we want to talk a bit more with Mrs. Soleri alone. Wouldn't you like to look around at the circus before it gets too dark?"

The owl grips Jean-Pierre's left shoulder even tighter as he stands up to go outside. Mrs. Soleri calls to the kitchen for Virgil to show the boy the stables.

As soon as they are gone, Jean-Pierre's step-mother asks Mrs. Soleri:

"Do you think the boy mentioned in the testament is our son, Jean-Pierre?"

Mrs. Soleri nods her head in agreement.

"To tell you the truth, I've been waiting more than six years for a sign. The owl's behavior leaves no doubt in my mind. Everything she does is for a reason."

Jean-Pierre's step-mother doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry. On the one hand she thinks it is wonderful that their step-child is blessed with a special destiny, but on the other hand she feels very sad to have to part with him.

Her husband has not said anything yet. He is thinking about the story Jean-Pierre told him at the river about the owl's first visit. He had been doubtful then, but he hadn't let it show. He is also thinking about his son's confession in the circus today, when he whispered that the owl had returned the night before but was gone again early in the morning. And then the third time, after the performance in the circus. The owl often seems to hoot three times. However baffling it all may appear, a sensible person should not ignore so many signs. He also realizes that Aurelia Soleri probably doesn't know anything about her owl's visits to Jean-Pierre. She herself said that the owl does not speak, at least not to her; so she probably does not know anything about these visits. While not making her story any more understandable, it does make it more believable.

He decides. If Jean-Pierre wants to stay here, then he should do that. They don't have any rights over the child. He looks at his wife. He feels her sadness. She loves Jean-Pierre as if he were her own child.

He begins to tell them about the owl visiting Jean-Pierre twice. He also tells that Jean-Pierre is their step-child, who at first would only be with them a few days or weeks, but in the meantime, has been with them for more than six years. In two weeks he will be seven years old.

Aurelia Soleri listens with close attention. She is amazed at the story, but not really surprised. It confirms her opinion that this is the boy written about in the testament. It also occurs to her that he has been living with these people for just as long as she has known about the contents of the testament. Is there a connection there, she asks herself? Aurelia Soleri does not believe in coincidence. Coincidence exists only for people; not for the stars, the animals, plants and minerals. Her grandmother could read more in the irises of people's eyes and the lines of their hands than many people thought possible. She always said:

"Everything has to do with everything else. The question is how!"

And her grandfather would chuckle then and say:  
 "And nothing with nothing. The question is what!"  
 Aurelia smiles. Her ancestors came from India, a large country where many people's faces express a consciousness hundreds of years old.  
 Just then they hear laughter outside. Jean-Pierre is looking inside through the window with the owl on his shoulder, while he himself is sitting on Virgil's shoulders.  
 His step-parents and Aurelia realize that the moment to decide has come. Without hesitating any longer, the man asks his wife the question.  
 "Shall we leave Jean-Pierre here for a while and ask him to come back to us now and then?"  
 His wife feels the tears well up in her eyes, but even still she nods her head 'yes'.  
 Aurelia stands up and shakes hands with them.  
 "I will take care of your son as if he were my own, and I will let you know about everything that happens here. It may take a while sometimes, if we are performing in other countries, but there are more ways to keep in touch than the mail."  
 They call Jean-Pierre in and ask him if he wants to stay with the owl and Mrs. Soleri for a while. Without a moment's hesitation he says, "Yes," and throws his arms around his step-parents. Then he whispers in his step-father's ear.  
 "When I can fly, I'll come to see you."  
 "A promise is a promise," answers his step-father.  
 The dinner proves to be a five-course affair. One dish looks more exotic and extravagant than the next.  
 "Do you always have parties here?" asks Jean-Pierre.  
 "Not really. Mostly there is little time for cooking, especially when we are on tour or we have to put up or break off the circus tent. But today is a special day, and a special day should be celebrated."  
 After dinner it is too late for Jean-Pierre's step-parents to make the return trip home. They decide to spend the night in Valence.  
 Jean-Pierre gets a small room next to Mrs. Soleri's bedroom in a caravan painted azure blue.  
 "In this caravan you can dream beautiful dreams," Aurelia says to Jean-Pierre, while fondly placing her hand on his head, "especially when we travel at night."  
 She asks him to call her 'Aunt Aurelia', and he agrees.  
 Being parted from his step-parents is more difficult for Jean-Pierre than he had imagined. Every evening, before he goes to sleep, he thinks about them and the river with the bushes close to their home. But if he gets too homesick, the owl hops onto the edge of his bed and begins to roll her head slowly back and forth, so that Jean-Pierre imitates her and falls asleep. He never feels homesick in the morning. Everything seems new then, especially when the sun shines.  
 "Jean-Pierre, Jean-Pierre!! Come here! Come here!"  
 Jean-Pierre runs out of the caravan. Virgil is waving excitedly next to the horse trailer. With his finger to his lips, he enters the trailer ahead of Jean-Pierre. Eva, the mare, is lying on her side with her neck stretched out. She is

resting after having pushed down hard several times. Her belly looks like a big balloon.

Aurelia is kneeling next to her and with her left hand, she pulls carefully on the heel of the little leg which has just become visible. She reaches into the mare's womb with her right hand to grab onto the second leg. Then she waits and she smiles at Jean-Pierre. Eva's eyes are opened wide. They are shining like water in the moonlight. After a short pause, Eva begins to push down heavily again. Aurelia helps her by pulling softly on the heels of the foal, and by making sure that the foal's head can come out right on top of its front legs. As soon as the head appears, she breaks the membrane around his nose and mouth, and pulls the foal out with a short tug.

Virgil disappears in the direction of the kitchen to get a bottle of cognac so they can drink to the birth of the foal. The mood is festive in the circus.

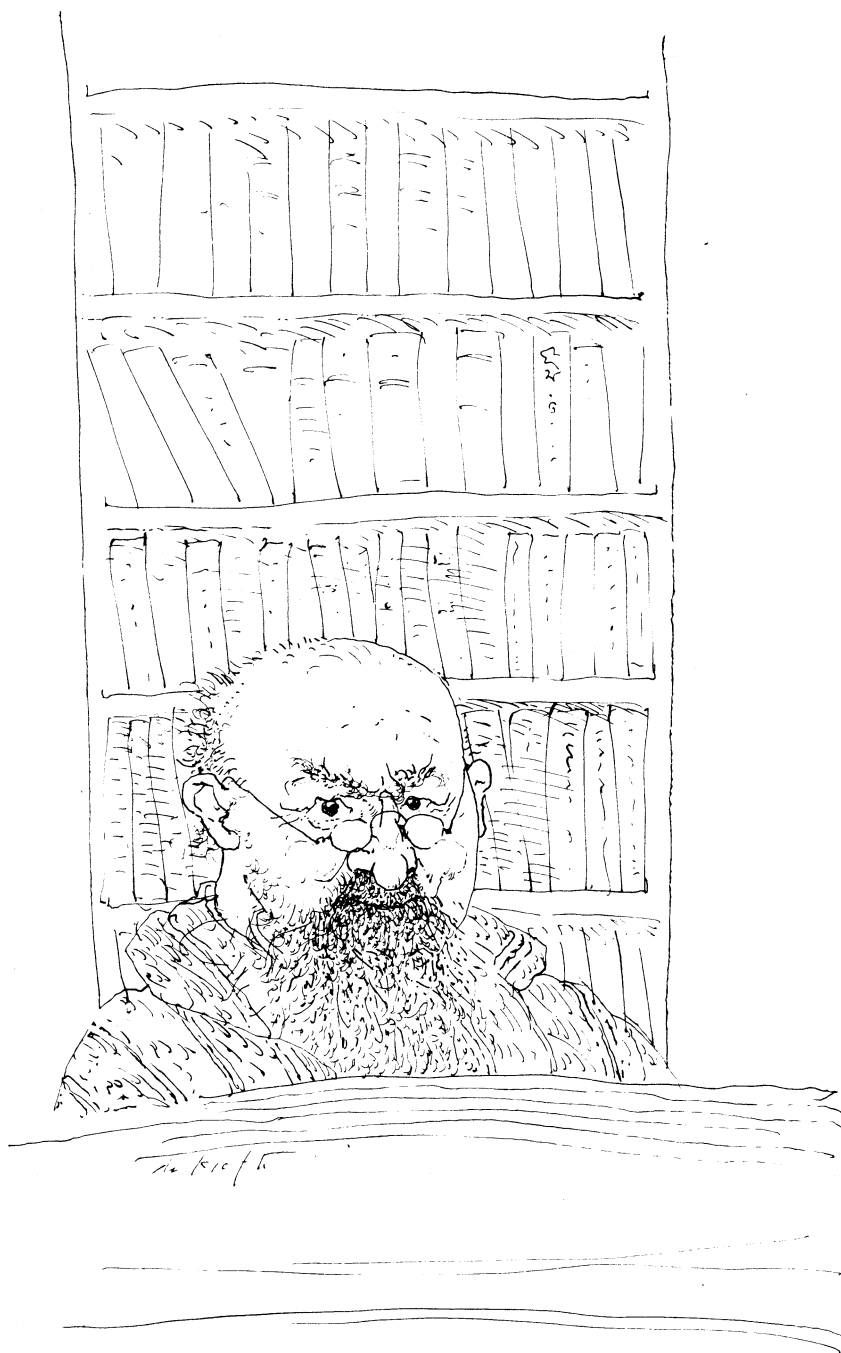
Everyone comes to the trailer to admire the newest member. They all agree on naming him Ajax, Aurelia's suggestion. This is Eva's fifth foal. He is shiny black with white above the hooves, exactly what Aurelia needs for her performances.

Jean-Pierre is deeply impressed by the birth. He has never seen the birth of a foal before. His step-parents are wine-farmers, not livestock farmers. The only thing is, he wishes that the foal were born four days later, because then it will be Jean-Pierre's birthday. He knows the date by heart: Sunday, October the fifth.

Aurelia is very satisfied with the date. Today the circus has to be broken off so that they can travel tonight and the whole day tomorrow. Their destination is Genoa. When they arrive there tomorrow evening, they can build up the circus on Friday and open the Italian season in grand style.

Aurelia loves Italy. The beauty of the cities, the spontaneity of the people, the pasta and the antipasto, the enthusiasm during the performances. You never know who's having more fun - the parents or the children. Italians love children and everything young. She can already see herself with Eva, followed by Ajax, making an opening round in the ring.

She decides to teach Jean-Pierre the secrets of horse training by letting him watch the training of Ajax. She does not realize that Delphi has other plans.



## Chapter 4. Visit to Paracelsus

After arriving in Genoa, the whole circus troupe immediately begins setting up the big top. Jean-Pierre has to amuse himself. He doesn't mind. There is plenty to see when the big circus tent is being set up. First they lay the big tent canvas in a wide circle on the ground. They place a 15-meter long pole through the hole in the middle of the tent and into the ground. Next they raise the tent by pulling ropes through two pulleys at the top of the pole. When the canvas is raised to the top, the acrobats, the lion tamers, the magicians, the clown and all the other members of the troupe span the tent from the inside outwards. To do this, they use a large number of bamboo sticks which are all three meters long. On the end of every bamboo stick is a joint into which the next bamboo stick fits. Because it is so flexible, the workers can make large arches with the bamboo poles, so that the tent bulges into a sphere. The last bamboo poles are locked at the top into a heavy iron ring, which is fastened to the tall, central pole. The long bamboo poles bend under the weight of the enormous tent canvas, but they do not break.

When the canvas is finally dome-shaped, dozens of hands rush to fasten the tent to the bamboo poles on the inside. They fasten it again on the outside using long ropes tied to short, sturdy poles that are pounded into the ground at a slant.

While this is going on, Jean-Pierre walks around and asks the circus people all kinds of questions. He wants to know exactly what they are doing. He loves the hubbub. Everywhere around him they are working, shouting and laughing. Delphi the owl, does not leave his left shoulder for a moment. She often sits on Jean-Pierre's shoulder while he is playing in his room or taking a short walk, but this time she acts differently, as if something special is happening. Delphi seems to want to direct Jean-Pierre's steps, as if to lead him in the one direction but not in the other.

In the beginning, Jean-Pierre does not even realize this, but when he wants to take a look outside the terrain, Delphi flutters off his shoulder and flies the other way. Jean-Pierre waits and calls her, but the owl shakes her head and begins to fly in circles. Jean-Pierre walks over to the spot where Delphi is fluttering around, and puts her back on his shoulder. At that moment, Delphi flies away again, but this time in the direction of the horse trailer.

Jean-Pierre goes that way, too, and Delphi returns to his shoulder. When he gets to the trailer, he sees Aurelia working with Eva and Ajax. Eva is saddled



with a magnificent, gleaming harness while Ajax's tail is braided with bright, colorful ribbons.

Aurelia motions to him to come closer.

She asks if he is having a good time and if Delphi has been staying with him. He tells her what just happened. Aurelia looks at the owl as if she is asking her a question. But instead, she questions Jean-Pierre.

"Would you like to look around in Genoa with me this afternoon?"

Jean-Pierre immediately nods his head 'yes'.

She looks at her gold watch and says:

"I will try to make some free time so we can go into the city together. Take a rest now, because it will be a tiring afternoon for you."

Lying on his bed fifteen minutes later, Jean-Pierre falls into a deep sleep almost immediately. He dreams he is flying with Delphi over glowing hills, crossing a river, and then in the distance, he can see his step-parents' house. When he is about to land so that he can enter the house, he wakes up. Aurelia is standing next to him. Delphi is on her shoulder. Astonished, he rubs the sleep out of his eyes, and tells her about his dream. She smiles.

"Did you like flying?"

"Yes, and I wasn't one bit afraid. It all seemed so natural, as if I could do anything a bird can do. Gliding above the trees and fields is really fantastic."

"That's what the acrobats say, too, about being suspended high up in the circus tent, falling from one horizontal bar to the next."

A little later, Aurelia and Jean-Pierre walk hand-in-hand through the streets of Genoa, with the owl on Jean-Pierre's left shoulder. It is a glorious fall day.

Here and there boys are busy pasting the colorful Circus Mediterraneo posters onto billboards. Eva is in the center of the poster, rearing up on her hind legs, while Aurelia, her jet-black hair piled high, cracks the whip. In the upper right corner, Popov, with his big yellow nose and fat red lips, waves at passersby.

The closer they come to the harbor, the busier the streets are. The doors of some hotels and restaurants are open. They hear fragments of music everywhere. Jean-Pierre recognizes a song from the Beatles and begins to hum along with 'All you need is love'.

Aurelia asks a passerby the way to Via Marconi. The owner of a shop in that street was a very good friend of the former director of the circus. She also heard that he has unusual things for sale, but only for special clients and friends. The owl came from his shop. People say that the shop owner knows magic. Sometimes he makes himself invisible in order to watch the customers

in his shop. If someone tries to steal something, he shouts into the ear of the thief:

"So, you want to have this, sir? I will wrap it for you. That will be one million lire."

Sometimes the thief pays the exorbitant price purely from shock. Should he try to leave the shop without paying, he finds the door locked without having seen anybody lock it.

In the meantime, they have arrived at Via Marconi. It is a narrow street with a few pizzerias and small shops. On the door of the shop they are looking for, there is a name plate with ornamental letters: **Dottore Paracelsus**; painted on the window in large letters: **CURIOSA**. In the window display they see old globes, antique dolls, mummies, colored stones, bottles of oil and books with strange titles that Jean-Pierre cannot read. They open the door. A bell tinkles. It is so dark inside they can hardly see anything the first few moments. Jean-Pierre immediately thinks that the owner might have made himself invisible. As he begins to say this to Aurelia, she nudges him and puts her finger to her lips to show him that he should not talk about it. They hear a door open in the back of the shop and the shuffle of footsteps.

A tall man comes in. He has a black beard with a lot of gray hair in it, a balding head, and a pair of small, round glasses on his nose. He is wearing a long, dark brown robe with black stripes, a caftan. He looks at the stately Aurelia and the boy in a friendly but inquisitive way. As soon as he sees the owl on Jean-Pierre's shoulder, he stretches his long arms out to both, embraces Aurelia and kisses Jean-Pierre on the forehead. The owl gets a friendly pat on the head.

"You are from Circus Mediterraneo," he says cheerfully. "I thought about you when I saw the posters for your performance in the city. Wonderful, wonderful. It pleases me that you have come. Let us go to the back room. There we can talk undisturbed."

The room behind the shop looks like a study. Along three walls the books go up to the ceiling. Books are stacked here and there on the floor alongside piles of papers. Jean-Pierre has never seen so many books. Paracelsus moves two high-backed leather chairs over to the table and invites them to sit down. Only now do they see that this room borders on a small courtyard where cypress trees stand in earthenware pots, decorated with fighting Roman soldiers.

"Is your name really Paracelsus?" asks Jean-Pierre.

"Yes," the tall man answers, "I am a direct descendant of the famous 16th century physician Paracelsus. Interest in the workings of the secret forces in nature has always remained alive in my family. This special knowledge has been handed down from father to son generations long, but always on the condition that the son promises to use his knowledge only to cure people and not to kill them."

After these words, they suddenly hear: "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo."

Aurelia and Paracelsus exchange meaningful glances. Paracelsus takes Jean-Pierre's hand.

"Tell me how you and Delphi got to be such good friends. She seems to like to be with you."

Again they hear: "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo."

"Delphi agrees with me completely," laughs Paracelsus.

Jean-Pierre begins to tell about how he kept hearing a bird calling at night, and went looking for the bird the next day. That bird was this owl. He brought the owl to his attic room where she stayed awhile, but later flew away. The evening before he went to the circus with his parents, the owl returned, but was gone again in the morning. That made Jean-Pierre very sad. But when they entered the circus in the afternoon, the owl was sitting above the entrance, and she hooted three times when she saw him and his step-parents. After the performance, she settled herself on his left shoulder, and since then, they have been together.

Aurelia completes the story by telling that Jean-Pierre's step-parents gave their permission for him to stay with Circus Mediterraneo for a while. The reason was that they understood that a very special friendship had grown between Jean-Pierre and Delphi.

At that moment, the shop bell tinkles.



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## Chapter 5. The agreement

Paracelsus asks Jean-Pierre to go see who is there. As soon as he is gone, Aurelia and Paracelsus put their heads together and agree, whispering softly, that this must be the boy mentioned in the testament.

Jean-Pierre comes back.

"There is a man in the shop who wants to speak to you. He says that he came to Genoa today by ship from Beirut. He has Persian carpets for sale."

Paracelsus gets up immediately and walks towards the shop. The men greet each other warmly. Aurelia suggests that she and Jean-Pierre take a look at the courtyard. The moment they are outside, the owl flies to the top of the highest cypress and looks around as if to say: home at last.

"Was this her house?" Jean-Pierre asks Aurelia. She nods her head.

"Doesn't it bother her not to live here anymore?"

"Maybe it does. If she wants to stay here, she will let us know."

Jean-Pierre is startled by his own questions, and by Aurelia's answer. If the owl stays here, then there is no reason for him to stay with the circus. His step-parents gave their permission because of the owl. If the owl leaves, then he can't stay there either.

While he is mulling over these difficult things, they call Aurelia to come in.

Leaving the courtyard, she says to Jean-Pierre:

"You stay with Delphi. We'll call you in a moment."

An Arab is sitting in the room, wearing a white headcloth bound by a black, rolled cord.

He introduces himself with a small bow of his head: Abdel Ibn Saoud. The man has the same clear, intense eyes as Delphi.

Paracelsus begins.

"This is a special day, one which I have long awaited. Among all his magnificent Persian carpets, Mr. Abdel Ibn Saoud has one small carpet which is the only one of its kind in the whole world. This carpet comes from the former palace of the Caliph of Baghdad. The owner wants to sell this carpet for two reasons. The first reason is that the carpet makes him unhappy. It is the only flying carpet from ancient times which has been saved. The formula necessary to be able to fly with this carpet has been lost. Without this formula, the carpet is just as all other carpets. No one can do anything with it. This thought makes the owner very sad. That is why he decided it would be better to part with the carpet, for its presence drives him almost crazy.

The second reason is that by trading this carpet, he hopes to get hold of a bird which, according to stories he has heard, is supposed to possess secret knowledge. We know that Delphi is such a bird."

Abdel Ibn Saoud is fully absorbed in watching Delphi, sitting motionless in the tree top outside. Paracelsus seizes this moment to whisper to Aurelia.

"Perhaps he hopes to find the missing formula with Delphi's help, and then try to buy back the carpet, or to get it back by less honest means."

Paracelsus stares Abdel Ibn Saoud straight in the eyes.

