

BALTHASAR'S ODYSSEY

AMIN MAALOUF

VINTAGE

VINTAGE

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About the Book

There are ninety-nine names for God in the Koran, is it possible that there is a secret one-hundredth name? In this tale of magic and mystery, of love and danger, Balthasar's ultimate quest is to find the secret that could save the world. Before the dawn of the apocalyptic 'Year of the Beast' in 1666, Balthasar Embriaco, a Genoese Levantine merchant, sets out on an adventure that will take him across the breadth of the civilised world, from Constantinople, through the Mediterranean, to London shortly before the Great Fire. Balthasar's urgent quest is to track down a copy of one of the rarest and most coveted books ever printed, a volume called 'The Hundredth Name', its contents are thought to be of vital importance to the future of the world. There are ninety-nine names for God in the Koran, and merely to know this most secret hundredth name will, Balthasar believes, ensure his salvation.

About the Author

Amin Maalouf's fiction includes *Leo the African*, *Rock of Tanios*, which won the 1993 Prix Goncourt, *Samarkand* and *Ports of Call*. He is also the author of an acclaimed scholarly work, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, as well as the much admired essay, *On Identity*.

Also by Amin Maalouf in English translation

Fiction

LEO THE AFRICAN
SAMARKAND
THE FIRST CENTURY AFTER BEATRICE
THE ROCK OF TANIOS
THE GARDENS OF LIGHT
PORTS OF CALL

Non-fiction

THE CRUSADES THROUGH ARAB EYES
ON IDENTITY



To Andrée

Balthasar's Odyssey

Translated from the French by Barbara
Bray

Amin Maalouf



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NOTEBOOK I

The Hundredth Name

STILL FOUR LONG months until the Year of the Beast, and it's already here. Its shadow dims our hearts and the windows of our houses.

The people round me can talk of nothing else. The coming year, the signs, the portents ... Sometimes I say to myself, Let it come! Let it finally empty out its pouch of prodigies and disasters! Then I change my mind and think of all the decent ordinary years when each day was spent just looking forward to the evening's pleasures. And I roundly curse the doom-worshippers.

How did this foolishness start? In whose brain can it have sprouted? Under what skies? I couldn't say for certain, and yet in a way I know. From where I am I've seen the fear, the monstrous fear born, grow and spread. I've seen it creep into people's minds, into those of my nearest and dearest, into my own. I've seen it overthrow reason, trample it underfoot, humiliate it, and then devour it.

I've watched the good days vanish.

Up till now I have lived in peace. I prospered in figure and fortune, every season a little more. I wanted nothing I couldn't get. My neighbours admired rather than envied me.

Then suddenly everything started to happen.

That strange book, appearing and then disappearing, and all my fault ...

Old Idriss's death. True, no one blames me for it ... Except myself.

And the journey I'm to set out on next Monday, despite my qualms. A journey from which I have a feeling I shan't return.

So it's with some apprehension I write the first lines in this new notebook. I don't know yet how I'll record the things that have happened, or those that already loom ahead. Just a simple account of the facts? A journal? A log? A will?

Perhaps I should say a word to begin with about the person who first made me anxious about the Year of the Beast. His name was Evdokim. A pilgrim from Moscow who came knocking on my door about seventeen years ago. Why "about"? I've got the exact date down in my ledger. The twentieth day of December 1648.

I've always written everything down, especially details, the sort of things I'd have forgotten otherwise.

Before he came in he made the sign of the cross with two outstretched fingers, and stooped so that his head would clear the stone lintel. He had a thick black cloak, woodcutter's hands with thick fingers, and a thick fair beard, but tiny little eyes and a narrow forehead.

He was on his way to the Holy Land, but he hadn't stopped at my house by chance. He'd been given the address in Constantinople, and told it was here and only here that he had a chance of finding what he was looking for.

"I'd like to speak to Signor Tommaso," he said.

"He was my father," I replied. "But he died in July."

"God rest his soul!"

"And those of your kin likewise!"