"In spite of the fact that we have been doing business with each other for many years, to our mutual profit, you ask me something now of which I can hardly approve. You want to have Delphi, the wisest bird on this earth, while I get a carpet from you, which you claim is The Last Flying Carpet... but even the present owner cannot make it fly. I don't consider it a fair trade. You will have to pay much more for me to accept your proposal. Furthermore, even if you would pay very much more, I cannot comply with your proposal unless Delphi herself agrees. This is in your own best interest. A wise bird who refuses to share her knowledge is worth no more than a sidewalk pigeon."

Abdel Ibn Saoud has listened impassively to Dr. Paracelsus' speech. Every now and then he even nodded his head in agreement, as if to make it clear that Paracelsus spoke sensibly.

"I agree completely with my friend," Abdel says. "Therefore I propose that we ask Delphi first if she is prepared to travel with me to the city of Baghdad, where she will then live in the former palace of the Caliph. Only when we know if Delphi agrees, does it make sense to negotiate about the price. First things first."

Paracelsus cannot argue with this line of reasoning, but thinks to himself that he would still rather make a deal about the price first. For if they cannot agree about the price, he can always make use of Delphi's refusal by saying that it is caused by the too low price. If she has already agreed, he loses this argument. What Abdel Ibn Saoud does not know, but what Paracelsus knows very well, is that Delphi is free to say 'yes' or 'no' to the request. Delphi and Paracelsus have agreed to this a long time ago.

"Although in principle I agree completely with your reasoning," answers Paracelsus, "still I believe it would be better to agree with each other first, before presenting our proposal to Delphi. We will be more convincing if we agree about the price than if we do not agree about the price."

Because Abdel Ibn Saoud wants to have the wise bird at any price, he gives in and says to Paracelsus:

"Make a proposal, my good friend!"

Paracelsus answers:

"I will name a ridiculously low price, but on one condition: if after five years, Delphi does not want to stay at the palace any longer, she has the right to go, or rather fly, wherever she wants, without any reimbursement from my side."

Abdel Ibn Saoud watches Paracelsus with a surprised look in his clear blue eyes. He has never thought about a bird, even a very wise bird, making decisions about its own fate. But at the same time he realizes that Delphi the owl cannot be forced to reveal unusual and valuable knowledge if she does not want to. So it does not make sense to discuss such a condition. Therefore he nods his head in the direction of Paracelsus, and waits for a proposal about the price.

Paracelsus says:

"I want five times Delphi's weight in gold for the five years that she will stay at the palace in Baghdad. If she wants to remain longer than five years, then please consider that a gift."

The Arab does not show any emotion on his face, but feels uncomfortable. This is no small price, especially if one considers that The Last Flying Carpet has to be added to the price of the gold. He decides to make a counter proposal.

"If you use the word silver instead of gold, we agree."

Paracelsus smiles and answers:

"You underestimate Delphi. Only gold is able to express the value of her extraordinary wisdom. It is also of essential importance that the amount of gold is five times Delphi's exact weight. If I agree to less, I would insult Delphi and our agreement would have little meaning for the owner. For everything depends on her cooperation. You must understand that she is following our conversation at this very moment, and she understands what we are talking about. It is not in your interest, or that of your master, for me to compromise with you."

Jean-Pierre is silently following the conversation from the courtyard through the half-open door. He does not quite understand what the men are discussing, but he feels that it is very important and very special. Only now does he understand how special Delphi is and how proud he can be of Delphi's friendship.

Abdel Ibn Saoud stands up and says solemnly:

"Ask Delphi the owl if she is willing to remain at the palace of my master for five years, and to assist him in word and deed."

Paracelsus stands up now, too, and both men walk toward the courtyard. At a sign from Paracelsus, Delphi flies down from the high cypress to Jean-Pierre's shoulder.

With a small bow, the doctor asks:

"Delphi, do you want to remain at the palace of Abdel Ibn Saoud's master for five years, and to assist him in word and deed?"

Delphi answers: "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo."

Everyone smiles and nods to each other contentedly.

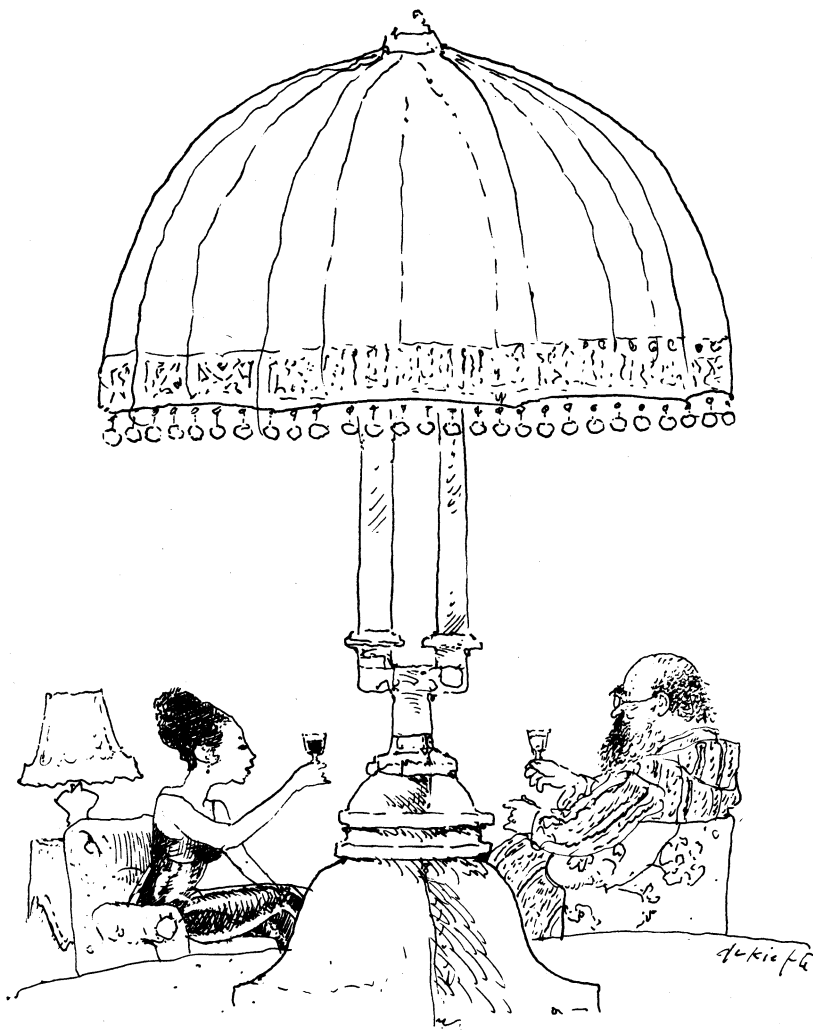
Paracelsus and Abdel Ibn Saoud go into the study to commit the agreement to paper and to seal it in red wax with the stamps of Abdel Ibn Saoud and of Paracelsus.

Aurelia asks the Arab when he is planning to travel back to Baghdad. He answers that he wants to make the return journey by boat next Monday, accompanied by Delphi. On hearing this, she invites him to attend the gala performance of Circus Mediterraneo on Saturday, tomorrow, as her guest of honor. He accepts the invitation with a bow.

Then they drink a glass of wine to the successful outcome.

Abdel Ibn Saoud makes an appointment with Paracelsus to come and pick up Delphi early Monday morning. The Last Flying Carpet is left behind in the shop. This is exactly what Paracelsus wants, because with Delphi's help, he is going to use the coming two days to discover the lost secret formula. If it does not succeed, then he would deeply regret the whole agreement. For all that gold does not equal Delphi's secret knowledge. Only a real flying carpet, and the assurance that Delphi can return to him after five years, could make Paracelsus decide to enter into this agreement.





## Chapter 6. The dinner

It is already late in the afternoon when the company says good-bye to each other.

Aurelia invites Paracelsus to have dinner with her that evening. He accepts the invitation eagerly.

A little later, Delphi on his left shoulder, Jean-Pierre walks with Aurelia through the now even busier harbor. The streets are buzzing with voices, music and automobile horns. There are swarms of people everywhere.

Aurelia says to Jean-Pierre:

"The next two days are going to be very important. Tonight or tomorrow Dr. Paracelsus will tell you what is going to happen. You don't have to be afraid, because he has your best interests at heart."

Jean-Pierre nods his head but his heart is thumping. He is so wound up that he can hardly speak. He wonders how it is going to turn out with Delphi. The departure of his bird makes him very unhappy, but the idea that Paracelsus is a smart man who knows what he is doing, comforts him. Perhaps he can discover the formula of The Last Flying Carpet.

Aurelia can feel Jean-Pierre's tenseness. To cheer him up a little, she suggests they get an ice cream. They enter an ice cream parlor where the walls are covered with mirrors so that it looks like the ice cream display counter is endless. From more than twenty flavors of ice cream, he chooses a large bowl of stracciatella and pistachio with lots of whipped cream on top. When he lifts the cup, Aurelia begins to laugh. The sundae is much bigger than Jean-Pierre's hand.

After walking back to the circus, Aurelia asks the kitchen staff to make a festive dinner in honor of her guest, Paracelsus. She sets the table herself. She takes out crystal goblets, a damask table cloth, an antique silver service and lovely dinner plates painted with yellow and blue dancing figures and here and there, a courting couple.

When she notices Jean-Pierre looking surprised, she says that this dinner service has been handed down from generation to generation in her family. The scenes come from ancient Greece, from a time even before Christ. She adds that Greece is also the country where the Olympic Games first began, about two and a half thousand years ago.

Jean-Pierre sighs.

"How can you even imagine what that much time is?"

Aurelia smiles.

"My grandmother always said:

"When you are born, you are zero years old. When your child is born, you are twenty-five years old. When your grandchild is born, you are fifty years old. And when your great-grandchild is born, you get ready to die. That's four generations in one hundred years. That makes one hundred generations in two thousand five hundred years. In one way it is a lot, but in another way it's not that much. There are trees in Sweden, Africa and America which are six hundred years old. In Sri Lanka, an island south of India, there is even a tree which is two thousand years old. A few of those trees add up to all that time."

Jean-Pierre looks surprised.

"I do understand and at the same time I don't. What about animals?"

"Animals," answers Aurelia, "don't count time the way we do. The sheep that you saw on the way, look the same as the sheep in the stable where Jesus was born. Animals don't have any trouble with time. They reproduce and after hundreds of years they are still the same. Dogs still bark; sheep still bleat. There are horses, called Fjords, that look just like the horses the Greeks sculpted on their temples. In the country my grandparents come from, many people believe that you are born again after death. So perhaps you have already lived many lives, and now you are back again as Jean-Pierre. Do you like that idea?"

"I don't know," Jean-Pierre says, "and if you don't know, it doesn't make any difference anyway, does it?"

Aurelia laughs.

"You're a smart boy!"

Meanwhile, Aurelia is adding the finishing touches to her table decorations. She places two magnificent candelabras, each with five white candles, on the table.

"May I light them this evening?"

"Yes, when we are ready to have dinner with Dr. Paracelsus. They give so much light that we won't need to have any other lights on."

By now it is almost dark outside. They can hear a whinny from the horse trailer, not far from Aurelia's caravan. The horses are getting their evening feed. Eva gets an extra portion of oats to help her recover from the birth of Ajax and to make sure she has enough milk for him. Aurelia asks Jean-Pierre to look for Popov the clown and to invite him to have dinner with them tonight. Then he may play outside until she calls him in.

When he is gone, she goes to her writing desk, opens a drawer in which there is a key, and with this key she opens another drawer so far at the back of the desk it is almost invisible. From this drawer, she takes out the testament that she saw for the first time after she was appointed directress of Circus Mediterraneo. She wants to show the testament to Paracelsus because she guesses that he has played an important role in drawing it up. All the signs indicate that one of these days, probably tomorrow or the next day, unusual things are going to happen. She wants Popov to be present tonight because she trusts him; and also because Popov, through his friendship with the old director, probably knows more than she herself about the background of the testament, about Delphi's secret knowledge and about Jean-Pierre's real parents.

Not only does her caravan travel the world over, but many conversations about uncommon affairs also take place there. The former director was known for getting along well with his people and animals, and for being a good business man, but he was also famous for his long talks with people like Paracelsus and Popov. And everywhere he went, and that included many countries, he seemed to attract unusual people like a magnet. He also delivered messages that people did not want to trust to the mail. Even highly-placed politicians gladly made use of his services.

While Aurelia is deep in her own thoughts, she is interrupted by the sound of footsteps and, shortly thereafter, a knock at the door.

"That must be Paracelsus."

As she walks to the door, she glances at the mirror to see if she looks like the same Aurelia Soleri as in the Circus Mediterraneo posters, hanging everywhere in the city. She likes to be recognized as the trainer of her magnificent horses. In Aurelia's eyes, horses have a matchless beauty, especially in the transition from walking to trotting and galloping. The movement of the legs and the neck, of the mane and the muscular body, and the glowing, moist eyes make her fall in love again with her own horses each time.

She opens the door as Dr. Paracelsus removes his hat with an elegant gesture and bows lightly to her.

"Come in, Paracelsus," she says warmly.

Preceding him to the living room of the caravan where there are a few comfortable cane chairs and a small sofa, she stops to switch on a table lamp.

"Now at least you can see if anything has changed since you were last here."

Without waiting for a reply, Aurelia tells Paracelsus that she also invited Popov for dinner because she knows that they are well acquainted with each other.

Paracelsus smiles.

"You're right. The director, Popov and I were good friends. Whenever Circus Mediterraneo performed in this city, we met each other for dinner, just as now. If you like, I'll tell you something about the background of our friendship."

Aurelia nods her head in agreement and says:

"I would very much appreciate knowing more about it, because now I am not only responsible for everything which happens in the Circus, but also for Jean-Pierre. I have the impression that you and Popov also know about the contents of the testament which was handed over to me after I was appointed directress."

While Aurelia pours a glass of sherry for her guest and a glass of port for herself, Paracelsus begins his story.

"Your predecessor, my friend Sarkysianz, came to visit me one day, after Popov told him that I had Delphi the owl. Our friendship started the first moment we saw each other. I share the opinion of my friend, Freddy Ayer, the English philosopher, that when people meet each other, the first ten minutes are decisive. After ten minutes, you should know what you can expect from each other.

Sarkysianz wanted to buy the owl for his circus. I refused, but I told him that he could borrow Delphi.

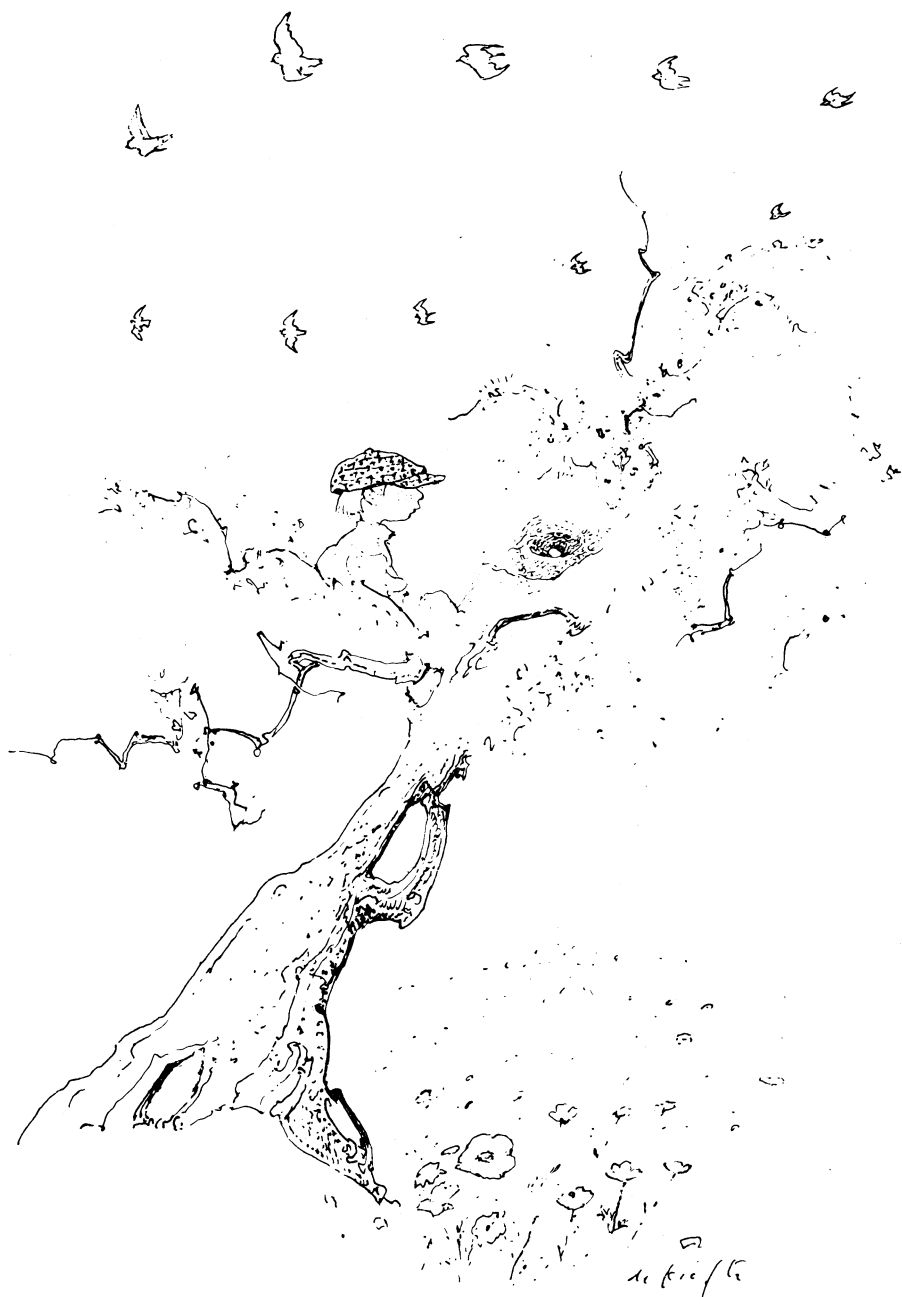
The reason he wanted Delphi in his circus was because such a magnificent bird can welcome the audience at the entrance, and even more importantly, she could help solve arguments in the circus. For the owl hears and sees everything, says nothing, yet knows who is right and who is wrong, or what is best for the whole circus. That is the reason that she interceded in your appointment. After she flew to your shoulder, Popov cried: 'Delphi has

spoken. Aurelia is the new directress!" And even though there were disagreements in the beginning, everyone accepted Popov's proposal, because everyone knew that Popov was not pushing his own opinion, but following the judgement of Delphi.

As long as people know that a referee is fair and not working in his own interest, they will accept his ruling.

Perhaps you are surprised that I know so much about your appointment, but Popov and Delphi have told me all about it, each in his own way. Years ago we knew there could be problems around the succession, because my friend Sarkysianz did not have any children. So there was no direct heir and successor. That was another reason for letting Delphi remain in the circus."

A long silence falls, while both stare into the darkness.



## Chapter 7. The Testament

"Another item we have to discuss is the testament. You are correct in assuming that Popov and I know more about it, because we had the trust and friendship of Sarkysianz.

It says in the testament that Delphi knows about the only flying carpet that still exists on this earth, and that this carpet may only be used by the boy who will be chosen by Delphi. Perhaps you are wondering why The Last Flying Carpet and a boy are mentioned in the testament. I will gladly explain.

Exactly seven years ago to the day - it was the third of October - a man walked into my shop in the afternoon. He was in the company of a woman in the last weeks of her pregnancy. In order not to keep you in suspense any longer, I will tell you who that couple was. They were Jean-Pierre's parents. Two days later, the woman gave birth to her first child, but died in childbirth that same day. She is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Genoa.

The man's name was Jean-Claude Auriol. He told me that on one of his many trips through the Middle East, he had heard there was a flying carpet in the city of Baghdad, for which the secret formula for flying it had been lost. He had also heard that I had an owl in my possession who knew the formula.

And he claimed that his wife also knew the secret of the formula."

Aurelia looks at him, surprised. She cannot believe her ears.

Paracelsus sees her amazement, but goes on with his story, undisturbed.

"Jean-Claude Auriol, Jean-Pierre's father, proposed a meeting between his wife and Delphi the owl, either alone or in our presence, to find out if the formula was the same. If it was, then we could be sure that the carpet from the palace of the former caliph would fly again with this formula.

I accepted his proposal, and we agreed to meet each other in a secluded spot the next day. I would bring Delphi and ask her to react to Mrs. Auriol's formula by hooting three times if the words she spoke were correct.

The place where we would meet each other was - believe it or not - the same Jewish cemetery where she is now buried.