This exchange had taken place in Greek, the only language we had in common, though it was clear neither of us used it much. The conversation was rather tentative, anyhow: my father's death, still a painful subject for me,

was also a shock to my visitor. Moreover, since he was speaking to a “Papist apostate” and I to a “misguided schismatic”, we were anxious not to offend one another’s susceptibilities.

After we had both been silent a moment, he went on:

“I am very sorry your father is no longer with us.”

As he spoke he looked round the shop, trying to make out the jumble of books, antique statuettes, glassware, painted vases, stuffed falcons; and wondering – to himself, but he might just as well have said it aloud – if, since my father was no longer there, I might not be in need of help. I was already twenty-three years old, but my face was plump and clean-shaven and must still have looked rather boyish.

I drew myself up and thrust out my chin.

“My name is Balthasar, and I have taken over my father’s business.”

My visitor showed no sign of having heard. He went on gazing at the thousand marvels around him with a mixture of wonder and apprehension. Our curio shop had been the best stocked and most celebrated in the East for a hundred years. People came from everywhere to see us – Marseilles and London, Cologne and Ancona, as well as Smyrna, Cairo and Isfahan.

After looking me up and down one last time, my Russian seemed to have made up his mind.

“I am Evdokim Nikolaevitch, from Voronezh. I have heard great things of your business.”

I assumed an easy manner – my way, then, of making myself agreeable.

“We’ve been in the trade for four generations. My family comes from Genoa, but we settled in the Levant a long time ago.”

He nodded once or twice to show he knew all that. In fact, if he’d heard about us in Constantinople this was probably the first thing he’d been told. “The last Genoese to come to this part of the world” – with some remark or gesture

suggesting madness or eccentricity handed down from father to son. I smiled and said nothing. He turned to the door, bawling out a name and an order, and a servant hurried in, a small stout fellow in baggy black clothes, with a flat cap and down-turned eyes. He took a book out of a box he was carrying and handed it to his master.

I assumed he wanted to sell it to me, and was immediately on my guard. In my trade you soon learn to beware of people who start by putting on airs about their fancy origins and acquaintances, give orders right, left and centre, and in the end just try to palm off some old piece of bric-à-brac on you. Unique in their own eyes, and so naturally unique for everybody. If you offer them a price that's less than they had in mind, they take offence and claim you're not only cheating them but insulting them too. And go off breathing fire and slaughter.

But this visitor soon reassured me: he wasn't here to sell or haggle.

"This book was printed in Moscow a few months ago. And everyone who can read has read it already."

He pointed to the title, which was in Cyrillic characters, and began reciting earnestly, "*Kniga o vere*", before realising he needed to translate for my benefit: "The Book of the Faith, unique, genuine and orthodox." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye to see if the words had made my Papist blood run cold. I remained impassive, inside and out. Outside, the polite smile of the merchant. Inside, the wry smile of the sceptic.

"This book tells us the apocalypse is at hand!"

He showed me a page near the end.

"It is written here that the Antichrist will appear, in accordance with the Scriptures, in the year of the Pope, one thousand six hundred and sixty-six."

He kept repeating the figure, slurring over the words "one thousand" a bit more every time. Then he looked at me to see my reactions.

I had read the Apocalypse of St John the Divine the same as everyone else, and had paused over the mysterious passage in Chapter 13: "Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six."

"It says 666, not 1666," I ventured.

"You'd have to be blind not to see such an obvious sign!"

"Sign!" How often had I heard that word, not to mention "portent"! Everything is a sign or a portent to someone always on the look-out for them, ready to marvel at and interpret anything and imagine parallels and coincidences everywhere. The world is full of such tireless seekers of omens - I'd had them in the shop, some of them quite delightful, some really appalling!

Evdokim seemed vexed at my lack of enthusiasm, which he saw as reflecting ignorance and impiety. Not wishing to offend him, I made an effort and said:

"It is certainly all very strange and disturbing ..."

Or something of the kind.

"It is because of this book that I am here," he answered, evidently reassured. "I am looking for other texts that may help me to understand it."

Now I understood. I'd be able to help him.

I should explain that the success of our business in recent decades was largely due to the craze throughout Christendom for old Oriental books - especially those in Greek, Coptic, Hebrew and Syriac - which seemed to contain the most ancient truths of the Faith, and which the royal courts, particularly those of France and England, tried to acquire in order to back up their point of view in the quarrels between the Catholics and the supporters of the Reformation. For nearly a century my family scoured the monasteries in the East in search of such manuscripts, hundreds of which are now to be found in the Royal Library in Paris or the Bodleian in Oxford, to mention only the most important repositories.

“I haven’t many books dealing specifically with the Apocalypse,” I said, “and especially not with the passage about the number of the Beast. But you might care to look at ...”

And I listed ten or twelve titles in various languages, indicating their contents and sometimes the chapter headings. I like this aspect of my profession, and think I have a gift for it. But my visitor didn’t seem as interested as I’d expected. Every time I mentioned a book he would show his disappointment and impatience by fidgeting with his fingers or gazing around.

Finally I understood.

“Oh, you were told of a particular volume – is that it?”

He mispronounced some Arabic name, but I had no trouble making it out. Abu-Maher al-Mazandarani. To tell the truth, I’d been expecting to hear it for some while now.

Anyone with a passion for books knows Mazandarani’s. By reputation, that is, for very few people have actually held it in their hands. I’m still not sure, as a matter of fact, if it really exists, or ever has done so.

Let me explain, for it will soon look as if I’m talking in contradictions. When you study the works of certain famous and recognised authors, you will often find them mentioning the book in question, saying that one of their friends or teachers had it in his library once. But I have never come across a reputable writer who clearly confirms he’s seen it. No one who says, “I own it”, “I’ve looked through it”, or “I’ve read it”. No one who actually quotes from it. So the really serious merchants, and most scholars, believe the book has never existed, and that the few copies which show up from time to time are the work of forgers and hoaxers.

The title of this legendary volume is *The Unveiling of the Hidden Name*, but it is usually known as *The Hundredth Name*. When I’ve explained what name that is, you will see why it has always been so much sought after.

As everyone knows, the Koran mentions ninety-nine names of God, though some prefer to call them "epithets". The Merciful, the Avenger, the Subtle, the Apparent, the Omniscient, the Arbiter, the Heir, and so on. And that figure, confirmed by Tradition, has always provoked the obvious question in curious minds: Must there not be a hidden, hundredth name to round off the number? Quotations from the Prophet, which some doctors of the law contest though others recognise them as genuine, say there is indeed a supreme name that someone has only to utter to avert any kind of danger or obtain any favour from Heaven. It is said that Noah knew it, and so was able to save himself and his family at the time of the Flood.

It is easy to see the attraction of a book that claims to reveal such a secret nowadays, when men live in fear of another Deluge. I've had all sorts of people through my shop - a barefoot friar, an alchemist from Tabriz, a Turkish general, a cabalist from Tiberias - every one of them looking for that book. I've always thought it my duty to tell them why I thought it was only a mirage.

Usually my visitors resign themselves once they have heard my explanation. Some are disappointed, but others are relieved: if they can't have the book, they prefer that nobody can.

The Muscovite reacted neither one way nor the other. At first he looked amused, as if to convey that he didn't believe a word of my patter. When I got annoyed at this and stopped short, he suddenly grew serious and begged in a low voice:

"Sell it to me and I'll give you all the gold I possess without a murmur!"

"My poor fellow," I felt like saying, "think yourself lucky you've come across an honest merchant! There are plenty who'd relieve you of your money in no time!"

I patiently started explaining again why, to the best of my knowledge, the book didn't exist, and how the only people

who claimed otherwise were either naive and gullible authors or swindlers.

As I spoke, his face grew flushed; like that of a doomed man whose doctor is airily explaining that the medicine the patient hoped would cure him has never been invented. I could see in his eyes not disappointment or resignation, not even incredulity any more, but hatred, the daughter of fear. I cut short my explanations with the cautious conclusion:

“What the truth of the matter is, God only knows!”