That very evening, I picked up Delphi at my friend Sarkysianz' house, and asked her to hoot three times if Mrs. Auriol spoke the right words.

The next day we met each other at the cemetery. Mr. Auriol and I stood several meters away from Mrs. Auriol and Delphi. From a pocket which she had sewn into her brassiere, Mrs. Auriol brought out a tiny cylinder which held a small piece of parchment. Slowly, she read the words written on it. We could not understand them, as the wind was blowing away from us. But what we could clearly hear, when she was finished, was Delphi calling 'hoot-hoot-hoot'. It sounded almost ceremonious.

From that moment on, we knew we were on the right track, even though we did not know how we could ever get hold of The Last Flying Carpet.

Therefore you can imagine how pleasantly surprised I was today, exactly seven years after the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Auriol, to see you come in with Jean-Pierre and, just after that, to get a visit from Abdel Ibn Saoud. After your arrival, and Mr. Saoud's, I knew that the stars must be favorable and that we could finally solve one of the oldest puzzles. With your permission, I will conclude by telling you what I think we should do now."

Aurelia nods in agreement. She is so dumbfounded by the whole story that she only now sees that she has forgotten to refill the glasses.

While she is pouring, Paracelsus says he wants to go to the graveyard the day after tomorrow, together with her, Jean-Pierre, Popov and Delphi. He continues his story:

"After the death of Mrs. Auriol on the fifth of October, Delphi stole the cylinder with the secret formula and flew away with it. Everyone was perplexed, but no one did anything about it due to their grief over Mrs. Auriol's death, and their faith in Delphi. We trusted that Delphi knew what she was doing.

Because the birth of the child coincided with the death of its mother, and the mother had possessed the secret formula, we all decided that if Delphi agreed, Jean-Pierre could become the sole owner of the secret formula and with it, owner of The Last Flying Carpet. That is why you found the statement in the testament that only Delphi can decide about the boy. And that explains Delphi's friendship with the boy. Jean-Pierre did not know the owl, but the owl has known him since his birth."

At that moment they hear voices outside. Popov and Jean-Pierre come inside together. Aurelia asks Jean-Pierre to light the candles.

Popov and Paracelsus are happy to see each other again. The men embrace and kiss each other on both cheeks.

After this, Paracelsus suggests to Aurelia that they call each other by their first names, and from now on, Jean-Pierre may call him 'Para'.

"That almost sounds like Papa," cries Jean-Pierre.

"Almost," says Paracelsus, "but not quite. And it isn't necessary, my boy, because your father is still alive. And I will do everything I can for you to see him again before too long. Your father and I are friends. I want to be your friend, too, not take the place of your father."

Dinner takes longer that evening than usual. They have so much to tell each other. Jean-Pierre is hypnotized by the candles he lit. He is so fascinated by the flames that he sometimes forgets to listen. But as soon as they talk about the next day and Sunday, he pricks up his ears. The day after tomorrow, Sunday, is his birthday. He'll be seven years old. Paracelsus proposes to go to the graveyard on Sunday. When Jean-Pierre looks up in surprise, not understanding why they want to go to the graveyard on his birthday, Popov says with a broad smile:

"I'd like to make the dead people laugh; they should have some fun, too."

Aurelia tells Jean-Pierre that she will explain it to him. Besides, it is high time for him to go to bed. She will walk with him to his room.

Jean-Pierre says good-bye to Paracelsus and Popov and walks hand in hand with Aurelia to his room which is next to her room. While Aurelia is tucking him in, she says to him softly:

"We are going to buy a big bouquet of flowers for your mother and give them to her."

"But my mother lives very far away from here."

"Yes, that's true," says Aurelia, "but I mean your real mother. As you know, your parents in France are not your real parents, but your step-parents."

"So I do have a real father and mother?" asks Jean-Pierre.



"Yes, everyone has a real father and mother, otherwise you could not be born. But your real mother died just after your birth. She saw you and you made her very happy. Your father could not take care of you by himself because he has to travel for his work. That is why he looked for step-parents for you. In the next few days, we will discuss whether or not you can go in search of your father in the near future. So now you actually have three parents: your real father, your step-father and your step-mother. And I am like a mother to you, too, now because I love you very much, and I want to take care of you. And I am sure your real mother is close to us and is following everything that happens."

"Where is she buried, then?"

"In this city, in Genoa. We will take you to the graveyard and bring a beautiful, large, colorful bouquet of flowers for her. Then you can give them to her."

Jean-Pierre feels sadness and joy creeping from his belly to his throat. He feels surprised that his step-parents are not his real parents even though he has always known it. Isn't that the reason that he often longingly watched the birds in the sky, who can so easily fly to faraway countries? Didn't he know since his earliest years that he came from another country? Now he understands suddenly why his step-mother sometimes looked at him so searchingly, as if she was asking herself questions about him. He never noticed it in his step-father. He was always very calm.

Jean-Pierre gets excited at the idea that he will perhaps be going on a journey to search for his real father.

"Will you stay with me a little longer, Aunt Aurelia? I feel so strange. And will you tell me a story, too?"

"Yes, I'll tell you a fairy tale.

Once there was a boy who was playing at the edge of the woods. There were many birds which flew back and forth from a meadow near a lake to the trees in the woods. In order to see them better, the boy climbed into a tree. At the top of the tree there was a branch that was shaped like a fork. There was a small nest with a tiny egg in the hollow of that branch.

For hours the boy waited to see if the bird parents would come back to guard the egg and keep it warm. When that didn't happen, he decided to take it home with him. On the way home, he thought about what his teacher at school had told them - that you had to keep eggs just as warm as your body or they could not hatch. He asked himself in despair how he would be able to do that in order to save the little bird in the egg.

Suddenly he got an idea: 'I have to swallow the egg whole, because if it is in my stomach, the little bird in the egg will be warm.'

Without further thought, he swallowed it.

When he arrived home, he did not tell what he had done, because he was afraid of how his parents would react. They would think that what he had done was crazy.

That night he dreamed that he was the guest of a bird family. They kept offering him delicious seeds, while the youngest birds watched him in suspicious surprise.

The next morning he woke up early. It was beginning to get light outside. He heard chirping under the blankets. Carefully he lifted the sheet to see where

that sound was coming from. His eyes opened big as silver dollars. The sound came from his stomach. The little bird had climbed out of the egg and was now in his stomach!"

Jean-Pierre laughed.

"And what happens then?"

"The boy," answers Aurelia, "later became a ventriloquist in Circus Mediterraneo. There's not only a bird living in his stomach now, but also a giant and some boyfriends and girlfriends who have arguments sometimes, and other times have a lot of fun. And now you have to sleep. It's gotten much too late."

With a big kiss, Aurelia leaves Jean-Pierre.



## Chapter 8. Circus Mediterraneo in Genoa

When Aurelia gets back to the room, she finds Paracelsus and Popov involved in a lively conversation. Popov can't keep his hands still for a moment, especially when he's talking. He is constantly emphasizing everything he says with gestures, just as he does in the circus. Paracelsus moves only his mouth and his eyes. In comparison to the lively Popov, he sometimes appears to be made up of only a head.

Aurelia is glad to see that the gentlemen have helped themselves to wine and cognac. They feel at home in her house, and act like members of the household.

The conversation quickly returns to the question of how the circus should give its first performances in the coming two days, and also how the secret formula can be found with the help of Delphi. For if they don't discover it before Delphi leaves for Baghdad on Monday, then they won't discover it for the next five years. And by then Jean-Pierre would be eleven years old or older. All three agree that Delphi will probably only entrust The Last Flying Carpet to Jean-Pierre. All signs point to that. And in addition, he has more right to it than anyone else, considering that it was his mother who discovered the secret formula. How she managed to do it is a mystery, even for Paracelsus. The only ones who might know are Jean-Pierre's father and the person who gave the formula to Judith Auriol. Could it have been a descendant of the Caliph of Baghdad? Was she possibly a friend of his?

There are more questions than answers. Aurelia laughs and says:

"It just goes to show, my friends, that one fool can ask more questions than ten wise men can answer."

They decide to devote all their attention to the first performance of Circus Mediterraneo on Saturday, and to visit the cemetery Sunday, as promised to Jean-Pierre.

Then they take leave of each other, but not for long.

Saturday afternoon at four o'clock they see each other again in Genoa at the festive opening of the circus. Genoa is always the first city the company visits during the fall season in Italy.

That night Aurelia hears Jean-Pierre call her in his dream, as if he is astonished at whatever he is seeing. He does not sound afraid. She smiles, turns over and goes back to sleep.

That afternoon there is already a long line at the box office at three-thirty. It is a sunny day. You can hear the sound of Arnoldo's and Boldoni's trumpets from far away. They are standing on a high scaffolding in front of the entrance to the circus tent, playing tunes for two trumpets. Delphi is sitting on her perch at the inside of the tent, above the entrance. The first thing the visitors see when they enter the tent is Delphi. And the few who don't see her, get to hear her. For as soon as Delphi notices that someone does not see her, she makes a few appropriate sounds so that the inattentive visitor jumps and looks up. This time Delphi is doing her very best because she knows that today and tomorrow are her two last days in Circus Mediterraneo. She has been working in the circus so long, that even Aurelia Soleri, the directress, cannot remember when Delphi wasn't there.

Delphi knows how old she is, and that, at least in human terms, is very old. It is not easy to see how old an owl is. All the gray feathers that they naturally have and the big, ringed eyes, make the owl a distinguished bird. And distinguished birds, just as distinguished people, always seem to want to defy time to a certain extent. They act as though they have nothing to do with time, as if time belongs to them, instead of them belonging to time. This way of thinking about time, which is not so easy for people to understand, is normal for Delphi. That is why she has become such a wise bird. The art of being wise is actually being able to look at things from all sides and not fool yourself, no matter how much you want something - or don't want it. It is as simple as that, Delphi thinks. And she begins to think again about why there are so few wise people and so many wise owls. You would actually expect the opposite.

While Delphi rocks back and forth and provides the early visitors with a topic for conversation, Jean-Pierre's eyes are practically popping out of his head as he watches the horses being saddled and decorated in the horse trailer.

Later, standing high on their back legs, they too will greet the visitors.

Aurelia tells Jean-Pierre about the opening act. First she comes in with an enormous whip which she gaily cracks in the air around her. If she wants to, she can even knock the cap off one of the visitors in the first row with her whip, without him really feeling it. That's how fast it is. The force of the wind does the work, actually. She only gives it direction. When Aurelia has finished with her first number with the whip, six magnificent black horses burst suddenly onto the circus floor and make figure eights in two groups of three. Then, at a sign of her whip, they rear on their back legs facing the public.

When she cracks the whip again, they snort and trot behind each other with their gleaming manes swaying on their proud necks.

Today Ajax will accompany Eva for the first time. He won't leave his mother's side for a moment, and will undoubtedly melt the hearts of the whole audience, the big people as well as the little people.

The clue to these numbers is to keep the tempo so high that the audience has the feeling they can hardly follow it. First of all, no one gets bored and secondly, there is no time to figure out how it all works. The spectators don't get the chance to think things over. People are supposed to enjoy themselves in the circus. They can save the worrying for home, work or school.

Aurelia tells these kinds of stories to Jean-Pierre while she is braiding Ajax's tail with a red and white ribbon.

She decides to give Ajax the colors of the city they are performing in. For Genoa it is white and red. But Aurelia also knows that white and red are the colors of the famous Amsterdam soccer club Ajax, for which she named the foal.

Aurelia had asked Delphi to look for Abdel Ibn Saoud, and to warn her as soon as she sees him with a special sound, a high and low "oohoo". Aurelia hopes deep in her heart that her circus can go on tour through the Middle East and then perform in Baghdad. This Saoud can be just the right man to introduce the idea in Baghdad. He knows people with power and influence and in her own way, Delphi can be of assistance to him. This will also make Delphi's departure on Monday morning less painful. For Circus Mediterraneo

without Delphi is still hardly thinkable. She hasn't told the members of her staff yet so as not to upset them before the first performance. Aurelia knows from experience that the first performance in a city sets the tone for the rest of the performances. That's why she always does her best to create a good feeling in the group before the start of a new show.

While Aurelia is thinking about all these different things, and is giving orders left and right, still having time for Jean-Pierre's questions, they suddenly hear a high "oohoo" followed by a low "oohoo".

There is Abdel Ibn Saoud. She leaves the horse trailer immediately to welcome him personally before the show starts. At the exact moment that Abdel and Aurelia are shaking hands, Delphi flies in a circle around them, to the immense enjoyment of the audience and Abdel and Aurelia, too.

The audience is happy, but also curious about the coming show. The last few minutes seem long and the tension is rising.

At the stroke of four, Arnaldo and Boldini enter the circus by the main entrance and stroll among the visitors towards the floor of the ring, filling the whole circus tent with their trumpet music all the while. Sometimes it sounds sad, and sometimes it has the power of an elephant so big it could pull down the whole tent by itself.

They are approaching the ring when Aurelia appears from the other side, cracking her impressive whip. Jean-Pierre's cap flies through the air before he knows what is happening or how it could have happened. Aurelia laughs at his surprised face. A few seconds later, six black horses and the foal storm into the ring. The audience cheers. The white and red in Ajax's tail make the Genoans fall in love with the foal at first sight .

Aurelia keeps a quick tempo in the performing horses act, to set the pace for the rest of the acts.

The performance of Circus Mediterraneo lasts two hours. At the end, the audience gives Aurelia and all the circus artists a standing ovation. The first show in Genoa is a great success.

Abdel Ibn Saoud says to Aurelia that he is sure the people in Baghdad, would also love to see such a show. Perhaps it will be possible to negotiate with the city council and arrange a tour.

Aurelia is glowing with happiness and says that she would consider it a great honor to perform with her circus in Baghdad.



## Chapter 9. The Secret Formula

That night, Jean-Pierre dreams about his house on the river. He sees his step-father pruning the grapevines. It is warm outside. His step-father asks him how it was in the circus and if he can already fly. Jean-Pierre looks at his step-father in surprise.

"I fly sometimes in my dreams," he answers. His step-father laughs and says: "The birds do it the other way around. They fly when they're not dreaming." When Jean-Pierre wakes up the next day, he looks right away to see if Delphi is still there, even before he remembers that it is his birthday and that it is going to be a special day.

When he enters Aurelia's living room, he hears Popov, Aurelia and Paracelsus loudly singing "For he's a jolly good fellow" and "Happy birthday to you". All kinds of delicious cakes and rolls are on the table. Aurelia gives him a package which he immediately opens. It is a magic set with a note saying that Popov will teach him the best magic tricks in the world. While he is kissing Aurelia to thank her, Popov makes the set disappear. When Jean-Pierre looks at his hands, he is startled to see that the set isn't there anymore. Popov laughs.

"The great vanishing trick," he says. "I'll teach you that one, too, but we'll save it for last."

Paracelsus shakes Jean-Pierre's hand and tells him that his present is too special to bring here. It's for later, in the afternoon.

This morning they are going to the cemetery together.

Delphi is sitting on Jean-Pierre's left shoulder as usual. As they get closer to the cemetery, the tension rises. What will Delphi do? Even the usually calm Paracelsus has trouble not showing any emotion.

Suddenly, Delphi flies away in the direction of the cemetery. She vanishes in the top of a high cypress which stands at the entrance to the cemetery. Everyone wants to stand still to see what Delphi is doing. But Paracelsus walks on and tells the others not to pay any attention to Delphi.

When they arrive at the cemetery, Aurelia holds Jean-Pierre's hand tightly. Slowly they walk to the spot where his mother is buried. Chiseled on the grave stone is: Judith Auriol-Semah, died 5734.

Aurelia tells Jean-Pierre that the Jewish people use a much older system of dates than the one we use. Jean-Pierre asks:

"What does that mean?"

Aurelia tells him that long ago, every group of people had their own system for counting the years. The Chinese counted by their emperors. With every new line of emperors, they started counting again from the beginning of the reign. The Jews count from the beginning of their history; the Christians from the birth of Jesus Christ. The Christian system of dates is now used everywhere.

While Aurelia is still talking softly, Jean-Pierre looks at his mother's grave and thinks: Is she really lying there? Does she know that I am here? Do I look like her? Was she pretty?

All at once he knows what to do; he has to search for his father and ask him.



Aurelia is still holding Jean-Pierre's hand tightly. She is wondering what is going through his head. It must be very strange to stand at your mother's grave for the first time on your seventh birthday, when you did not even know until recently that your mother was dead. Tears come to her eyes. She loves this child.

Suddenly everyone looks up. They clearly hear Delphi's wings flapping. She lands on the tombstone of Jean-Pierre's mother with a cylinder in her beak, and flies from the grave to Jean-Pierre's shoulder again. She holds the cylinder in front of his face like a challenge. Jean-Pierre grabs it, looks at it, and turns it over a few times. He keeps looking at it in amazement, without knowing what to do with it. Paracelsus nods his head at Jean-Pierre and tells him to open it. Jean-Pierre begins to pull carefully on the round cap. Everyone watches closely. When the cap is off, Jean-Pierre pulls out a piece of paper. With his trained eye, Paracelsus sees right away that it isn't paper, but parchment. That can mean that it is very old. Until now, he is thinking, everything is going exactly as I expected.

Jean-Pierre rolls the paper open and sees that there are words written on it. While he cannot read well yet, these letters are so clear that he silently mouths the words with his lips: MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK and OHPEK TAYKEL MAHNEH. He repeats this several times. In the meantime, Paracelsus is holding his forefinger to his lips as a sign to Jean-Pierre that he may read the words, but that he may not speak them out loud. Beneath these six words are two other words, but written differently. With trouble, Jean-Pierre can make out that 'for Judith' is written there, and that a long name follows which he cannot read.

Everyone around Jean-Pierre is holding his breath. Carefully, he puts the parchment back into the cylinder.

The time has come to leave Mrs. Auriol-Semah's grave and, with Jean-Pierre holding on to Delphi's cylinder tightly, to go back to the circus. With Jean-Pierre's help, Aurelia lays a beautiful bouquet of flowers on the tombstone, bows slightly, and says to Jean-Pierre:

"Shall we go now? If you want, we can come back again next week."

Jean-Pierre begins to cry. Going away makes him feel very sad. Through his tears he sees a round pebble shimmering. He picks it up spontaneously and lays it next to the flowers on the tombstone.

Paracelsus suggests they go to his house to discuss things further and to give Jean-Pierre his present.

As they walk through the Sunday-quiet streets of Genoa, Paracelsus tells Jean-Pierre that today, on his birthday, he will become the proud owner of the only flying carpet left in the world. There used to be more of them, but either the secret formulas needed to be able to fly them were lost or the carpets were stolen. Because, of course, everyone wants to have a flying carpet. It makes a person as powerful as the great birds. With a flying carpet you can go anywhere you want. Paracelsus finished his story with the words:

"I will help you with your first try."

Having arrived at Paracelsus' house in the Via Marconi, they go right to the back room which gives on to the small, walled-in courtyard. Paracelsus takes

the Persian carpet from Abdel Ibn Saoud, who has arrived in the meantime, and asks everyone except Jean-Pierre to wait in the study. He then goes outside with Jean-Pierre, where he lays the carpet on the courtyard flagstones and says:

"You read the same three words a few times over. I saw that by the way your lips moved. I assume that the words you read with your eyes were still the same words, but only another way around. Is that right?"

Jean-Pierre looks at him and says:

"Yes, it looked like 'apple, dog, cat' and 'cat, dog, apple'."

"That is good," says Paracelsus. "That means the following: if you say the words one way while you are sitting on a flying carpet, then you go up. Say the same words the other way around and then you go down. Do you understand?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head yes.

"Are you ready to sit on this flying carpet?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head again. Excited, he waits to see what Paracelsus wants him to do.

"Then go sit on the carpet now and slowly and softly say the words you read on the parchment from your mother. After saying those three words, you will go up, carpet and all. When you want to come down, repeat the same three words the other way around. Understand?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head. He sits on the Flying Carpet and repeats the words MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK and OHPEK TAYKEL MAHNEH in his head a few times. Then he whispers the words softly and gets the surprise of his life: he slowly goes up. In no time he is hovering over the heads of Aurelia, Paracelsus and Popov, who, unable to control themselves any longer, came outside when they saw Jean-Pierre slowly ascending on the carpet. Paracelsus is also amazed and overjoyed to see Jean-Pierre ascending. An old dream which he had thought about and worked on for many years is finally coming true. Delphi calls "oohoo-oohoo-oohoo".

When Jean-Pierre reaches the top of the tree, he becomes afraid. Now I have to say the secret formula back to front, he thinks.