But he had stopped listening. He stepped forward, grabbed at my clothes with his mighty hands and crushed my chin against his giant chest. I thought he was going to strangle me, or smash my skull against the wall. Luckily his servant hurried over, touched him on the arm and whispered something in his ear. Soothing words, I suppose, for his master let go of me at once and thrust me disdainfully away. Then he left the shop, muttering imprecations in his own language.

I never saw him again. And I'd probably have forgotten all about him, even his name, if his visit hadn't marked the beginning of a strange procession of callers. It took me some time to realise it, but I'm certain now: after Evdokim, the people who came to the shop were different from before, and behaved in quite another way. Hadn't the pilgrim from Moscow had a look of terror in his eye, a look of the sort of terror some might describe as “holy”? I could see it now in everyone. And with it the same attitude of urgency and impatience, the same mixture of persistence and apprehension.

These are not mere impressions. It's the merchant speaking now, with his hand on his ledger. After the Russian's visit, not a day went by without someone coming and talking to me about the Apocalypse, the Antichrist, the Beast and the number of the Beast.

Why not admit it outright? It's the Apocalypse that has brought in most of what I've earned in the last few years. Yes, it's the Beast that clothes me and the Beast that feeds me. As soon as its mere shadow crops up in a book, buyers come running from all over the place, purses at the ready. It all sells for a fortune, learned treatises and far-fetched squibs alike. At one time I even had on my shelves a tome called *An accurate description of the Beast and many other monsters of the Apocalypse* - in Latin, with forty drawings into the bargain.

But while this morbid enthusiasm makes me well off, it also makes me uneasy. I'm not the kind of man to go along with the follies of the moment. I keep my head when others are losing theirs. On the other hand, I'm not one of those arrogant fools who form their opinions as oysters form their pearls, and then shut them away where nothing can touch them. I have my own ideas and beliefs, but I can hear the rest of the world breathing. I can't ignore the fear that's spreading everywhere. Even if I thought the world was going mad, I couldn't ignore its folly. I may smile and shrug my shoulders and execrate foolishness and frivolity, but I can't help being disturbed.

In the struggle that goes on inside me between reason and unreason, the latter has won some points. Reason protests, mocks, insists, resists, and I'm still clear-sighted enough to observe the confrontation more or less impartially. But it's precisely this vestige of lucidity that forces me to admit that unreason is gaining ground in me. One day, if things go on like this, I'll no longer be able to write as I'm writing now. I might even turn back through these pages and erase what I've just set down. What I call unreason now will have become what I believe in then. If that Balthasar should ever come into being, which God forbid!, I hereby hate and despise him, and muster all the intelligence and honour I have left to curse him.

I know this all sounds rather wild. That's because the rumours that are dinning around the world have seeped into here. The sort of thing Evdokim said then I hear in my own house now.

It's my own fault.

Eighteen months ago, as business was still flourishing, I decided to ask my sister Pleasance's two sons to come and give me a hand. My idea was that they should get to know the antiquities trade so that eventually they could take over from me. I had high hopes of Jaber, especially. He was the elder of the two. A diligent, meticulous, studious youth, already almost a scholar before he was a man. The opposite of his younger brother Habib, who neglected his books to roam around the back-streets. I didn't expect much of him. But at least I hoped he might settle down a bit if I gave him some unaccustomed responsibilities.

A waste of time. As he has grown up, Habib has become an incorrigible womaniser. He does nothing but sit at the window of the shop, ogling, smiling and paying compliments, and disappearing at all hours for mysterious appointments the object of which I can easily guess. How many young women who live nearby find, when they go to fetch water, that the quickest way to the fountain passes by our window! Habib means "beloved" - names are rarely neutral.

Jaber stays well inside the shop. His skin grows paler all the time, so rarely does it see the sun. He reads, copies, makes notes, arranges, consults, compares. If his face ever lights up, it's not because the shoemaker's daughter has just come round the corner and is sauntering this way. It's because young Jaber has just read something on page 237 of the *Commentary of Commentaries* that confirms what he thought was meant by a passage he found yesterday evening in *The Final Exegesis*. I'm quite satisfied to skim through the most difficult and abstruse volumes out of duty,

and even then I often stop for a yawn. Not he. He seems to revel in them, as if in the most delicious sweetmeats.