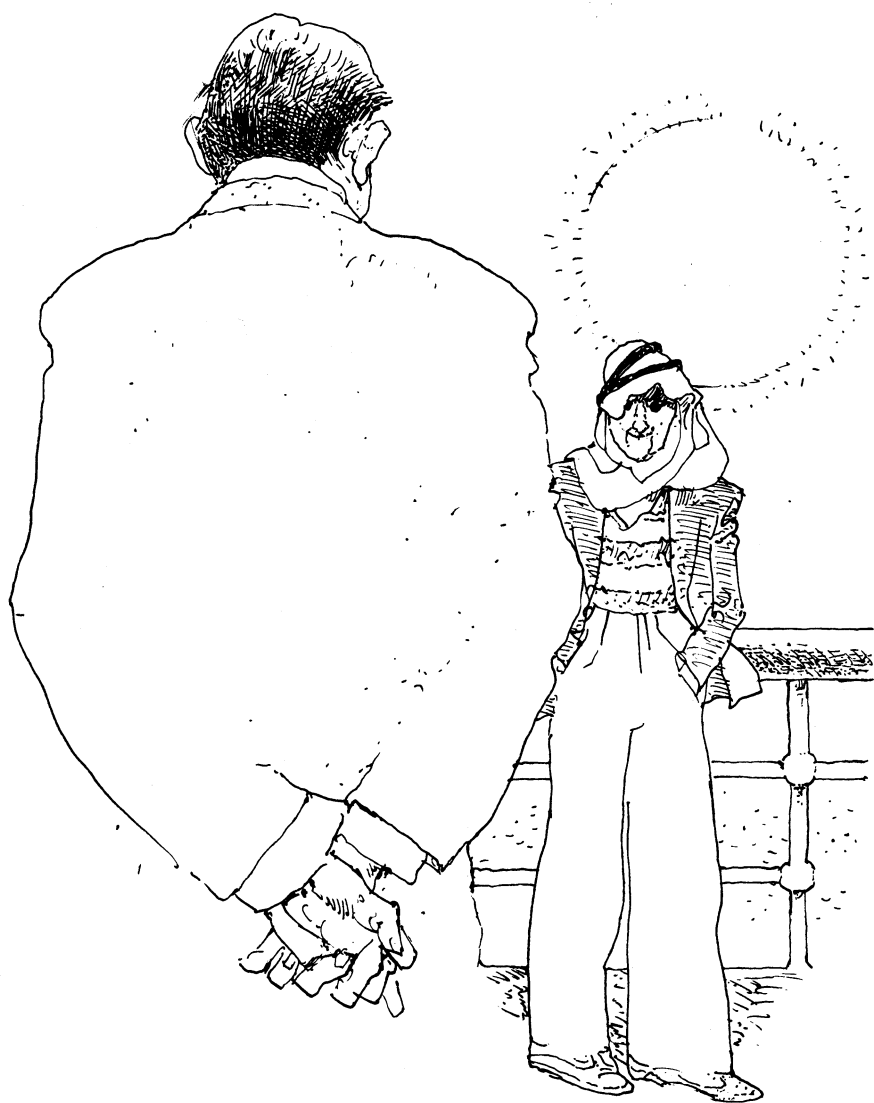
He whispers: "OHPEK TAYKEL MAHNEH".

As soon as he says these words, he begins to go down at the same speed he went up.

Everyone steps back through the open door into the study to give Jean-Pierre enough room to land. When he lands softly on the stone floor of the courtyard, he steps off his carpet glowing with happiness and gets hugged and kissed enthusiastically by everyone.

Paracelsus says to Jean-Pierre now:

"This is the present I spoke of this morning. You are the one and only lawful owner of The Last Flying Carpet. With this carpet you will have many adventures; you can search for your father, but also visit your step-parents in France. With it, you will make Circus Mediterraneo even more famous than it already is. Tell no one, but absolutely no one, the formula. Even I do not want to know the formula. It can only cause trouble, a great deal of trouble.



## Chapter 10. Abdel Ibn Saoud on 'the Orient'

On the evening of his birthday, Jean-Pierre doesn't fall asleep until late. The visit to his mother's grave, his first experience with The Last Flying Carpet and saying good-bye to Delphi, who remained with Paracelsus, give him the feeling that he is standing on the threshold of another world. Didn't Paracelsus say that he could now go in search of his father? In the distance he hears the humming noise of an airplane. He smiles. Now he can fly by himself.

In the Via Marconi, Paracelsus takes out his beloved crystal after his guests leave. At the end of a busy, remarkable day he always needs to look at the glistening of the stone. It makes him feel calm inside. He solved the old puzzle of The Last Flying Carpet today, but the price is high; for he has to do without Delphi for a period of five years. The thought that Delphi apparently wants it this way consoles him. A person is wise if he knows what he doesn't understand, Paracelsus thinks.

In the meantime, Delphi is in a deep sleep. Paracelsus decides to follow her example.

While Paracelsus dreams about the scintillating water of the Mediterranean Sea in which an island suddenly appears, overgrown with citrus trees bent by the wind, Abdel Ibn Saoud is arranging his departure from Genoa in the harbor. The ship 'the Orient' is being prepared for the trip to Beirut. Baskets and boxes with food are being brought on board. The city is still sleeping, but the harbor is already awake and full of action as if being pulled by threads from many other places out of sight and far away.

Saoud is carrying half of the gold he has to pay for Delphi in a wide leather belt under his clothes. He does not have the other half yet. He hadn't counted on paying such a high figure. But he trusts that Delphi's advice will bring him enough money to quickly get the second half of the payment together.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, he thinks.

At precisely six o'clock in the morning he is standing in front of Paracelsus' shop. His ship leaves in an hour. He does not have much time to lose.

Paracelsus opens the door. For a moment he hopes that Abdel Ibn Saoud is not able to pay him so that he won't have to let Delphi leave. When he sees the gold, he knows that it is too late.

As Saoud lays down the small bars of 24-carat gold on one side of the scale, Delphi hops onto the other side. Delphi weighs exactly 1250 grams. Five times Delphi's weight in gold was agreed upon, which makes it 6250 grams.

Abdel Ibn Saoud remarks:

"Dr. Paracelsus, since I did not count on paying such a high price, I cannot pay you the whole price in gold at one time. Can you accept this half now, and my I.O.U. for the other half?"

Unshakable, Paracelsus says:

"I do not need an I.O.U. If you should fail to pay me, Delphi's presence will be worthless to you. Either she will not give you advice any longer, or still worse, the wrong advice. You will discover what the difference is too late, and will curse yourself that you did not fulfill your promise to me. I propose that you

let Delphi leave after two and a half years if you do not pay your debt by the end of the year.

Both gentlemen smile. They know they are a good match for each other. A handshake seals the verbal agreement.

Abdel Ibn Saoud takes out a thin, golden chain and attaches it to a ring on Delphi's leg. Paracelsus gives Delphi a last pat on her head, opens the door for them and calls after them in a loud voice:

"Arrivederci, Delphi!"

Having come aboard 'the Orient', Abdel Ibn Saoud inspects his cabin carefully. This trip is one of the most important in his life and he wants to be sure that everything is alright. He knows from experience that most people enjoy taking rather than giving, and this makes him suspicious. Although no one knows the real purpose of his trip, he is always on his guard. Delphi the owl is his most precious possession.

When the bell rings for breakfast, he goes upstairs. In the meantime, 'the Orient' has left Genoa far behind. Only the contours of the city spread against the flanks of the mountain are still visible. The sun is gleaming above the water like a golden ball.

While Abdel Ibn Saoud is standing entranced by this dazzling view, a man's voice behind him says:

"Wouldn't you like to buy the sun?"

Surprised, he looks around. Usually he can feel the presence of someone behind him, even before having seen him. This man was able to take him by surprise.

"Are you Egyptian?" asks Abdel with a meaningful smile.

Now it is the other's turn to laugh.

"Yes. How did you guess?"

"Who else would ask if someone wants to buy the sun? Your ancestors were worshipping and studying the sun thousands of years ago. That's why I asked."

The gentlemen shake hands. When people have to spend several days and nights on the water, which is timeless and quiet, they begin to need each others' company.

The gentlemen decide to have breakfast together.

A lively discussion begins. Carefully, they explore each others' activities.

Neither wants to give more information about his work and secret plans than the other. The reason is that both are top-level government advisors in their own country, and so are continually dealing with the question of how much power and wealth they can conquer. That is why Abdel Ibn Saoud was willing to pay such a high price for Delphi.

The Egyptian, whose name is Mubarak, asks his breakfast companion:

"Do you think it is possible to defeat a large army with a small army? If you can give me a good idea about this, I will richly reward you with gold, unless you prefer dollars or yen."

Saoud takes a sip of his black coffee and thinks to himself:

"This is not bad. If Delphi gives me good advice, I can make my first deal on this trip."

But he decides not to accept the offer immediately, and answers the question with a counter question:

"Imagine that I give you good advice, how can I know for certain that you can and will pay me enough? And even if you can assure me, how do I know that my advice will not be used against me or my country?"

Mubarak smiles and answers:

"But your problem is my problem, too. For how do I know that your advice really is good advice? I will only know that when it is used, and you do not want to wait that long for your money."

"That is true for all of us," answers Abdel. "A doctor's advice, or the purchase of a car or a camel never gives us the certainty that we are getting value for our money. We always have to trust our common sense and a good balance between each others' interests. In this way, the earth can continue to revolve around the sun the longest."

Both gentlemen begin to laugh spontaneously. The ice is broken. Abdel Ibn Saoud promises to think about the question of how a small army can defeat a large army, and says good-bye to Mubarak.

Back in his cabin, he greets Delphi. He is shocked to see that Delphi has bitten through the golden chain. When he tries to fix the chain, Delphi shakes her head three times from left to right and from right to left. Saoud understands that she will not cooperate as long as she is a captive bird. There is no other choice than to let Delphi free and to trust that she does not fly away. He puts the golden chain away in his suitcase.

Delphi greets him now with 'oohoo'. This gives Saoud the courage to tell Delphi about Mubarak's question. As soon as he is finished, Delphi flies from the edge of the bed to the table and begins to scratch strange figures with her right leg. Quickly, Saoud takes a piece of black paper out of his leather attaché case, places it under Delphi's legs and sees to his amazement that she is scratching all kinds of strange signs. He cannot read the signs, but they look like Egyptian hieroglyphics. Delphi calmly goes on scratching until there are more than thirty signs on the black paper. Then she stops and flies back to the edge of the bed.

Saoud is speechless. What can he do with this? How does he know if this is the answer to his question?

He decides to take the risk, rolls the paper up as tightly as possible, binds it and decides to hand it to Mubarak this evening at dinner.

In the meantime, 'the Orient' is steaming steadily forward. The sun is high in the sky. The passengers are stretched out on low chairs enjoying their journey. They have no idea of the strange goings on in the cabin of one of their fellow passengers. Abdel Ibn Saoud is waiting for what is to come.

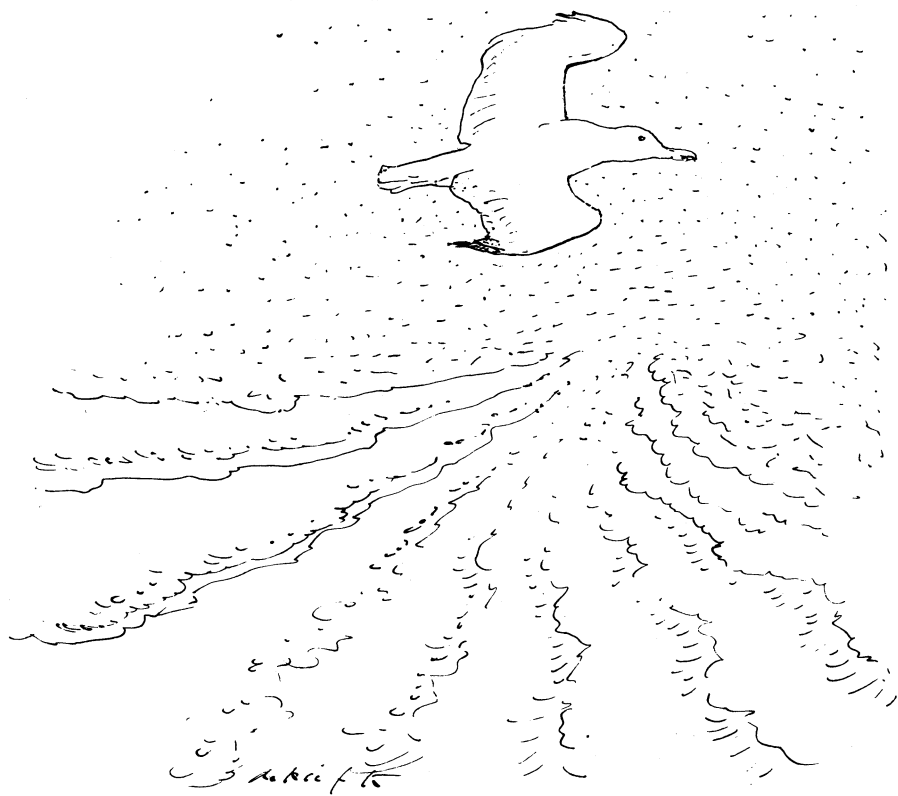
That evening, he hands the roll of paper to Mubarak, who opens it immediately.

"How did you know that I can read this? Who wrote this? This is the advice an old Egyptian general gave to Pharaoh Ramses II to propose one hundred duels to his much stronger opponent: whoever won the most duels was the winner. If the opponent did not dare to accept, then you knew that his soldiers were not good soldiers, and that you could win even with less soldiers. If he did dare to accept, you would have a one-to-one chance."

Abdel Ibn Saoud beams broadly, as if he had made it up himself and says confidently:

"I hope you are satisfied. It is the best advice I could come up with at such short notice. It is your turn now to fulfill your promise."

The gentlemen take leave of each other against the background of a clear, star-filled sky with the moon reflecting the light of the now-invisible sun.





## 11. The Crossing

At the same time that Delphi is traveling in an easterly direction aboard the Orient, Aurelia, Popov and Paracelsus are busily discussing Jean-Pierre's first flying trip in Genoa.

They quickly give up the idea of letting Jean-Pierre perform on The Last Flying Carpet in Circus Mediterraneo. It would attract large audiences but also be the beginning of a great deal of trouble. All the thieves and swindlers in Genoa and thereabouts would stop at nothing to get The Last Flying Carpet. The struggle that would break out around the carpet might not only be dangerous for Jean-Pierre, but also for the circus. The newspapers would want to know how a boy could become the owner of such a rare carpet. At hearing this news, Abdel Ibn Saoud would probably turn right around and want to hear from Paracelsus how he had recovered the secret formula.

"All things considered," says Popov, "the best thing would probably be for me to make The Last Flying Carpet vanish, so that no one, except me, can steal it."

Aurelia and Paracelsus laugh. Popov is always ready to lighten up a conversation that is threatening to become heavy. He likes to imitate a general inspecting a parade who sees that his fly is open while his troops are saluting him. He always says that people shouldn't take themselves too seriously: there's enough trouble in the world already. If Jean-Pierre feels gloomy, Popov blows bubbles with him so that his bad feelings float away one after the other and burst high in the air.

After they have talked with each other for a few hours, Aurelia makes a suggestion:

"Why don't we ask Jean-Pierre what he wants now that he knows he can fly?"

Paracelsus and Popov nod in agreement. They call Jean-Pierre. When he enters Aurelia's room, he can feel that the adults are talking about something important.

"Have you already thought about what you want to do with The Last Flying Question, Jean-Pierre?" asks Aurelia, watching his face to see if he has thought about it before.

Jean-Pierre nods and begins to talk:

"Last night in my bed I got the feeling that there is another world. My father lives in that world. I want to look for him."

To his surprise, the words roll off his tongue as if they have been there a long time. The words are there before he thinks them.

Aurelia is surprised at the certainty with which Jean-Pierre speaks. Yesterday has changed him. He seems more like a man than a child. She looks at Paracelsus, who shows his agreement by slightly bowing his head. After all, he himself told Jean-Pierre he could search for his father with The Last Flying Carpet.

"But don't you want to visit your step-parents first before you begin to search for your father?"

Jean-Pierre hesitates now with his answer. He does not want to act unfriendly or ungrateful to his step-parents, and therefore it's hard for him to say 'no'. But his heart tells him that he wants to begin his trip as quickly as possible, today rather than tomorrow; to travel to the strange landscapes he so often dreamed about, and to the other side of the big water, where his father lives.

"Can't you write a letter to my step-parents? Then I will make a drawing of The Last Flying Carpet. If you write that I've gone in search of my father, they will understand."

Aurelia promises to write a letter.

Jean-Pierre jumps up from his chair and dances around the whole group. He is beside himself with happiness. He can hardly believe what is happening. It surpasses his wildest dreams.

When he has calmed down a little, Paracelsus pulls him close and says:

"You may leave tomorrow, but on one condition. This afternoon I will teach you how to find your direction in the air. If you don't know where you are flying, you can never reach your goal."

Happily enough, there is no circus performance on Monday, so everyone has time to prepare Jean-Pierre's flying trip.

Aurelia takes care of the clothes Jean Pierre will need on his trip. Popov will look for a quiet spot where he can take off unseen. Paracelsus takes Jean-Pierre home with him to the Via Marconi.

Having arrived there, he takes out a large map. On it, many stars are shining in a wondrous pattern against a soft blue background.

"This," says Paracelsus, "is the polestar. It will give you something to go by, because it always points to the North Pole. That's why it's called the polestar. And unlike the sun and the moon, it is always in the same place. For hundreds of years, perhaps even thousands, night travelers in the desert and especially on the sea have used the fixed position of this star to determine their direction. The ancient Chinese also oriented their palaces and temples to the polestar. And a short time ago, my friend Frassinelli from Florence told me that a house is being built, or is already built in Amsterdam, directed to the polestar."

This afternoon Paracelsus and Jean-Pierre forget the time. For hours, Paracelsus tells about the secrets of the stars, the Big Bear and the Little Bear, about Venus, about the different positions of the sun and the moon. How the sun's gravitational force keeps the earth revolving around the sun. And how the earth's gravitational force keeps the moon revolving around the earth, while the moon makes the oceans rise and fall; for it is the pull of the moon which makes ebb and flood. Paracelsus ends his story with these words:

"And so we are all traveling around together, with each other and through each other, while we are sitting here on our chairs. We are

moving without knowing it."

Jean-Pierre asks:

"But how can I fly now?"

Paracelsus gives him a meaningful look, and says:

"You cannot fly by yourself and neither can The Last Flying Carpet fly by itself. You can only do it together. The reason is that your words change the carpet into a bird. It does not take the shape of a bird, but it gets the power of a bird, just as an airplane is a kind of a bird. Delphi the owl, the wisest bird in the world, knew this secret and has entrusted it now to you. Be careful with it, and make sure that no one ever gets to know it without her permission. For if this knowledge and the carpet fall into the wrong hands, it will turn against the world and everything in it."

Jean-Pierre thinks it is a strange idea that The Last Flying Carpet is a kind of bird. How can something that lies still and lifeless suddenly fly because of a few words?

Paracelsus sees on Jean-Pierre's face that he does not understand. He walks toward a closet, takes out a bag of sand and sprinkles some onto a metal plate lying on a small table in the corner of the room. Then he gets his violin case, takes out the bow and begins to play along the side of the metal plate. To his surprise, Jean-Pierre sees how the grains of sand begin to dance around and form beautiful patterns.

Smilingly, Paracelsus asks Jean-Pierre now:

"Were the patterns already in the sand, or were they in the metal plate or in my bow?"

Jean-Pierre thinks it over and then he says:

"In none of the three, because I didn't see them before you started."

"That's right," Paracelsus says, "the vibrations of the sound make the patterns. The sound gives the sand a new shape. In this way, not only sounds but also words can make new things."

Both look at each other as if they have just made a big discovery.

It has grown dark outside in the meantime.

They agree to go back quickly to Aunt Aurelia's caravan.

That evening, Jean-Pierre has to promise to return at least once a year to the Circus.

The next morning, just before sunrise, Paracelsus, Popov, Aurelia and Jean-Pierre are walking along the beach. Jean-Pierre is holding a small traveling bag in his right hand, and on his left shoulder he is carrying a long, round object on a black leather strap. As soon as the beach narrows along the steep mountainside, they stop and stand in a half circle around Jean-Pierre. He takes his carpet out of the oblong case, lays it on the ground and, after Paracelsus nods encouragingly, sits on it.

Popov begins to hop from one leg to the other. Everyone is laughing now.

The serious mood is broken. Aurelia gives Jean-Pierre a last kiss.