So much the better, I thought at first. I wasn't sorry to see him so industrious. I quoted him to his brother as an example, and even started entrusting some of my own tasks to him. I didn't hesitate to let him deal with the most pernicky customers. He'd spend hours chatting to them, and though he wasn't primarily interested in business he usually ended up selling them masses of books.

I'd have been perfectly satisfied with him if he too hadn't begun - and with all the ardour of youth - to irritate me with talk of the imminent end of the world and of the omens heralding its coming. Was it the influence of the books he read? Or of some of my customers? At first I thought I could settle the matter by clapping him on the shoulder and telling him to pay no attention to such nonsense. He seemed a very biddable lad, and I believed he'd obey me in that as in other things. Little did I know him, and little did I know the age we live in, and its passions and obsessions.

According to my nephew, we have an appointment with the end of the world that dates from its beginning. Those alive today will have the dubious privilege of witnessing that macabre culmination of History. As far as I can see, this doesn't make him feel sad or depressed. On the contrary, I think I detect a sort of pride - tinged with fear, no doubt, but also with a certain amount of exultation. Every day he finds some new confirmation of his predictions in Latin, Greek or Arabic sources. Everything is converging, he says, towards a certain date. The date cited in the Russian book of the Faith - if only I hadn't told him about it! - 1666. Next year. "The Year of the Beast", as he likes to call it. He backs up his belief with a whole array of arguments, quotations, computations, learned calculations, and an endless litany of "signs".

I always think that if you look for signs you find them, and I write this down once again lest, in the maelstrom of

madness that is seizing the world, I should one day forget it. Manifest signs, speaking signs, troubling signs – people always manage to “prove” what they want to believe; they’d be just as well off if they tried to prove the opposite.

That’s what I think. But I’m rattled just the same by the approach of the famous “year”.

I still remember a scene that took place two or three months ago. My nephews and I had had to work late to finish the inventory before the summer, and we were all exhausted. I’d collapsed on to a chair, with my arms circling my open ledger and a nearby oil-lamp beginning to dim. Then suddenly Jaber came and leaned over the other side of the table, so that his head touched mine and his hands pressed down painfully on my elbows. His whole face glowed red, he threw a huge shadow on the walls and furniture, and he whispered in a lugubrious voice:

“The world is like this lamp. It has burned its ration of oil. Only a drop is left. See how the flame flickers! The world will soon go out.”

What with being so tired, and with all that gossip about the coming Apocalypse, I suddenly felt quite crushed by these ominous words. As if I hadn’t even the strength to sit up straight. As if I must just sprawl there and wait for the flame to die away before my eyes and the darkness to swallow me up.

Then the voice of Habib rose up behind me, laughing, cheeky, sunny, salutary.

“When are you going to stop tormenting poor Uncle – eh, Boumeh?”

“Boumeh”, meaning owl or bird of ill-omen – that’s what the younger brother has called the elder since they were children. And as I stood up that evening, suddenly crippled with aches and pains, I swore I’d call him that too from then on.

But though I do so, and curse and swear, and mutter to myself, I can’t help listening to what Boumeh says, and his

words nest in my mind. So that I too start to see signs where before I saw only coincidences. Tragic or instructive or amusing coincidences - but where once I'd have just exclaimed in surprise, now I start, I'm worried, I tremble. And I even think about changing the peaceful course of my existence.

Admittedly, recent events were bound to unsettle me.

Just take the business of old Idriss!

Just to shrug my shoulders as if that didn't concern me would not merely have been unwise. It would have been reckless and blind.

Idriss came and sought refuge in our little town of Gibelet, sometimes known as Byblos, seven or eight years ago. In rags, and with practically no belongings, he seemed as poor as he was old. No one ever really found out who he was, where he came from, or what he had fled. Persecution? Debt? A family vendetta? As far as I know he never told anyone his secret. He lived alone in a hovel he was able to rent cheaply.

The old man, whom I rarely came across and with whom I never exchanged more than a couple of words, came to the shop last month clutching to his chest a large book that he awkwardly suggested I should buy. I leafed through it. An undistinguished anthology of the work of little-known poetasters, copied out in shaky and irregular calligraphy, badly bound and badly preserved.

"A unique treasure," said the old man. "It's all I have left from my grandfather. I'd never have parted with it if I wasn't in such dire ..."

Unique? There must have been something similar in half the houses in the country. It would remain on my hands till the day I died! I thought. But how could I show the poor wretch the door when he'd swallowed his pride and his shame in the hope of getting some money to buy food?

“Leave it with me, hajj Idriss,” I said. “I’ll show it to some of my customers who might be interested.”

I knew already how I’d proceed. Just as my father would have done, God rest his soul, if he’d still been in my place. For conscience’s sake I made myself read a few of the poems. As I’d seen at first glance, they were mostly minor works, with a few well-turned lines here and there; but on the whole the book was completely trite and unsaleable. At best I might get six maidins for it – more probably three or four – from a customer really keen on Arabic poetry. But in fact I found a better use for it. A few days after Idriss’s visit, an Ottoman dignitary who was passing through came to buy a few things from me. And as he insisted on having a discount, I got myself a satisfied client by giving him the book free as well.

I waited for just under a week, then went to see the old man. God, how dark his house was! And God, how empty and poor! After I’d pushed open the rickety wooden door I found myself in a room with a bare floor and bare walls. Idriss was sitting on a mud-coloured straw mat. I sat down cross-legged beside him.

“An important personage came to my shop,” I told him, “and he was pleased when I offered your book to him. I’ve brought you the money that’s due to you.”

Please note that I told him the exact truth! I can’t bear to lie, though I may occasionally cheat a little by leaving something out. But I was only trying to save the poor man’s dignity by treating him as a merchant rather than a beggar! So I took three one-maidin coins out of my purse, then three five-maidin pieces, pretending to calculate the total carefully.

He stared at me wide-eyed.

“I didn’t expect all that, my son. Not even half as much ...”

I shook my finger at him.

“Never say that to a shopkeeper, hajj Idriss. He might be tempted to diddle you.”

“No danger of that with you, Balthasar effendi! You are my benefactor.”

I started to get up, but he stopped me.

“I’ve got something else for you,” he said.

He disappeared behind a curtain for a few moments, then came back carrying another book.

What, more? I thought to myself. Perhaps he’s got a whole library in the other room. What the devil have I got myself into?

As if he’d read my thoughts, he hastened to reassure me.

“It’s the last book I’ve got left,” he said, “and I want you to have it! You and nobody else!”

He placed it on my hands, open at the first page, as if on a lectern.

Good heavens!

The Hundredth Name!

Mazandarani’s book!

I’d never have dreamed of finding it in such a hole!

“But hajj Idriss, this is a very rare book! You ought not to part with it like that!”

“It’s no longer mine – it’s yours now. Keep it! Read it! I never could.”

I turned the pages eagerly, but the room was too dark for me to make out more than the title.

The Hundredth Name!

God in Heaven!

As I came out of the shack with the precious tome under my arm, I felt quite drunk. Was it really possible that this book, sought after by the whole world, was in my possession? How many men had come from the ends of the earth in search of it, and I’d told them it didn’t exist when all the time it was in that dilapidated hut a stone’s throw away! And a man I scarcely knew was making me a present of it! It was so

disturbing, so unimaginable! I found myself laughing aloud in the street, like an idiot.

I was still like that, tipsy but incredulous, when a passer-by hailed me.

“Balthasar effendi!”

I recognised the voice straight away: Sheikh Abdel-Bassit, imam of Gibelet’s mosque. But how he could have known who I was, when he’s been blind from birth and I hadn’t said a word?

I went over to him, and we exchanged the usual greetings.