Gathering all his courage together, Jean-Pierre whispers inaudibly the words: MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK. The Last Flying Carpet floats upwards

right away and is quickly above the heads of Aurelia, Paracelsus and Popov. He turns his eyes now to the great, blue-green water, because Paracelsus told him he can steer the carpet in any direction he wants with his eyes. He has to make sure that the sun stays on his left side for the first few hours, for then he will be flying in a southerly direction, toward Algeria and the great desert with the mysterious name Sahara. Though Aurelia, Paracelsus and Popov are still waving, Jean-Pierre does not turn around for one moment. He does not know if that will make the carpet turn around, too. And they must not think that he is afraid or homesick.

Beneath him, a big, white seagull is flying, flapping its wings slowly as if wishing him a good trip.

In the distance he sees a few ships. Those people will be amazed, he thinks. Suddenly he shouts:

"I'm flying! I'm flying! I'm flying!"

The white seagull dives and goes back in the direction of the coast.

After less than two hours of flying, Jean-Pierre sees sparks dancing in the distance, like sunlight on water or on a shiny object. A little later he discovers that the desert sand is playing its games with the sun.

After another half hour of flying, whitish-gray plains arise as if crawling up out of the sea.

He quickly begins to form the words in his head which he needs to descend later. It is all right here because there is no one to see. After a few minutes, he passes the border of water and land and says softly: OHPEK TAYKEL MANEH. Before the words are out of his mouth, the carpet begins to descend. He lands softly on an African beach, for Africa is the name of the continent where he has landed.

His father lives here, they've told him. Here or there, or there, or there. With each 'there' he looks in another direction: first to the east, then to the south, and finally to the west.

Before he begins his search, he decides to eat Aurelia's sandwiches because a sudden feeling of hunger makes him forget all about directions. He saves the mineral water for later.



## Chapter 12. Jean-Pierre in Algeria

Jean-Pierre is dreaming. He is walking in a narrow alley between white, pink and blue houses. Suddenly a dog runs at him. Startled, he begins to kick at it. Sand blows in his eyes. Sweat drips off his face. He wakes up with a start. The sun is now high in the sky. Without realizing it, he had fallen asleep.

He sees that he is still laying half on his carpet.

I'd better not let this happen again, he thinks to himself. This is an easy way for someone to steal The Last Flying Carpet.

Paracelsus warned him that there was a lot of stealing not only in Genoa but also in North Africa, in fact, everywhere. It is a contagious disease, which is widely spread. But he also said that there were still neighborhoods, villages and districts where people did not have the disease, whether they were rich or poor. His last words were:

"You must not steal, and especially not as a habit, because it makes you lazy and dependent on the suffering of others. The only time you may steal is if you have nothing to eat."

As soon as he remembers Paracelsus' words, he forgets them again. He has to think about how to go on.

He decides to fly over land in a westerly direction, keeping the sea in sight. Sooner or later, according to Paracelsus, he should arrive in a country called Morocco.

Another beautiful name, thinks Jean-Pierre. His father lives in this country, at least the big people told him he used to. They even mentioned the name of the city . . . Chao or Chaouen, something like that.

It is getting so warm now that he decides not to wait a moment longer to take off. It is cooler higher up, and he can still enjoy the sun and watch the sea.

After waving briefly at the spot where he landed alone for the first time, he rises slowly on his carpet. He says the words MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK slower than he did this morning. Is that the reason he goes up more slowly?

Probably, thinks Jean-Pierre. Paracelsus told me this carpet is a bird, which comes alive by my words. If I speak slowly, it moves slowly. It does whatever I want, just like a dog.

All these thoughts float like thin ribbons of clouds through his head. He feels more airy way up in the sky, just as he feels more watery with the rolling of the waves in the water. The motionless ground and the immobile houses seem really very crazy. Perhaps everything is actually different than we always imagine. It depends if we are on the earth, on the water or in the air, thinks Jean-Pierre. Suddenly he wakes up from his daydreaming with a start.

In the distance he sees cars driving and still further away, he sees a city lying on a bay. He has no idea which city it is, but he decides to land

on the outskirts. Only now does he realize how difficult it is to do this unseen.

All at once he gets an idea. If I lie down completely flat on my carpet, no one can see me and from a distance the carpet will look like a piece of brown paper carried by the wind.

Jean-Pierre lies down and looks to see if there are any trees close by to land behind. Fifteen minutes go by before he sees a group of palm trees a few hundred yards from the road which will hide him as he lands.

He does not hesitate and begins to say the words: OHPEK TAYKEL MAHNEH.

A few moments later he breathes a sigh of relief. It worked. There is no one around. He quickly rolls the carpet up, puts it into the case and strolls towards the road with his travel bag in his right hand. Pockets are sewn into the bottom of the bag, where Aurelia hid small silver coins. She told him he could pay everywhere with these coins. If people should ask him where he got the silver coins, he is to say they were made in honor of the 50th anniversary of Circus Mediterraneo, and that he earned them by working in this circus. If the people do not believe him, then he can prove it by doing a handstand, a double somersault and landing on his feet, and no one will doubt it further. Jean-Pierre smiles. In the meantime he has arrived at the road. Since there is no person, car, horse or dog in sight, he decides to practice a little. While he is standing on his hands, he sees something coming in the distance. He quickly does two somersaults, jumps to his feet again and sticks out his left thumb for a ride.

A small truck grinds to a halt. The man behind the wheel has a cloth around his head, encircling a narrow face with lively, bright eyes. He shouts something to Jean-Pierre, who doesn't understand any of it, but does understand he can get a ride.

When he is sitting in the truck, the man says something again. Jean-Pierre answers that his name is Jean-Pierre, at which the man exclaims in French:

"My name is Mohammed. When I was young, I used to work for a Frenchy by the name of Jean-Pierre. He was a nice guy, but he didn't pay enough."

The truck driver is a man of about forty. He tells Jean-Pierre that he carries all kinds of goods with his truck, from Oran to Algeria and back; sometimes straight through the Sahara to In Salah and even Tamanrasset. He also drives to different cities in Morocco.

He asks Jean-Pierre what he is doing here and where his parents live.

Jean-Pierre answers:

"I'm looking for my father. My step-parents live in France and my Aunt Aurelia from Circus Mediterraneo is in Genoa. They gave me permission to search for my father who lives in Morocco."

"But where?" the man asks with growing amazement.

"I don't know exactly. They told me he used to live in Chao or Chaouen."

The man looks amazed. He also has a son of this age, and the idea that his son would go searching for him has never entered his mind. If he



would lose his son, he would move heaven and earth to find him. Why doesn't this father do that?

The driver looks at Jean-Pierre out of the corner of his right eye and asks:

"How did you lose your father?"

"My mother died the day I was born. My father is always travelling and couldn't take care of me. That's how I came to my step-parents. For a long time, I did not know they weren't my real parents."

Along the left side of the road he sees mountains in the distance; on the right side of the road, he can see the sea sometimes. The city comes slowly closer by.

"Do you live there?" asks Jean-Pierre.

The man nods. He has just decided to take the boy home with him.

"I have a son at home, the same age as you. He doesn't speak French, but you will understand each other anyway. You can talk with your hands and your feet. You can come to my house if you want to. One of these days, I'll take you with me to Morocco. This truck goes everywhere."

"Does your son ever go with you?" asks Jean-Pierre.

"Only when he doesn't have school."

The man talks fast and in short sentences. His sentences sound like the staccato rhythm of the tires under his truck.

They are driving now in the outskirts of the city. Children are playing on the street. The streets, lined with trees on both sides, are just as straight as stripes. Only the children don't take notice of the straight lines. They run in and out of the trees trying to tap each other, crossing almost in front of the passing cars.

"I used to do that, too," says the man with a smile on his face, tooting his horn loudly to chase the children from the street.

A few minutes later, the truck stops in a quiet side street where a few trucks are parked.

"Come on, we're going to my house."

Without waiting for an answer, he jumps out of the truck and opens the door on Jean-Pierre's side. As Jean-Pierre is climbing out of the truck with his long case and bag squeezed under his arm, a dark boy runs to the big man and jumps right into his arms. They hug and kiss each other.

"This is Jean-Pierre, Achmed," the father says to the son. "He comes from France and is looking for his father. Take him home with you. Give him something to drink and then go and play. I'll be home later." The two boys look at each other as if they are looking at another world. But mutual curiosity quickly wins over the distance they both feel.

"Is your name Achmed?" asks Jean-Pierre.

The boy nods, picks up a stone and throws it in the direction of a tree on the other side of the street. Jean-Pierre also picks up a stone and throws it at the same tree. Both miss. The ice is broken.



Achmed's house is a big white box with little windows and a green door. It is cool inside.

Achmed's mother looks up in surprise from the table where she is making couscous as she sees her son come in with a strange boy. Achmed begins to talk and gesture animatedly and he points outside. Jean-Pierre feels the distance again that he felt at first with Achmed. The atmosphere in the house is so different than what he is used to. The living room is more empty than the living room at his step-parents' house or Aunt Aurelia's caravan.

But then he hears music outside. A wailing female voice sings as if her heart is a restless bird. The room glows in tones of blue. The air begins to vibrate. It is as if he hears the voice of his mother.

At that moment, Achmed's mother pushes a chair towards him and begins to pour tea. Achmed smiles at him encouragingly. Jean-Pierre feels that he is welcome. Outside the woman goes on singing as if she has done that forever.

That evening the man asks Jean-Pierre if he wants to stay a few days or to travel with him to Oujda, a Moroccan city on the border of Algeria.

"Does my father live there?" asks Jean-Pierre.

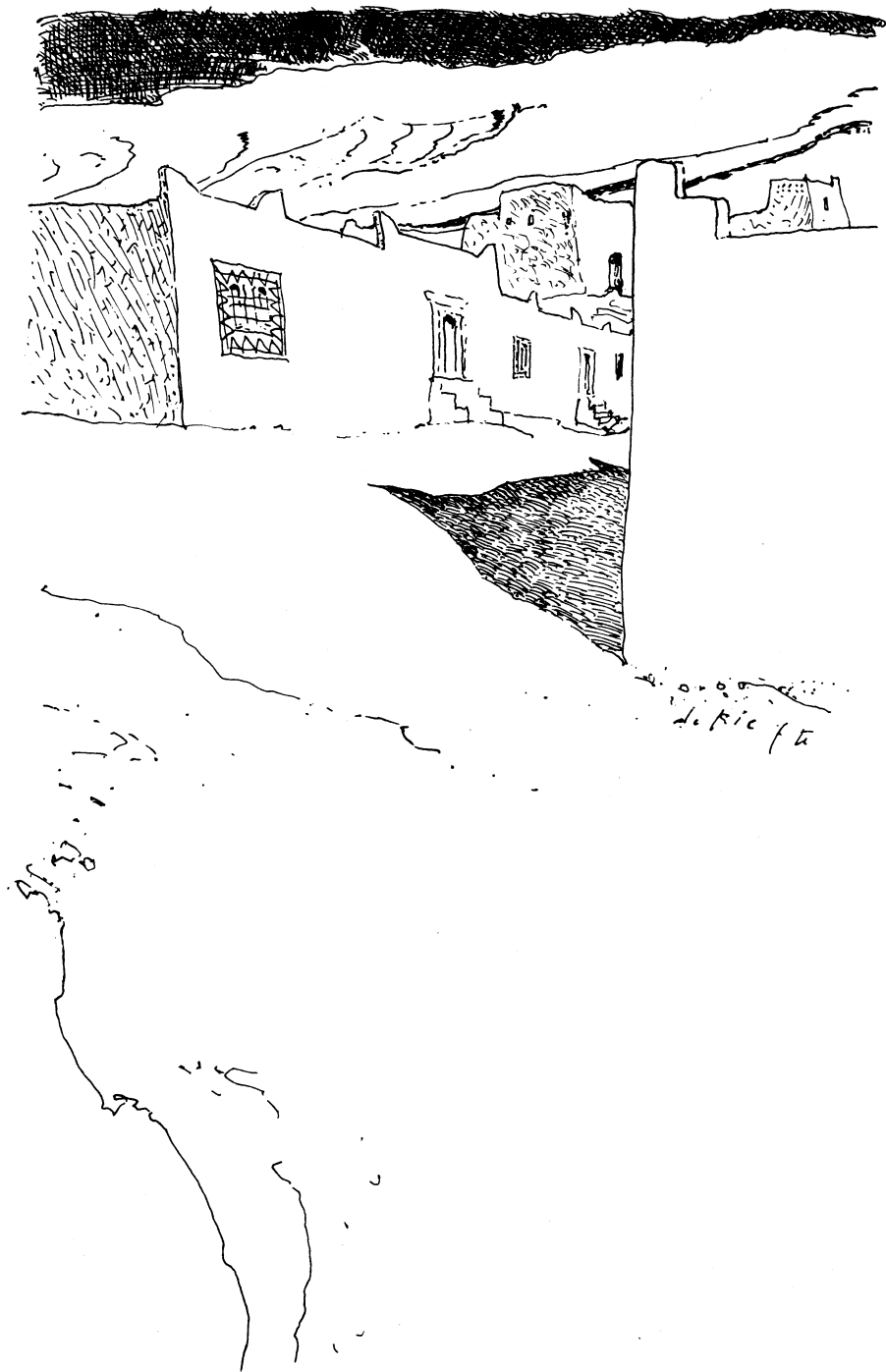
"I don't know, but if you tell me his name, I'll look with you. If it is Allah's will, we shall find him."

Jean-Pierre says he wants to go.

That night the boys sleep next to each other in Achmed's bed. They say good-bye to each other early the next morning. They are friends.

Achmed understood from his father that Jean-Pierre has one goal in his life and that is to find his father. Starting today, he decides to ask his father every time he comes home from a trip, if they have found him yet.

As the truck begins to drive, Achmed's father puts on a transistor radio. The same female voice from yesterday afternoon fills the cabin of the truck and drowns the sound of the motor. The woman's voice nestles itself in Jean-Pierre's belly.



## Chapter 13. Jean-Pierre in Morocco

As the cold, rocky mountain landscape slowly warmed to a glowing red under the rays of the morning sun, Mohammed asks Jean-Pierre:

"Do you like this music?"

Jean-Pierre nods his head.

"The singer's name is Leila. She is an Egyptian singer, but she is loved everywhere in North Africa. Everyone is crazy about her. She sings the language of our heart."

"She makes me think of my mother. Yesterday afternoon I thought I heard my mother's voice and this morning I felt cold chills up and down my spine when you put on the radio. After that it seemed as if her voice crept into my belly."

Mohammed laughed and turned up the transistor radio.

"Is it still there?" he shouts.

"I don't know. Now everything seems normal."

For a long time they ride through the rocky landscape without saying anything to each other. Casually, Mohammed looks sideways at Jean-Pierre every now and then, asking himself what kind of a boy he is. He is a child and a man at the same time, he thinks to himself, just like my son, but in another way. Again he decides not to give up until he has helped the boy find his father.

"What is your father's name, by the way?" he asks.

"Jean-Claude Auriol," answers Jean-Pierre.

"And how old is your father?"

"I don't know. Maybe as old as you."

A smile stretches over the tight face. The boy guesses my thoughts, thinks Mohammed. He feels my concern for his father.

"Yesterday I promised to help you look for your father. When we get to Oujda, I'll start asking if anyone has ever heard of the name Auriol. Is your father a merchant?"

Again Jean-Pierre does not know the answer. He begins to realize now how little he knows about his father, while at the same time he has been thinking about him so much the last days. Apparently you can think about your father a lot without knowing anything about him.

"You mentioned the name of a city yesterday, where your father lives or used to live. Was that Chaouen?"

"Something like that," says Jean-Pierre. "Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, it is a little town. I've been there twice. I'll see if I can get a load for Chaouen in Oujda. Then we can drive there in one trip. I'm starting to get curious now myself."

"What time do we arrive in Oujda?"

"Allah willing, eleven o'clock in the morning."

Again it is quiet between them for a long time. The transistor radio crackles. A man sings melodies as if they spring from his throat. You forget time with these songs, thinks Jean-Pierre.

Suddenly they hear a thud. The truck pulls to the right just as they are driving close to a ravine. The man jams on the brakes as hard as he can and pulls up the hand brake at the same time. The truck comes to a standstill a few inches from the precipice.

Mohammed jumps out of the truck, walks around it and calls to Jean-Pierre: "Allah did not will it."

The right wheel of the truck is off. It is lying a few yards back on the road.

"Who is Allah?" asks Jean-Pierre, for the man has already mentioned the name twice.

"Allah, my son, is the Inexpressible, without whose will nothing happens."

Jean-Pierre grins. It seems as if he is hearing his step-father talking when he says that not even a sparrow falls from the roof without God's will. Could Mohammed's Allah and his step-father's God possibly be the same? In any case, they both have a lot of power. But if there are two, then they have to share the power. If there is only one, he wouldn't have to.

His thoughts are interrupted by Mohammed saying:

"We have to wait until someone comes along and we get a ride to Oujda. It is not much farther."

A half hour later, an old taxi comes along, one with old-fashioned running boards at both sides under the doors. Mohammed and Jean-Pierre get to sit next to the baggage on the back seat. The taxi goes to Oujda full speed ahead. It is eleven-thirty when they arrive.

Mohammed goes to a garage to get help and Jean-Pierre sits down in a tea house and looks around him. The people make a friendly, quiet impression.

They seem in less of a hurry than in Genoa. He feels quite comfortable here.

A man talks to him and asks him if he is from Oujda. Jean-Pierre answers that he comes from France and is on his way to Chaouen.

"Who are you visiting there?" asks the man in French.

Jean-Pierre hesitates. Should he say he is looking for his father or not. He has noticed that people find it strange. The man sees him hesitate and says quickly:

"You don't have to tell me, but I'm asking because strange things happen in Chaouen."

Seeing that he has Jean-Pierre's attention now, he continues. The story goes that there is a valuable treasure hidden in Chaouen. This treasure is a carpet, still as a lifeless bird, and yet it can rise up like a phoenix for the one who knows the right words.

Jean-Pierre's eyes begin to shine. He almost has to bite his tongue to keep from blurting out that he is the owner of just such a carpet, maybe even the same one.

"What is a phoenix?" he asks.

The man explains that the phoenix was an ancient Egyptian bird which rose again and again out of its own ashes after being burnt. Hence the comparison with the carpet. The man continues his story:

"It all began with the arrival of a Frenchman in Chaouen, about ten years ago. Once, when he was drunk, he boasted that he owned The Last Flying Carpet in the world. The only thing that was needed to make it fly, was a secret formula that was stolen from him. If the people in Chaouen would help him to

get the formula back, he would give a demonstration of his Last Flying Carpet as a reward."

The man stops talking and orders two glasses of tea. Jean-Pierre cannot keep his eyes off him.

"And then?"

"One night, four men forced their way into the house of the Frenchman, tied him to his bed, and searched his house until they found the carpet under the floor of his bedroom. They left a note behind with the words: 'We are flying to the East.'

Shortly thereafter, the Frenchman left only to return once more. On his return to Chaouen he went to a notary. A notary is someone who records on paper all kinds of agreements between people, for example, when someone wants to buy or sell a house, or leave money to their children when they die."

"A testament," says Jean-Pierre.

"Very good, boy. He gave two envelopes to this notary. One letter was about the carpet, and the other contained the secret formula. The notary could open the envelopes only in the case of the Frenchman's death."

The man stops talking. He is amazed to see tears in Jean-Pierre's eyes. He wonders why the boy is crying. It is only a story!

Just then, Mohammed enters the tea house. He immediately asks Jean-Pierre what is the matter. Jean-Pierre shakes his head and begins to laugh through his tears. Now that he sees Mohammed, he feels safe again. His father couldn't be dead!

The two men begin a conversation in Arabic. Jean-Pierre follows it breathlessly. Only when they are finished does he realize that he has been listening to a language that he does not understand. And still he understood, literally, every word they said. The man told Mohammed which story he had been telling the boy after he heard that he wanted to go to Chaouen.

Mohammed answered that he had promised the boy to take him to Chaouen to look for his father there.

The two men see the amazement on Jean-Pierre's face.

Mohammed says to Jean-Pierre that the first stop in Chaouen must be a visit to the notary. If he still has the two envelopes unopened in his possession, then it is probable that the Frenchman is still living.

Perhaps the notary even knows where he is. There is a chance he is Jean-Claude Auriol, Jean-Pierre's father.

That evening, they drive the sandy road into Chaouen under a full moon. The pastel pink, blue and yellow houses are illuminated by moonlight. There is magic in the air.

Together they visit the local café. Jean-Pierre notices that only men are sitting around the tables. They are waiting for the performance of a young dancer and are smoking their pipes. The greenish tobacco smells fragrant and strong. After fifteen minutes, Jean-Pierre falls asleep.