“Where do you come from, dancing along like that?”

“I’ve been to see Idriss.”

“Did he sell you a book?”

“How did you know?”

“Why else would you have gone to see the poor fellow?” he laughed.

“True,” I said, laughing too.

“An irreligious book?”

“Why should it have been?”

“If it wasn’t, he’d have offered it to me!”

“To tell the truth, I don’t know much yet about what’s in it. It was too dark to see in Idriss’s place. I’m waiting to get home to be able to read it.”

The sheikh held out his hand.

“Show me!”

His lips are always half open as if he’s about to smile. I never know when he really is smiling. Anyhow, he took the book, leafed through it for a few seconds as he held it in front of his closed eyes, then handed it back.

“It’s too dark here too,” he said. “I can’t see anything!”

This time he laughed aloud, looking up at the sky. I didn’t know if politeness required me to join in. That being so, I just gave a little cough, halfway between a stifled laugh and a clearing of the throat.

“So what sort of book is it?” he asked.

You can hide the truth from a man who can see; lying is sometimes a necessary skill. But to lie to someone blind is base and unworthy. A certain sense of honour, and perhaps some superstition, obliged me to speak the truth. Though I did wrap it up in some careful conditionals.

“It may be the book that’s attributed to Abu Maher al-Mazandarani. *The Hundredth Name*. But I’m waiting until I get home to check that it’s genuine.”

He tapped the ground three or four times with his stick, breathing heavily.

“Why does anyone need a hundredth name? I was taught all the names / needed to pray with when I was a child. What would I want a hundredth one for? Tell me, you who’ve read so many books in every language!”

He took a string of prayer beads out of his pocket, and started telling them rapidly as he awaited my answer. What could I say? I had no more reason than he to champion the hidden name. But I felt obliged to explain:

“As you know, some people claim the supreme name allows you to perform miracles ...”

“Miracles? Idriss has had that book for years, and what miracle has he performed for himself? Has it made him less poor? Less decrepit? What misfortune has it saved him from?”

He didn’t wait for my reply to that, but went off lashing at the air and the dust with his angry stick.

My first concern on reaching home was to hide the book from my nephews. Especially from Boumeh: I was sure if he actually saw and touched it he’d go out of his mind. So I slipped it under my shirt, and when I got indoors I hid it safely under an old and very fragile statuette that no one was allowed even to dust, let alone move.

That was last Saturday, 15 August. I promised myself I’d spend Sunday examining Mazandarani’s book closely.

As usual I rose rather late on Sunday – an infidel hour, some would call it. But as soon as I was up I went along the little corridor that leads from my bedroom to the shop, got the book out and sat down at my desk as nervous as a child. I'd bolted the door on the inside so that my nephews shouldn't take me by surprise, and drawn the curtains to discourage visitors. So I had quiet and cool, but when I opened the book I realised there wasn't enough light. So I decided to move my chair nearer the window.

While I was doing so, someone knocked at the door. I let out an oath and listened, hoping whoever it was would tire of waiting and go away. Unfortunately he knocked again. Not just a timid tap – an imperious thump, and then a volley of them.

“Coming!” I shouted. I quickly put the book back in its hiding-place, then went and opened the door.

My caller's insistence had made me think it must be someone important, and so it was: Chevalier Hugues de Marmontel, emissary of the court of France. A most cultivated person, a connoisseur of Oriental literature and objets d'art, who had often come to my place in the course of recent years and made substantial purchases.

He was on the way from Saida to Tripoli, he told me, whence he would take ship for Constantinople. And he could not possibly pass through Gibelet without knocking at the door of the Embriaci's noble dwelling. I thanked him for his compliments and his concern, and naturally asked him in. After drawing back the curtains, I let him browse about at leisure among the curios as was his habit, following him at a distance so as to be able to answer any questions, but not bothering him with any unsolicited comments.

He began by glancing through a copy of Samuel Bochart's *Geographia sacra*.

“I bought it as soon as it was published,” he said, “and I keep referring to it. At last a book that deals with the

Phoenicians, your ancestors – that is to say, of the people of this country.”