Mohammed asks if there are rooms in the café. There is no point in looking for a hotel with a sleeping child. The café has a few guest rooms. He also asks for the address of the local notary. He also wants to find out if there are still stories going around about the Last Flying Carpet.

As soon as the words 'flying carpet' are mentioned, one of the men tugs at his sleeve and says:

"You've been here before, haven't you?"

"Yes, but that was more than ten years ago," answers Mohammed. "You've got quite a memory."

The man begins to tell a long story in a soft voice while Jean-Pierre, his head cradled in his arms on the table, sleeps deeply, as if he were lying in his own bed.

"Since the theft of an important letter, we've known no peace here," says the man. "Sometimes it's quiet for a few months, but then suddenly gangs of fellows turn up again, looking more like Ali Baba's thieves than decent, hard-working people. They seem to have their headquarters here, but we are not sure about it. They have such dangerous dogs that none of us dare to spy on them. Before you know it, the dogs sink their teeth in your leg or your neck, and they don't let go, even if you bash them with an iron bar."

Mohammed laughs:

"Is it really so bad?"

"You've got my permission to try it. I'll let you see where it is."

Each man takes Jean-Pierre under one arm and they carry him to the truck.

After a few minutes of driving, the man nudges Mohammed and says:

"See that house that's completely dark? That's where they live. Just opposite it is the house where that Frenchman lived, the one who owned a flying carpet."

Jean-Pierre smiles in his sleep while the men are talking softly. He is dreaming about pink, blue and yellow houses just as the truck is standing right in front of his father's house. But he doesn't realize that.



## Chapter 14. Ali Baba's Gang

The next morning Yussuf and Jean-Pierre are standing in front of the notary's door. On a large name plate, they read: Y. Hakim, notary public and attorney-at-law. They ring the bell and a man with big, dark glasses and a gray beard opens the door.

Yussuf says:

"I gave this boy a lift from Oran to here. He is looking for his father, whose name is Jean-Pierre Auriol. I heard that you know Mr. Auriol."

"That's correct," says the notary. "Come in. This is quite a coincidence." Jean-Pierre blushes with excitement, and thinks to himself, we're on the right track. This man knows my father.

"Is my father still living?" he asks.

"As far as I know, he is. I haven't spoken to him for a long time, but I did get a letter from him. But first tell me what you know about your father and how you found your way to Chaouen."

His eyes narrowed, the notary listens to Jean-Pierre, who tells him everything, but says nothing about his Flying Carpet, even though it is lying next to him on the ground in its long cover. He decided to take his carpet and travel bag with him everywhere.

Yussuf tells the notary that he has finished his work now and has to return to Oran the same day. He asks the notary to help Jean-Pierre to find his father.

The notary promises to help, but in return, asks Yussuf not to talk about The Flying Carpet, because of the recent problems in the town. He is afraid that more publicity around The Flying Carpet will only attract the attention of more ruthless thieves and ruffians.

Mr. Hakim does not add that he is under heavy pressure from Ali Baba's gang and is considering cooperating with them. In the past he has also had dealings with the gang. Ali Baba knows about Hakim's contact with the owner of The Last Flying Carpet. That is why the gang broke into his house recently, trying to get hold of it. Afterwards, Ali Baba sent a middle man - an important politician - with a promise of a great deal of money. Because Hakim did not consider it enough money for such a rare carpet, and therefore would not cooperate, the gang began to threaten him.

The notary thinks that the arrival of Jean-Pierre will not go unnoticed by the robbers. There is a good chance they will try to kidnap the boy as soon as they discover that he is the son of the owner of The Last Flying Carpet. But perhaps the new situation provides him the chance to kill two birds with one stone. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could free the town of the robbers and earn a lot of money doing it at the same time?

Yussuf and Jean-Pierre take leave of each other. Jean-Pierre promises to send him a post card as soon as he finds his father.

After Yussuf has gone, the notary takes Jean-Pierre upstairs. While they are standing in the hall which leads onto a room, the notary says:



"Jean-Pierre, you can live in this house until your father comes, or until you continue your journey to the country from which he last wrote me."

"Which country is that?"

"That country is Japan. Japan is a big island, far away from here to the east. More than 100 million people live on that island. The Japanese understand the secret of time. That's why your father wanted to go there. I'll tell you more about it later. First we have to arrange your stay here. I'm giving you a secret room that no one knows about except me. The reason I'm doing this is that there is a gang working under the code name 'Ali Baba'. Ali Baba was a famous thief long ago. Everyone knows his name. This gang is so brazen as to take this famous name for themselves. They also try to be just as clever as the original Ali Baba. They like to work with cunning tricks instead of violence, but they would stoop to anything. I am afraid that the gang is interested in you because you are the son of Jean-Claude Auriol. They won't find you in the secret room. I invite you to look for the room yourself so you can see how well the room is hidden. "

Jean-Pierre begins to look around. Naturally, it is not the room at the end of the hall, because that would be too easy, he thinks. He studies the walls, pulls open a door, behind which is a closet, then looks at the ceiling, only to end up looking at the closet again. After fifteen minutes of searching, he gives up. Mr. Hakim laughs:

"I didn't think you'd give up so quickly. Look, there is no door, only a wall. An ultra-sensitive noise sensor has been built into this wall, designed by a Japanese engineer to react only to the sounds, 'AH - O O - AA - EE' and only in that order. The sound sensor is here in the light switch. Try it."

Jean-Pierre slowly says: "AH - O O - AA - EE".

The whole wall, including the closet and the closet door, slowly begins to pivot on a shaft in the middle. He walks inside through the opening. He is standing in a long, narrow room without a window. There is a bed, some dates, a few bottles of mineral water and a commode with a lid. As he is looking around in surprise, he suddenly sees the wall move and fall back into its old place with a soft click. He turns as pale as a sheet and thinks - is the notary keeping me prisoner? Could this man be working with Ali Baba's gang?

He presses his ear against the wall. He doesn't hear anything. No voice, no footsteps, only a deep silence. He wants to scream, but he cannot make a sound. Fear pinches off his throat. With a shock, he realizes that he left his bag and carpet in the notary's room. He is not only a prisoner, but he has also lost his carpet. The only thing he knows is that his father is in Japan and that Ali Baba's gang and Mr. Hakim do not know that he has The Last Flying Carpet. By feeling around, he finds the bed he saw earlier. Gradually he begins to get used to the silence and the darkness. His eyes seem to catch a glimpse of light here and there, or is that his imagination? He shuts his eyes. At that moment he suddenly

sees the figure of Paracelsus standing before him. Paracelsus says, in a calm voice:

"Don't panic, boy. That won't help at all. Stay calm and think about how you can get out of this. There is a solution to every problem. Therefore, there is a solution to this problem, too. Now then, there are two possibilities: either you wait until Mr. Hakim opens the wall or you have to try to open the wall yourself. Let's begin with the second possibility because we cannot do anything about the first one now. Look. If there is a sound sensor on the outside of this wall, then perhaps there is also one on the inside. The notary is smart enough to realize that he not only has to be able to hide himself, but that he also has to be able to get out from the inside. We can assume that he uses the same method for getting out as for getting in: sounds. Why don't you try the sounds 'AH - O O - AA - EE' in different places? If that doesn't help, say the sounds backwards, just as with your Flying Carpet."

Jean-Pierre jumps up from his bed. Paracelsus has disappeared. Maybe it was a dream. But the ideas are good. He is going to try it.

He carefully steps around the room with his hands in front of him. When he feels the wall he turns around and walks back slowly while counting his steps. The room is eight steps long. In the hall he had seen that the wall turned in the middle. That was where the light switch was, too. Maybe he was in the middle here, too.

So I have to take four steps, he thinks.... one, two, three, four.

When Jean-Pierre reaches the middle of the room, he suddenly thinks it might be better to wait a few hours until everyone is taking their siesta and therefore, not working. Then there is a good chance that Hakim will not be downstairs in his office, but somewhere in town.

Jean-Pierre lies on the bed and thinks about his step-parents' house. Will they already have gotten the letter from Aunt Aurelia and his drawing of The Last Flying Carpet? They will most likely think it is only a child's drawing, because they certainly won't be able to imagine that he can really fly now. He goes on daydreaming in this way, forgetting time. In his thoughts he flies from the house on the river to the circus tent in Genoa. Aurelia is performing her horse act. Ajax is galloping next to his mother. He doesn't stray from her side for a moment.

Suddenly he wakes up with a start. He sees the wall turning. An expanding ribbon of light falls inside. Mr. Hakim is standing in the opening.

"Did you sleep a little?" he asks in a friendly tone.

"Yes, I thought you would come back soon. What time is it?"

"The sun is high in the sky. It is noontime even though you don't notice it in this room. I wanted to test, Jean-Pierre, if you could stand a little shock. And I see that you can."

Jean-Pierre is thinking all the while: Does he mean what he says or he is just telling a story to trick me?

Jean-Pierre decides to play it safe and not to trust the man, but to act as if he does trust him. If it turns out that he's wrong, then everything is all

right. If he's not wrong, then it is better that notary Hakim does not know about his suspicions.

"Let's have lunch together," says Hakim. "I will tell you something then about your father. But you have to promise me that you will go to this room immediately and stay here whenever I tell you to. A moment can come unexpectedly when we have to act quickly."

"But I have to stay there because I don't know how to get out," Jean-Pierre says.

"You're right, Jean-Pierre. I will show you another time. Now we are going around the corner to get something to eat."

The restaurant is not much bigger than a living room. They sit down at a table in a corner directly opposite the entrance. In that way, Hakim can see exactly who comes in. After Hakim orders tea, French bread, cheese and olives, he begins to talk.

"Jean-Pierre, your father is an exceptional man. Though he is actually a French Jew, he loves the Arabian culture, which he got to know during his travels in North Africa and the Middle East. Because of this, he was in a position to win the trust of important people who were not always willing to talk to each other directly, but sometimes wanted to do that via him. Thus, he traveled through the Middle East to bring secret messages from one influential figure to the other. For one of these people, he had to go to Baghdad, the capital of Iraq. Iraq is a country in the Middle East. The evening he arrived in Baghdad, he immediately had a talk with an important staff member of the president. But he had bad luck. The same evening, there was a coup in the palace of the president and he and the staff member were taken prisoner. In prison, he ended up in a cell where, a half hour before, someone had been dragged in who had been threatened and beaten. This was because the man refused to talk.

Fear and misery kept your father from sleeping that night. While he lay in the dark among the other prisoners, this man began to mumble in his sleep. Your father pricked up his ears. He heard him say the same words over and over, sometimes forwards, sometimes backwards. He decided to try to remember these words, hoping they could be of use someday.

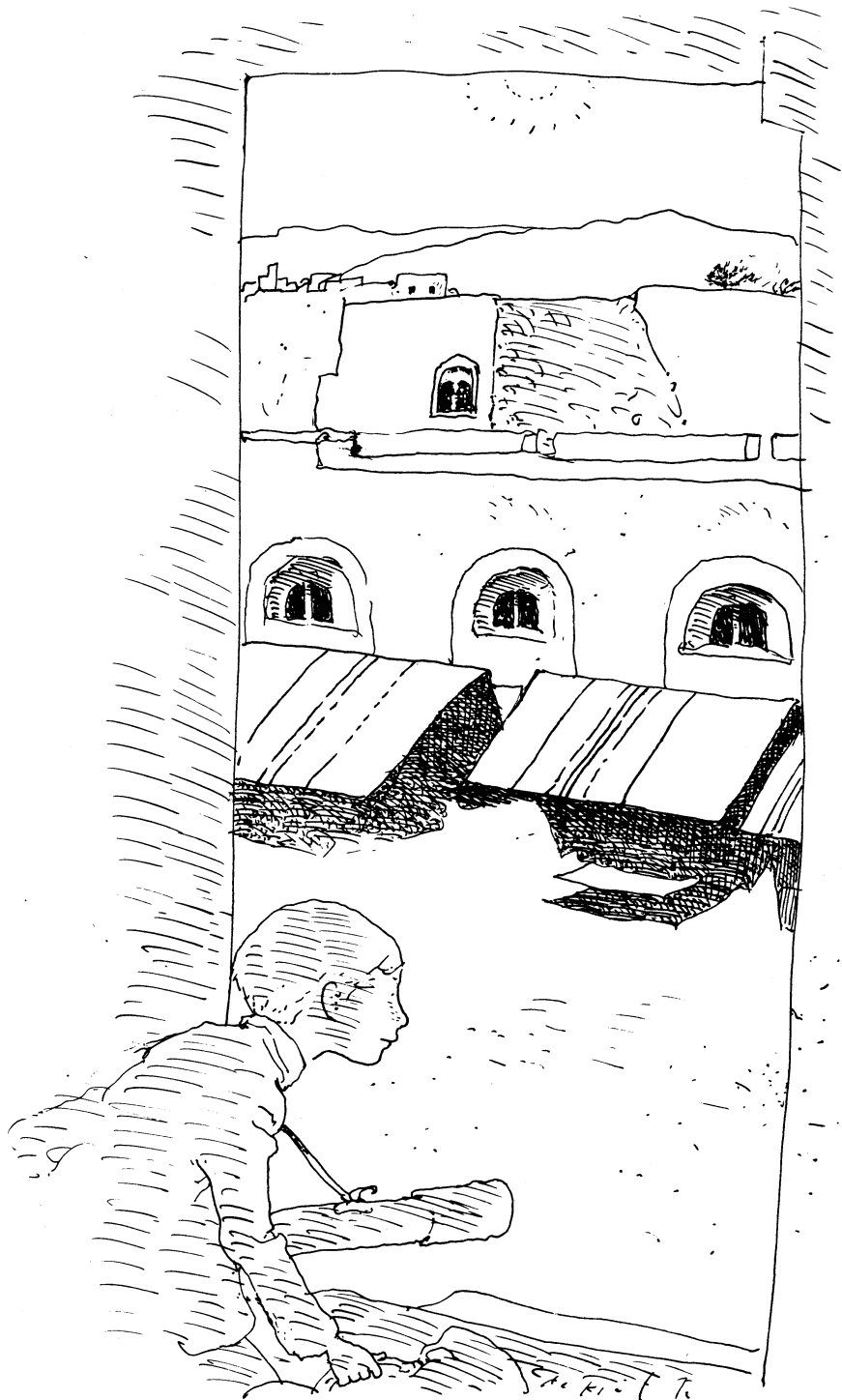
Every day the man got taken out of the cell, was threatened and beaten again, but the guards never got a word out of him. Only at night, he would sometimes mumble these strange words again.

After spending three days and nights together in the cell with only some water and bread, this prisoner asked your father if he would do something for him if your father were let free sooner. It seemed the man had heard that they would keep him until he talked. He told your father that in a certain house in Baghdad a carpet of inestimable value was lying in a special place. Why the carpet was so valuable he did not want to say. His request to your father was to go to that house and to say a password. Someone would then hand the carpet over to him. And he had to bring that carpet to Morocco, to a place called Chaouen.

Having arrived there, he had to leave a letter describing the whereabouts

of the carpet with the local notary. He had to choose a secret place for the carpet himself, and keep it there for him, the prisoner. The reward he would get for this would be a very, very great deal of money. Your father promised to do this because he had grown to hate the prison guards who were beating this man so terribly, and also because the adventure and the money attracted him. But the real reason was that he was that he was burning with curiosity about that special carpet. Your father was set free soon after that. The new people in power thought they could use your father to take a secret proposal to their old opponents. Before he left Baghdad he succeeded in picking up the carpet. The password was: Ali Baba. He received a sealed and stamped envelope at once, which he had to deliver at the same time as the letter noting the address of the carpet. The sealed envelope was stolen from him the evening he arrived in Chaouen."

Mr. Hakim stops talking. Two bearded men enter the restaurant.



## Chapter 15. The Escape

The look of mutual understanding the two bearded men exchange in passing with Mr. Hakim does not escape Jean-Pierre. Hakim stands up, pays the bill and takes Jean-Pierre by the hand. Arriving at the office, Jean-Pierre sees that his carpet case and travel bag are standing in a corner. He says casually:

"Shall I bring these to my secret room?"

Hakim scrutinizes him for a moment and then says:

"We only use that room in case of emergency, for example if Ali Baba's gang should break in here again. As you know, they did that once. As long as things are quiet, you can use the room at the end of the hall and put your things there, too. Go take a rest now, because it's going to be a late night tonight. I'll come for you later, when I am through with my appointments."

Jean-Pierre feels relieved with this answer. Maybe he is imagining things. After all, if Mr. Hakim really is his father's friend, then he must also want to help his friend's son? He gets his travel bag and the long case, and walks upstairs. The room at the end of the hall has a window with shutters in front of it. The shutters let only a few shafts of light through. Jean-Pierre opens the window first and then the shutter a little, so that he can look diagonally down at the street. The shadows in the street are very short. That means that the sun is high in the sky. His step-father once explained that to him after he ran after his own long shadow in the evening.

In a corner of the room on the same side as the door, directly opposite the window, is a large closet with a heavy door. With effort, he succeeds in opening the door. The closet is empty. The door has a heavy lock on the inside which makes it possible to lock the door from the inside, too. This gives him an idea. He takes a candle out of his travel bag, lights it and puts it in the closet. Then he pulls the door closed, locks it and takes his carpet out of the case. The closet is big enough to roll out the carpet on the ground. Jean-Pierre sits with his legs crossed on his Flying Carpet. He feels an almost irresistible urge to say the words MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK. He has to control himself not to say them softly.

What would happen if I would do it now anyway? Would I simply fly away through the roof or would I bang my head and fall down, carpet and all? And what would happen if I said the words backwards? Would I then disappear into the ground?

These thoughts do not cheer him up. Because if it is possible, it scares him, and if it is not possible, he remains here as a prisoner. He decides to say the secret words only in case of an emergency.

In the meantime, his eyes are used to the semidarkness. The candle flame flickers uneasily as if there were a draft in the closet. Jean-Pierre looks at the door. It is closed tight. There is not even any light shining under it. How can the candle flicker then? He holds his breath. But that doesn't have any effect on the restless dance of the flame. There must be

a draft here, he thinks. But if there is a draft, then there is an opening where the air comes through to the inside.

His eyes search slowly wall by wall. Under the carpet, he sees a split between two floor boards which is slightly larger than the others. Then he sees a sunken ring large enough to pull on. Feverishly, he searches further. He has already rolled up his carpet. Four boards farther than the large split he discovers a thin hinge. A trap door, he almost shouts out loud. Where does the trap door lead to?

Deep in thought, he walks down the stairs to Hakim's office. At the bottom of the stairs he stops and looks at the lay-out of the hall. He walks back upstairs, still in thought. Turning right to the door of his room and seeing the big closet in the corner, he knows for sure that this closet is directly above Hakim's office. For in the same corner of Hakim's office, he has seen a spiral staircase leading to a small gallery with a bookcase full of large, black binders. If he would open the trap door, he could jump onto the gallery and get down by the stairs.

With his right index finger he taps the side of his head while he says: "Brains." He is proud that he has discovered this secret spot with its hidden exit. But at the same time he asks himself why this house has all these secret places. Do all the houses here have them or only Mr. Hakim's?

The answer to the question pops up like a jack-in-the box:

"Of course it's Mr. Hakim, because he told me himself that no one knows about the secret room behind the wall in the hall. He must have had it made. And that can only mean that he is a man with secrets."

Jean-Pierre decides to search further. For if he already knows two secret places while he has only been here half a day, who knows what else he will find. At that moment he hears a shuffling sound downstairs. He jumps. Maybe Hakim is coming upstairs. He quickly opens the closet door, leaves the carpet, the case and the travel bag in the closet, and lies down on the bed in the room. The door opens a moment later. With a friendly smile Mr. Hakim says:

"Did you rest? I didn't hear anything, so I thought I'd just have a look to see how you are. If you want, we can talk a little now, because one of my clients has just cancelled his appointment."

While talking, Hakim opened the window and the shutter wider. The light from the street falls brightly into the room now.

As they sit next to each other on the bed, Hakim continues his story:

"Of course you have understood, Jean-Pierre, that the carpet I was talking about is so valuable because it is The Last Flying Carpet in the world. There used to be more. But no one knows where the other flying carpets are. Perhaps they have been eaten up, destroyed by mildew and moths. In the last analysis, nothing can withstand the test of time. Everything comes and goes. Where there is a birth, there is a death. I see that every day in my practice."

Mr. Hakim pauses. He is startled by his own words. What is he actually doing here in this stuffy, dusty office amid hundreds of binders bearing the names of all his clients? All of them people with a house, some land



and a testament; poor people never come here. They don't have any affairs to arrange. 'Nothing' can't be divided or left behind or claimed.

"What are you thinking about," Jean-Pierre asks.

"Something you're too young to understand."

At that moment they hear shouting from the street. Hakim hurries to the open window and peers outside.

"Quick," he cries. "Ali Baba's people are coming. They could be looking for you. Get into the closet. We have no time to lose."

"Why not the secret room?" asks Jean-Pierre.

"No time, no time," answers Hakim.

He propels Jean-Pierre hastily forward in the direction of the closet, opens the door and pushes it closed. A grinding key does the rest. Jean-Pierre hears Hakim walk away quickly and call down from the stairs.

He slides the bolt on the door. A knocking comes from downstairs. Lying on the ground, he presses his right ear to the floor. He can hear voices in the hall.

"Where is the boy?" he hears them shout.

"I've already hidden the boy. But first we have to talk this business out, before you can take him with you."

Jean-Pierre turns pale. So the notary is in cahoots with Ali Baba's gang.

What a scoundrel. How can he be my father's friend?

He is close to tears.

I have to try to get away from here as fast as possible. But where to?

To Japan, he thinks, because that's where my father is, at least if the notary isn't lying about that, too.

In the meanwhile, Hakim and Ali Baba's men have come upstairs.

Without too much trouble, he can follow the conversation.

"Are you sure he's Auriol's son?" the kidnappers ask.

"One hundred per cent sure!"

"Do you have Auriol's address in Japan?"

"Downstairs in my office. It's ready for you."

"Then we want to talk to the boy now."

"First the money, but no Moroccan money. Only American dollars, German marks and Japanese yen," says Hakim.

Some words are exchanged and someone goes downstairs. A little later, someone comes upstairs again. The notary says:

"Everything is in order. You can go in, but on one condition. Everyone goes downstairs now and comes up again when I say."

After a few seconds, Jean-Pierre hears sounds softly spoken: AH - OH - AA-EE.

"Darn, he's opening the wall of the secret room. Why would he do that?"

He doesn't have to wait long for an answer.

Hakim calls downstairs that they can come up. He made the kidnappers go downstairs because he did not want them to hear the opening formula for his private prison. When the three men are upstairs, he says:

"Go quickly inside through the opening at the end of the wall. He is lying on a bed, tied up."



The Ali Baba men go inside. Before the last man is through the opening, the wall turns back and clicks softly into its old position.

Jean-Pierre hears Hakim walk downstairs and open the outside door.

He's probably going to put his money in a safe place, he thinks. Maybe he's going to leave us here forever, until we die of hunger and thirst, while he leaves Morocco with his loot. He heard a story like that once at his step-parents' home, after a big bank robbery in Morocco.

He decides not to wait another moment and begins to pull on the trap door. Happily enough, it isn't very heavy. When it is standing open, he sees that the gallery is indeed directly underneath. After throwing down his case and bag, he lets himself fall down. He lands on the gallery with a little jump. He grabs his case and travel bag, runs down the spiral staircase, and looks on Hakim's desk for an envelop with his father's name. When he sees an envelope with strange stamps and the name Auriol, he grabs it and runs to the hall. Upstairs he hears a dull knocking. Apparently, the Ali Baba people are beating on the walls of their dark room as hard as they can. Jean-Pierre opens the front door and looks up and down the street to see if there are people outside. When he sees no one, which is not surprising during the hot midday hours, he strolls outside cool as a cucumber. A half hour later he is at the edge of the city. The pastel houses look a lot different now than last evening. Their friendly-looking faces have taken on a threatening appearance.



## Chapter 16. Jean-Pierre flies to the East

While Jean-Pierre looks around for a quiet, safe place to read the letter from his father, he notices a sign along the roadside. In big letters, in French and in a language he cannot read, it says: "The best decision is brief and precise." Under that: "Arabian saying."

He has to read it three times before he understands the meaning.

It's as if this was put here for me, he thinks to himself. Because now I have to decide what I'm going to do.

Not far from where he is standing, he sees a large number of cactusses and agaves with long, pointed leaves which bow gracefully to each other in the middle of the plant. Without hesitating further, he walks over to them, watching all the while to see if anyone is following him. Breathing a sigh of relief, he finds a small, open spot among the enormous cactus plants. No one can see him here. He is finally safe.

The first thing he does is take out the envelope which bears his father's name as sender. The letter is addressed to notary Y. Hakim. With trembling fingers, he pulls the letter out of the envelope and begins, as well as he can, to read word for word. His fingers move over the words and follow the lines. The handwriting is elegant with rounded curlicues. It looks a little like the strange letters he just saw on the sign. His lips spell out the words:

My dear Mr. Hakim,

It has again been a long time since I have written you.

In your last letter you mentioned that Ali Baba's gang had broken into your office in an attempt to steal the two envelopes. I am pleased that they were not successful. I propose that you send the two envelopes by registered mail to the following address: Jean-Claude Auriol, P.O. Box 13579, Kyoto, Japan. As soon as I have received the envelopes, I will send you a check for 50,000 yen for your services. If the two sealed envelopes are no longer in your possession, please disregard these instructions and the rest of this letter. I hope that sending the two envelopes will rid the city of Chaouen and you of Ali Baba and his gang. After all, if you don't have the envelopes, Ali Baba doesn't have any more business with you or Chaouen. The only reason I left the envelopes with you was, in fact, to put my pursuers on the wrong track.

Apparently it succeeded, because they believed that you had the real information. To make them believe this, I am sorry to say that I also had to let you believe it. I hope that you will be able to understand that I had to mislead you, too.

At the words: "...that I had to mislead you, too," Jean-Pierre begins to wave his arms enthusiastically. His father outwitted not only Ali Baba's gang, but also the untrustworthy Hakim.

The biggest losers until now are Ali Baba and his assistants because they paid Hakim a lot of money to get their hands on him, Jean-Pierre. The letter continues:

In case you do not return the envelopes to me still sealed, I regret that I cannot send you the promised check. The decision is up to you.

Faithfully yours,

....followed by an illegible signature.

"My father's signature looks more like a drawing of a few pointed roofs than a name," Jean-Pierre mumbles. He begins to wave the letter around from joy, and then to feel it on the front side and then on the back. Fascinated, he looks at all the words with the long curlicues for a few minutes.

Is my father tall? Does he have thin hands? What do you look like if you write like this?

These kinds of thoughts ran through his head when he was suddenly reminded, by shouts in the distance, that they were probably looking for him and that he was in great danger. Didn't it say on that sign: "The best decision is brief and precise."?

His decision is made. He has to get away from here as quickly as possible. Maybe the other members of Ali Baba's gang have discovered why their people didn't return. They probably also know by now that notary Hakim is gone. The town is not large. They will also come here. Maybe, without his noticing it, someone saw him walking through the street in this direction. The sounds seem to spread out. They come from several sides, now.

Feverishly, Jean-Pierre begins to pull his Carpet out of the case. He quickly crumples the letter from his father under his shirt. Next to the carpet, this is his most valuable possession. He finally has something tangible from his father. For the first time in his life, he feels how important and irreplaceable a text can be, especially if it is written by hand.

The funny thing is, thinks Jean-Pierre, that my father is farther away than I always think he is, and yet he gets closer to me, for example, by this letter. I also know now that he lived in this town. Now I know someone who knew my father, even if I can't trust him.

The shouts get louder. Some of the voices sound close by. In the meantime, Jean-Pierre has rolled out his carpet and is sitting in the middle of it with his bag next to him. Thoughtfully, he says the words: "MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK."

In the same slow tempo as the words, he rises above the cactusses and agaves. It seems as if they want to hold him back with their sharp, pointed arms, but without success. He can hear a tremendous noise in the distance, as if all the devils had escaped from hell. The men and boys have discovered that something is happening there that they have been talking about for years. The shouting is becoming deafening. In the

distance, a man with a black beard jumps onto a horse. It is a dark brown horse with a shining coat and a finely chiseled head. The big eyes gleam like spring water. It must be an Arabian stallion, from the spirited way it begins to sprint. Jean-Pierre glances quickly over his left shoulder. The horse is following him. The rider shouts suddenly, as he sees that he is losing ground with every second:

"Stop, stop! That is my carpet! Stop, stop! That is my carpet!"

That's what you think, thinks Jean-Pierre. Delphi gave it to me.

It only takes a minute for the distance between him and the rider on his horse to get so big that rider and horse look like a dot. Jean-Pierre decides not to pay attention to them any more, but to use all his energy to fly as quickly as possible to the city of Kyoto in Japan. He knows that he has to go in an easterly direction, because of the letter the robbers left at his father's: "We are flying to the East. To fly to the East, he has to go in precisely the other direction than the sun now is. Paracelsus taught him that the sun turns towards the west in the afternoon. If the sun is at his back now, then he is going towards the east.

Below him he sees sand, sand and more sand. It makes him feel dreamy. His eyes lock onto the horizon which sometimes seems to come closer but then escapes into the endless blue air. The silence around him is becoming slowly more intense.

To break the tension he begins to make soft noises in his throat, the same way Achmed's father did while driving his truck. Then you forget the time. But his humming makes the silence even deeper. The sky around him seems to be getting larger and larger. He feels like he is disappearing into it just like the mosquito in Aunt Aurelia's circus tent, which he had followed with his eyes for awhile at the last performance. The mosquito was not afraid, so why would he be afraid? Still, Jean-Pierre feels a strange feeling inside him. He doesn't know if it is joy or fear. Paracelsus told him once that while some people are very afraid in airplanes, others tremendously enjoy flying through space.

To overcome that strange feeling about the continually growing space around him, he looks down, and is startled by what he sees. The desert has become a sea. The sand blows in long ribbons in all directions at the same time. Sand dunes appear to be walking. They disappear suddenly only to appear again later in another place. While there is not a breath of wind around his Flying Carpet, the plains there far below him are dancing. The wind has made itself master of the desert. Small hills grow smaller and large hills larger and sometimes the other way around. It is a breath-taking spectacle. The desert is alive. The earth moves like water. An indescribable feeling overtakes him. The world is endlessly beautiful. This feeling of beauty radiates through his whole body from the top of his head to his toes. Billions of grains of sand are rushing through each other (in intricate patterns)(changing partners at lightning speed). Jean-Pierre shuts his eyes. The desert keeps dancing.

Has my father also experienced this? he asks himself. Surely he has.

That's why he wants to travel so much. I want to, too.

He opens his eyes with a smile. He is on the way. He doesn't have to want it because he is already doing it, and he is doing it on The Last Flying Carpet. No one in the world can take that away from him.



## Chapter 17. Jean-Pierre in Tibet

After several hours of flying and daydreaming, Jean-Pierre sees something white sparkling in the distance. The rays of the setting sun seem to be reflected by mirrors hanging high in the air. His curiosity is aroused and with it, his sleepiness disappears. That strange light far away to the left, what could that be? Could it be light coming from Japan? How will he know when he should land?

Paracelsus had advised him not to fly in the dark, especially the first few days. He also told him that The Last Flying Carpet would keep on flying along the same latitude by itself, as long as he did not change its direction with his head and his eyes. If he would just keep on flying without changing directions, he would finally end up in the same place he started from.

"So, you can never really get lost," Paracelsus had remarked with a laugh, using his globe to show him why. With his right index finger, he traced a line on the globe marked number 30.

"For example, if you take off from Morocco and follow this line to the east, you fly from Morocco over the Sahara through Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, India, Tibet and China to Japan. Before you get to Japan, you have to fly over the water, because Japan is an island. After Japan, there is an enormous sea, the Pacific Ocean. If you see land after this ocean, you are in Mexico, and a little later, in the United States of America. Then you get another large body of water. That's called the Atlantic Ocean. When you have flown over that ocean and you see land again, you are back in Morocco."

Paracelsus always talked about the earth as if it were no larger than an egg compared to the cosmos, in which the sun and the moon, Saturn, Neptune and many other planets are continually traveling through their orbit.

"That is why traveling is more natural than many people think. Everything is always moving, not only around us, but also inside us. Even when you are sleeping in your bed at night, you go on breathing and your heart keeps on pumping, so that the food you ate for dinner can change into living cells."

While the air above and in front of him conjures fantastic red and gold-yellow figures, the brilliant reflections to the left and right of him begin to hurt his eyes. The desire to arrive quickly in Japan gets side-tracked by an even stronger desire. Jean-Pierre becomes so curious that he decides to land.

"OHPEK TAYKEL MAHNEH."

The three words sound ceremonious. He has said them aloud. There is no one who can hear him up here anyway. The Last Flying Carpet descends slowly. Jean-Pierre peers down over the edge. He sees mountain slopes and ravines. In the distance, a river winds through the mountains. The water flows as slowly as molasses. Looking to the right, he sees a mountain towering above all the others. He sees ice and snow



everywhere around him. The light is so blinding now that he has to shut his eyes. With a thump, he lands on a softly glowing mountain slope. He remains seated on his carpet for a few minutes, out of breath. The air is so thin it makes him dizzy. The silence is overwhelming.

Nature talks to itself here, thinks Jean-Pierre. While he is looking around, he sees shadows climbing up the mountainside, growing larger and larger. The sun is withdrawing quickly.

I have to do something, thinks Jean-Pierre. Isn't the best decision brief and precise?

Thanks to that Arabian saying he is sitting here now, high in the mountains. The question is, what should he do, or rather, what can he do? While he looks around again, he hears a soft tinkling of bells from the valley.

"That sounds like cowbells."

His decision is made.

"I'm going to follow that sound. Where there are animals with bells, there are people."

Jean-Pierre quickly rolls up his carpet and puts it in the long case which he then throws over his left shoulder. Then he picks up his travel bag and begins climbing down. There is a long slope in front of him which gets narrower near the bottom and leads onto a large split between two mountain slopes. That is where the sound is coming from. He tries to walk as quickly as possible, but he slides more than he walks. He holds onto his long case and bag tightly. The sound of the bells seems to be coming closer. He hears still more bells. A little bit afraid and sometimes out of breath, he keeps his eyes on the cleft between the two mountain slopes. The distance becomes quickly smaller. Now he can see that the cleft is much larger than he thought. There is a stream running through it, too. The sound of the bells gets louder. When he is ten meters away from the opening, he sees a cow with a big bell around its neck coming out of the opening. The animal walks along the stream. It stands still as soon as it sees Jean-Pierre. Jean-Pierre holds his breath. Two big eyes look at him, as if to ask: Where do you come from? Who are you?

The cow's eyes look so calm and matter-of-fact that Jean-Pierre begins to talk softly.

"My name is Jean-Pierre. I came here on my Flying Carpet. It's all right for you to know, because you'll never tell on me anyway. I want to stay here tonight."

At that moment, a shepherd comes half-running and half-stumbling out of the same opening. He is wearing a sheepskin over thick, black woolen pants tied around his waist with a rope. A cow's horn dangles from the rope. His boots consist of strips of thin leather wound tightly around his feet and ankles. He has a long stick in his right hand. When he sees Jean-Pierre, his mouth falls open in surprise. With a few leaps and bounds, he is standing next to the boy. He shouts strange and, for Jean-Pierre, unintelligible sounds. But the waving of his arms is not hard to understand. He wants the boy to go with him. With a hit of the stick, he

drives the cow back to the cleft between the two steep mountain slopes. Jean-Pierre follows.

He is happy. He has found someone. Maybe this man has a place for him to sleep tonight. And there will be more people, too. He hopes he can find out where he has landed.

When they have walked for a while, one by one, between the two mountain slopes, the sound of other bells begins to get louder. The cow with the big, calm eyes walks slowly in front of them. She is not in a hurry. She doesn't seem to pay any attention to the shouts of the shepherd to walk faster. That's fine with Jean-Pierre. He has to do his very best to keep up with the shepherd's strong legs.

Emerging from the cleft, they have to climb up a slope. The sun lights up only the higher parts of the mountains now. Coming to the top, Jean-Pierre is surprised to see plains in front of him with a city in the distance. Torches and flares are burning here and there, as if to show the way to the houses in the distance. The shepherd grins and points with his right hand in the direction of the houses and cries: "Lhasa, Lhasa!"

Jean-Pierre repeats the sounds: "Asa, asa!"

"Lhasa, Lhasa!" cries the man, as if to say: Everybody knows Lhasa!

Half an hour later, when the sun has forsaken even the uppermost peaks of the mountain, the shepherd and Jean-Pierre are walking down an unpaved street towards a square where a large house is standing. The whole time the shepherd is mumbling, "Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama." Jean-Pierre doesn't understand any of it, but tries to repeat the sounds to himself in the hopes that he will remember them. Soldiers in bleached out green uniforms are wandering aimlessly about the street. Most of them walk past as if they don't see them, and some even seem to avoid them. There are men in yellow and red robes who are laughing. Their heads are shaven. Some of them carry a cup and a kind of rosary. They are greeting each other. When one of them sees the shepherd and Jean-Pierre, he comes right over and asks the shepherd something. The shepherd answers. First one looks at Jean-Pierre, then the other, so that Jean-Pierre knows the conversation is about him. After bowing to each other, the man with the yellow robe takes Jean-Pierre by the hand and walks with him to a house with a crooked sign hanging on the front, which says: Otel.

It's noisy and crowded inside. Jean-Pierre sees a few faces that seem familiar, as if he had seen them in France or Italy. The bald man begins to shout something to everyone. They all stop talking and look in amazement at the boy. Apparently they are asking him something, but Jean-Pierre does not know what. He decides to do the same thing as he did when the cow came out of the ravine, to speak in his own language.

"My name is Jean-Pierre."

Before the words are even out of his mouth, one of the bystanders comes forward and asks in French:

"Do you come from France?"

Jean-Pierre nods 'yes'. The crowd is jubilant. Everyone begins to clap as if a difficult puzzle has been solved. As long as there is someone who can

talk to the boy, then any problems can be solved. Someone makes a gesture with his hand to his mouth, as if to say: Do you want a drink? Jean-Pierre nods 'yes' again. Only now does he notice how thirsty he is. He hasn't thought about food or drink for hours. His stomach is grumbling. In no time at all, there is a pot of tea in front of him and a plate with dark bread, butter and an egg.

The man who speaks French is burning with curiosity. He wants to know how Jean-Pierre got here alone. But to put the boy at his ease and to give him a chance to eat and drink something, he himself begins to talk:

"My name is David Rubinstein. My father used to travel a lot. He was a world-famous pianist who got invitations to perform everywhere. When I was your age, my father took me with him a few times a year so that we could see each other every now and then at least, and I could also see something of the world. Since then, I've kept on traveling, from North America to South America and from Europe to Africa and from Africa to Asia."

Jean-Pierre cannot keep quiet any longer:

"Where are you now?"

The man laughs.

"Now I am where you are. In Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, the country of the Dalai Lama. The mountains you saw are called the Himalayas. Not far from here is Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world.

That's why I'm so curious about how you got here. To the people here, it's a wonder. They have never found a boy alone in such a place, as where the shepherd found you. Will you tell me how you came here?"

"I cannot tell you that. I am traveling to Japan because my father is there. I am looking for my father. I have never seen him."

The man is touched. He looks at Jean-Pierre and says:

"If you want, I'll help you find your father."



## Chapter 18. Jean-Pierre escapes from the Red Guard

In Lhasa that night, Jean-Pierre sleeps on an old mattress in a corner of David Rubenstein's hotel room. He firmly embraces the case with his Flying Carpet with his right arm, just as he always used to hold his brown beer at night in his step-parents' house.

David is used to meditating for an hour before he goes to sleep. In order to calm his thoughts, he looks at a piece of white paper which has a black circle in the middle. The black circle helps him to release his restless thoughts and vague anxieties into the pure, healing silence of the night.

But tonight the black circle seems to become alive. The small spot disappears behind the white square and begins to float in the direction of the mountains around Lhasa. Above the mountains, the circle changes into a kite which quickly ascends now only to suddenly make an unpredictable dive. A doll is hanging on to the tail of the kite, letting itself be carried away by the game of the wind with the kite. While he is enjoying the whimsical, darting movements of the kite, he sees to his amazement that the doll changes into a boy. The boy becomes Jean-Pierre. His eyes follow this strange spectacle with amazement, and suddenly, he hears a soft, penetrating shout. David pricks up his ears. He is wide awake. Does this sound come from inside or outside? Does he imagine it or did he really hear something? He holds his breath for several seconds, trying to catch the sound again.

"Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo!"

There it is again. It is coming from outside. He is absolutely sure.

"Jean-Pierre, Jean-Pierre!" David calls.

Jean-Pierre smiles and opens his eyes. He looks around him in surprise.

"Where am I?" he asks David.

"In Lhasa, but listen. I hear a strange sound."

At that moment, they both hear:

"Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo. Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo!"

"That's Delphi!" Jean-Pierre jumps up and goes to the window. In front of the window, only half a meter away, Delphi is watching him, kindly but intensely, with her black-encircled eyes. She is hanging motionless in the air with a slow movement of her wings. Then she turns her head slightly to the left and flies away in an easterly direction, while she cries again:

"Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo!"

"I have to go to Japan," Jean-Pierre thinks to himself. "I can't let myself be tempted to stay here."

David Rubenstein is speechless. While he has traveled a great deal and has seen and done many things, the appearance of this boy in the Himalaya and the night visit of an owl apparently coming for Jean-Pierre, is getting to be too much for him. He looks at Jean-Pierre thoughtfully and asks:

"Would you tell me what the owl's call means?"

"Delphi is letting me know that I should not stay here, but should go to Japan. Delphi is helping me to find my father."

As Jean-Pierre is saying this, he notices the white square with the black circle. The piece of paper seems to be moving.

"What is that?" he asks David.

"A pocket-size mandala," David says. "I use it to quiet my thoughts. In the temples in Tibet, you see the mandala, a square with a circle, everywhere. It is an ancient form which, according to some people, represents the heavens and the earth. The heavens are round and the earth is square. The mandala exists in Japan, too. There are Japanese who see their country, one big island, as one big mandala. The mandala is the dwelling of the Buddha. But the Tibetan monks who teach me Tibetan, told me that the real dwelling of the Buddha is in your own heart and mind."

"Who is Buddha?" asks Jean-Pierre.

"You are Buddha. I am Buddha. We are all Buddhas if we follow the very first Buddha's path and his way of life. The first Buddha lived in the north of India, not far away from here. He saw that peoples' suffering stems from their greed. To be freed of suffering, we have to learn to understand that our desires and fears stand in the way of our ultimate happiness and inner peace. If you do not need anything yourself, you can enjoy the things around you much more than if you are always thinking about things you'd like to have."

Jean-Pierre listens in amazement. He doesn't know why, but it seems as if the first Buddha and his wise Delphi have something in common. While he is still thinking about the things David told him, they hear footsteps in the street below. It is the sound of soldiers' boots. David turns pale.

"The Red Guard is coming," he whispers. "They control the whole city. Sometimes they raid the hotels and inns at night to find out who is staying there. You're not registered. You have to hide, because if they find you, they are sure to take you with them. Maybe they heard from someone that a foreign boy was found and they want to know where he is."

Because everyone downstairs had seen him bring Jean-Pierre to his room, David decides not to hide Jean-Pierre there, but in a closet in the hall. He motions Jean-Pierre to follow him. Jean-Pierre grabs his long case and travel bag. David opens the door. It is pitch black. Feeling their way, they shuffle carefully to the other side of the hall. The closet door squeaks as it opens. Jean-Pierre squats down on the floor with the long case between his legs. The door is hardly closed when he hears knocking and shouting from downstairs. The Guards beat hard on the door of the hotel. As soon as the door opens, the Guards burst in and begin to search every room systematically. When they come upstairs, they enter David's room first. He pretends he's sleeping. As two guards question him, a third walks through the hall, shining his lantern along the walls. When he sees the door, he throws it open and sees a frightened Jean-Pierre sitting on the floor. He utters a few hoarse shouts and with a quick

movement of his right arm, he jerks Jean-Pierre to his feet. David is watching all this, pale as a corpse. As they are pushing Jean-Pierre downstairs, David calls:

"I'll come to see you tomorrow. I'll explain everything to them. Don't be afraid. Think about your father and the owl."

At the words: "Think about your father and the owl," an amazing serenity spreads through Jean-Pierre. It seems as if the fright is making room for a feeling of strength. If he succeeds in keeping his carpet with him, not much can happen to him.

While he is being pushed out the door of the hotel, an old Tibetan sticks up his thumb and winks at him from under his bushy eyebrows.

Apparently, he wants to wish him luck without the Chinese soldiers seeing it. It reminded him of what David told him last evening about the Red Guard. They are the Chinese soldiers who overran Tibet in October 1950. The Tibetans still use the name, even though the Chinese do not anymore.

It is ice cold outside. The moonlight seems frozen. As Jean-Pierre is walking among the Red Guards, a small dog runs to him suddenly. The hair on his head is parted and his tail stands up in a fat plume. A soldier kicks the dog. Another laughs and shouts something strange-sounding. Jean-Pierre gets angry and mumbles under his breath:

"The animals are friendlier than the soldiers."

At the barracks, they take Jean-Pierre to the top floor. Without a word, the soldiers push him into a room and bar the door behind him. The only light in the room, which is used as prison cell, comes from the same frozen moon that Jean-Pierre saw out on the street. In the middle of the cell there is a pot that stinks of urine. Some rags are lying a few feet away. He gathers them up, wraps them around himself and lies down. In spite of the cold, he falls asleep from exhaustion. When he wakes up, a shaft of sunlight is shining in his eyes.

Jean-Pierre doesn't have to think twice. He stands up, pees in the pot, throws the rags on top and walks over to the wooden shutter where last night the moon, and now the sun is shining through. After opening the shutter, he can see a flat roof. Without hesitation, he throws his long case and travel bag onto the roof, jumps down and rolls out his carpet. The walls go straight down on three sides of the flat roof. Only an acrobat would dare to climb down the walls or to jump. The sun is ablaze with a reddish-yellow glow. It rises majestically above the snow-topped mountains.

"MAHNEH TAYKEL OHPEK."

The words sound cheerful. Jean-Pierre is enjoying himself.

The Last Flying Carpet rises slowly above the roof tops of Lhasa. People on the street begin to shout. They stop what they are doing and look up. He hears shouts coming from the barracks. Soldiers are running around like mad men. Jean-Pierre waves at them. They can't catch him anymore. He is flying towards the rising sun. Didn't Mr. Hakim tell him that his father is living in the Land of the Rising Sun?



After several hours of flying, he sees in the distance, to the right of his Flying Carpet, a large city with water beyond it.

"That must be the sea that surrounds the island of Japan!" he shouts. His face begins to burn with excitement even more than it already does from the warmth of the sun. As he approaches the sea, he sees fishing boats and a few large ships.

Could those large ships be sailing off to France? While asking himself that, he has to think about his step-parents.

What would they be doing now? Would they think about him often?

Would his step-father be pruning the grape vines now or filling the bottles with wine? He decides, as soon as he has found his father, to go with him to his step-parents and introduce him to them. His father can travel with him on his Flying Carpet. It is big enough for two.

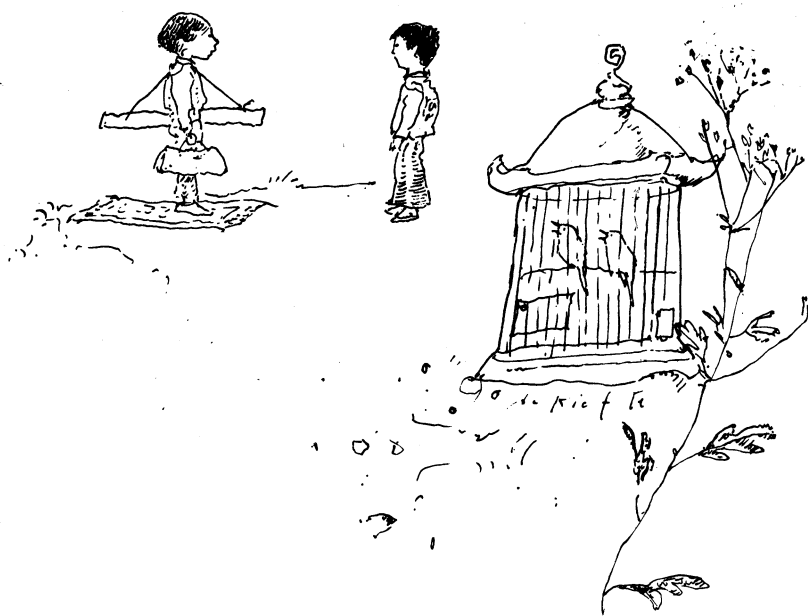
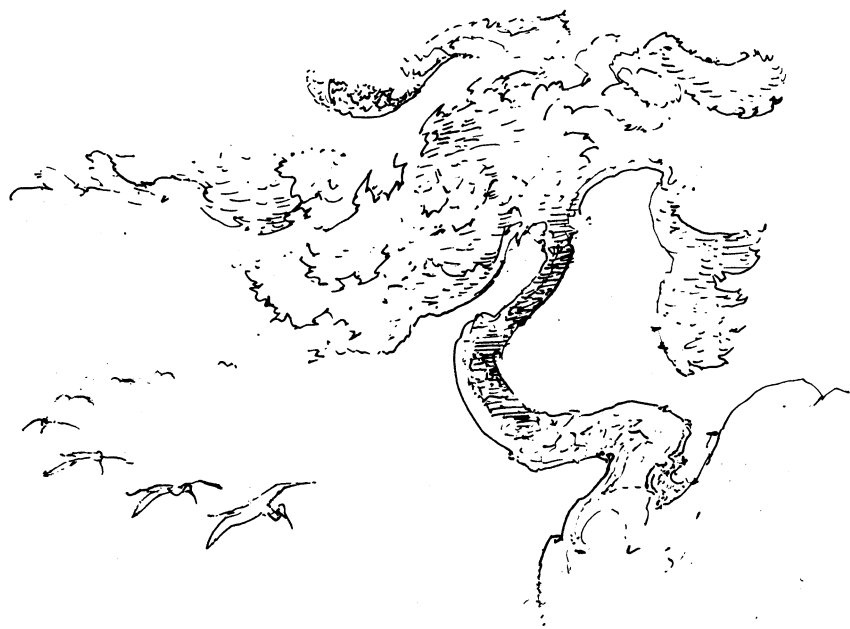
While he is day-dreaming about this and about Circus Mediterraneo, he sees little spots in the distance. Closer by, he sees that they are islands.

Could that be Japan? The Land of the Rising Sun is probably larger.

Coming still closer, he sees to his relief that a much larger country is visible behind the islands. Flocks of white birds with long beaks fly high in the air only to plummet suddenly towards the water. Fishermen are throwing little fish into the air which the birds catch without missing one. Behind the white birds, a steep rock wall rises up out of the water. The rock wall gives way to softly undulating ground. A tree is standing there with a trunk twisted like a corkscrew. As Jean-Pierre is peering down over the edge of his carpet, he sees a boy on the rock near the twisted tree. He has a cage in his hand. The boy looks up and waves at him as if to say: come here.

Jean-Pierre decides to land on the rock, close to the twisted tree. Maybe the boy wants to be friends. A little while later, they are standing face to face. The boy bows low to him and the cage with its two small birds swings back and forth in his hand.





## Chapter 19. Jean-Pierre in Japan

The two boys stand silently facing each other under the tree with the twisted trunk. Far beneath them, waves are breaking on the steep rock wall. The sound of breaking waves blends with the shrill cries of the white birds.

Jean-Pierre makes a small bow. He has never bowed to anyone before, let alone a boy, but it feels right to answer the bow of the Japanese boy.

The boy says:

"Akito."

When Jean-Pierre looks at him in surprise, he again says: "Akito," and points to himself. Then he says: "Kikuju," and points to one of the two little birds. And finally, he says: "Kukuji," and points to the other little bird.

Jean-Pierre points to himself now and says:

"Jean-Pierre."

Both laugh. The ice is broken. Akito takes a handful of dried fruit out of a linen bag and gives a few pieces to Jean-Pierre. He tosses one into the cage.

At that moment, both birds begin to sing at the same time. With high-pitched, trilling tones, rhythmically interspersed with a cascade of 'oo' and 'ee' sounds, they sing a duet, stilling the cries of the large white water-birds. Jean-Pierre begins to feel a change in himself the likes of which he has never experienced before. From his head to his toes, everything inside him begins to vibrate softly. There is no difference anymore between inside and outside. His body floats through the air like a kite, with whimsical, wild movements. By turns, the rays of the sun pierce through him and bounce off him. The earth undulates like the sea. The sea seems to turn into air. The air changes from cold to hot and finally melts with the sun. The tree next to him begins to move.

Whirling, he revolves around his own invisible center. Akito smiles at him, as if to say: now you are flying on the sounds of Kikuju and Kukuji. All at once the two song birds are silent. Jean-Pierre feels his eyes open, but they have not been closed. He sees where he is again, while he has not been away. He remembers his arrival. He knows that he landed here to look for his father. He is living in normal time again, with a past, a present and a future. When the birds were singing, there had been no past and future. Is that what made him feel so happy?

Akito looks at Jean-Pierre and says:

"I know what you are thinking about."

Jean-Pierre looks at Akito and answers:

"And I know what you are thinking about."

Both boys can read each others' thoughts since the singing of the birds. Both know that the other carries a big secret within him: the one, his Flying Carpet; the other, his paradisaical song-birds.

How it is that they understand each other, they do not know. They don't worry about it. They take it just as much for granted as flying on

the Carpet or floating on the sounds of Kikuju and Kukuji. Such things are only a puzzle to outsiders.

Akito and Jean-Pierre decide to leave their place high on the rock. While Jean-Pierre rolls up his Carpet and puts it into the case, he tells Akito that he is on his way to Kyoto because his father lives there. Akito claps his hands and cries:

"My grandparents live in Kyoto. Maybe I can go with you, so that I can visit them. They are very nice. My grandfather tells good stories. He knows stories from his grandfather, from when the emperor still lived in Kyoto.

"Where does the emperor live now?" asks Jean-Pierre.

"In Tokyo, the capital of the country. The old emperor Hirohito is dead. We have a new emperor, Akihito. My name sounds a little bit like his. My grandparents wanted it that way."

As the boys are beginning to descend along a small, curving path, the bright sky above them changes to a gloomy, dark color. Black clouds chase each other in the sky as if they are on the warpath. The sea begins to churn. The trees groan. Seagulls skim the clouds in long lines, looking for shelter. The song-birds remain calm. They do not seem to be affected by the threatening autumn storm. The boys run downhill as fast as the mountain slope allows. Akito knows from experience how rough it can get on the coast when the north wind and heavy rain storms take over from the warm southwestern wind. It is as if winter is announcing its arrival by quickly disposing of everything reminiscent of the summer. The warmth has to make room for the cold. Daylight is shorter than the nightly darkness. According to his mother, the dead call to the living at this time of the year:

"We're here, too. Think of us!"

That's the way his mother always talks to him. To her, the dead are just as much alive as the neighbors on both sides of their house. His mother also often says:

"Nature is a mirror with the living on one side and the dead on the other. That is why there is summer and winter, spring and fall."

Although Akito still does not understand what these words mean, he feels that they are true. His mother visits the grave of her grandparents in Kyoto once a year when she is in that city visiting her parents. She talks then with her dead grandparents. They seem to answer, even though you don't hear anything.

While Akito is telling this to Jean-Pierre, Jean-Pierre thinks about his mother's grave in Genoa. Before leaving, he had placed a round, shiny pebble on her grave. He felt, then, that his mother liked it. So his mother must have been present then, otherwise she couldn't have liked it. After all, you wouldn't give flowers to your mother if she weren't there at all? Just before the heavy rainstorm bursts, the two boys reach Akito's house. Jean-Pierre cannot follow the conversation between Akito and his parents. The sounds follow each other so quickly that they seem to compete with the patter of the raindrops on the slanted roof. Jean-Pierre

notices how polite they are to each other. They're different than we are, he thinks to himself.

After they are finished talking, the parents bow to him in a friendly way, make a gesture of welcome and invite him to sit on a tatami mat.

Akito's older sister offers him tea and rice cookies.

While he has not been able to follow the conversation between Akito and his parents, he understands immediately what Akito says to him:

"Tonight we go by train to Kyoto. My mother is going with us. I will visit my grandparents. My parents are very impressed by your Flying Carpet and by your determination to look for your father."

That evening, Jean-Pierre sleeps next to his friend Akito in a deluxe train which zooms through the darkness at a speed of 250 miles per hour.

The next morning, they walk through a narrow street in the old center of Kyoto where the houses have special roofs. They curve upwards at the edges like a bird that is poised to fly.

An elderly couple opens the door. After an extensive greeting, in which they all show each other great respect, Jean-Pierre receives a warm welcome. Together, they enter a beautiful room. The doors are so light that you have to slide them open very carefully. The walls are panels of rice paper which lets a soft, milky light shine through. Mats are on the ground, and between them are low tables of gleaming wood.

All of this makes a great impression on Jean-Pierre. He has never seen anything like it before. The room is a perfect setting for the song of Kikuju and Kukuji. After a conversation in which the grandparents and Akito's mother bring each other up to date, it is Akito's turn. Apparently he is talking about Jean-Pierre, because the grandparents and the mother smile at him regularly. Akito asks Jean-Pierre:

"Do you have the address of your father?"

Jean-Pierre does not have to think twice. During the escape from Chauen, he hid his father's letter under his shirt. He takes it out and hands it to the grandfather, who reads:

"Jean-Claude Auriol, Postbox 13579, Kyoto, Japan."

Without further ado, the old man takes a piece of paper. From the contents of Jean-Claude's letter to Mr. Hakim, Akito's grandfather copies the names of cities and the amount in yen, using strange characters made up of horizontal and vertical lines. Sometimes the characters look like a house. In this way, Mr. Auriol will know that the news that his son is in the city is based on reliable information. He asks Jean-Pierre to sign his name at the bottom. Then Akito is sent outside to bring the letter to the post office as quickly as possible.

Hours go by before they get a reply. In order to distract them, Akito's grandfather begins to tell a story. Akito repeats every sentence, so that Jean-Pierre can understand the story.

"More than a hundred years ago, the emperor lived in this city. My grandfather worked at the court of the emperor. Japan has had one hundred and twenty four emperors. Akihito is the hundred and twenty-fifth emperor. Our emperor, or tenno as we call him, is traditionally the mediator between the gods in the heavens and the people on earth. He

makes sure that we live together in mutual harmony. In order to do this, the new emperor has to serve special dishes to the kami. The kami are the gods of Japan. The new emperor has to become immortal. That happens by staying in a closed room where the sun goddess Amaterasu is waiting for him. In the night he changes in his spirit from a man into a woman so that the gods can impregnate him. Then he is immortal.'

Akito and Jean-Pierre listen breathlessly. Jean-Pierre asks:

"Does the new emperor become a god?"

The grandfather nods his head.

"I heard from Dr. Leon Alibi in Nagoya that the difference between our Shinto tradition and the western Christian tradition is not so large. This European scholar told me several years ago that the Christians believe in a god who has become a man. His name is Jesus. We believe in a man who becomes a god.

After the emperor left Kyoto and went to Edo, they changed the name Edo into Tokyo, which has the same letters as Kyoto. Tokyo is the new Kyoto."

Akito turns to Jean-Pierre and asks:

"Why did your father come to Japan?"

Jean-Pierre answers:

"Notary Hakim told me my father believes the Japanese know the secret of time. That's why he went to Japan."

Akito asks his grandfather about it. He smiles when he hears the question. He looks at Jean-Pierre with affection and says:

"I think that the expression: the Japanese know the secret of time, could mean that some of us know that everything changes, and therefore, everything always looks different; but at the same time, nothing ever really changes. The question is if the minerals, plants, animals and people living on the earth now are any different than thousands of years ago. Everything is born of the same forces and laws. That is why everything can change and still remain the same. That is the big secret."

Akito's grandfather is such a fascinating storyteller that both boys keep listening, even if they don't completely understand what he is saying.

Akito and Jean-Pierre look at each other. The grandfather sees it. He continues his story:

"But not only the Japanese know the secret of time. So do the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Koreans, Indians, Jews, Africans and even more peoples. Even among Europeans and Americans, you meet people who have discovered this secret, that everything is not only changing."

At that moment, they hear the doorbell. There is a telegram from the main post office in Kyoto. The grandfather reads it aloud slowly:

"Mr. Jean-Claude Auriol has requested all his mail to be forwarded to Poste Restante, Main Post Office, Xian, China. We will forward your letter."

As Akito sadly translates, Jean-Pierre feels the tears well up in his eyes. Akito puts his arm around him.

"Perhaps we can look for him together," he says.

That night Jean-Pierre has a dream. He sees a man walking away from him down a long road which passes a high, old city wall. Suddenly, an owl flies onto the man's left shoulder, calling "Hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo, hoo-oo? Oohoo-oohoo," in Jean-Pierre's direction.

Jean-Pierre is immediately wide awake and sits straight up in bed.

"That is Delphi," he whispers to himself in relief. "She is trying to tell me that man is my father. Now I know I will find him for sure."