He moved forward a pace or two, then halted.

“These statuettes are Phoenician, aren’t they?” he asked. “Where are they from?”

I was proud to say that I myself had found and excavated them, in a field close to the beach.

“I’m very fond of this one,” I admitted.

The Chevalier merely said, “Oh”, surprised that a merchant should speak so of something offered for sale. I was slightly offended at this, and said no more, merely waiting for him to turn and ask me to explain my attachment. When he did so, I told him that the two statuettes had once been buried side by side, but with time the metal they were made of rusted in such a way that a hand of each had become welded to a hand of the other. I like to think of them as two lovers separated by death, but reunited for ever by time, rust and the earth. Everyone else who sees them speaks of two statuettes, but I prefer to speak of them as one: the statuette of the lovers.

The Chevalier put out his hand to take hold of it. I begged him to be careful, as the least shock might break them apart. No doubt thinking I had been rather abrupt with him, he signed to me to handle my statuette myself. So with the greatest possible care I started to carry it nearer to the window. I expected him to follow, but when I turned round he was still standing in the same place. In his hands he was holding *The Hundredth Name*.

He was as white as a sheet. I too turned pale.

“How long have you had it?” he asked.

“Since yesterday.”

“Didn’t you once tell me you didn’t think it existed?”

“That’s what I’ve always thought. But I must have told you forgeries appeared from time to time.”

“Is this one of them?”

“Probably. But I haven’t had time yet to make sure.”

“How much do you want for it?”

I almost said “It’s not for sale!” but I changed my mind. One should never say that to an important personage. He’ll only say, “In that case, I’ll borrow it.” And then, for fear of giving offence, you have to lend it to him, and of course it’s highly likely you’ll never see your book again, nor your customer either. I’ve learned that to my cost.

“As a matter of fact,” I stammered, “it belongs to a crazy old fellow who lives in the most broken-down hovel in Gibelet. He’s convinced it’s worth a fortune.”

“How much?”

“A fortune, as I said. He’s insane!”

At this point I noticed that my nephew Boumeh had come up behind us and was observing the scene in stunned surprise. I hadn’t heard him enter. I asked him to come over and be introduced to our eminent visitor. I hoped this would allow me to change the subject and escape from the trap closing in on me. But the Chevalier just nodded briefly and repeated:

“How much is the book, Signor Balthasar? I’m waiting.”

How much should I say? The most I ever charged for the rarest volumes was 600 maidins. Sometimes, very exceptionally, the price went up to 1,000, which in sols tournois came to ...

“He’s asking 1,500! But I can’t let you pay all that for a forgery!”

Without a word my visitor opened his purse and counted out the sum in sound French currency. Then he handed the book to one of his servants, who went and stowed it away in the midst of his baggage.

“I’d have liked to take the statuettes, too. But I suppose I haven’t enough money left for that!”

“Take the two lovers as well, then. They’re not for sale, but please have them as a gift. Take good care of them!”

I then invited him to stay to lunch, but he briefly declined. One of his escort told me he had to get on with his journey

as soon as possible if he wanted to reach Tripoli by nightfall. His ship sailed next day for Constantinople.

I accompanied the party to Gibelet harbour, but without getting another word out of the emissary, nor so much as a farewell glance.

I reached home to find Boumeh weeping and wringing his hands with rage.

“Why did you give him that book? I don’t understand it!”

I didn’t understand it either. In a moment of weakness I’d lost *The Hundredth Name*, the statuette I was so fond of, and the respect of the emissary. I had even more reason to lament than my nephew. But I had to defend myself somehow.

“What can I say? It just happened! I had no choice! He *is* the envoy of the King of France, after all!”

My poor nephew was sobbing like a child. I took him by the shoulders.

“Cheer up! It was a forgery, as you and I both know.”

He pulled himself free.

“If it was a forgery, we committed a fraud by selling it to him at that price. And if by some miracle it wasn’t a forgery, we shouldn’t have parted with it for all the gold on earth! Who sold it to *you*?”

“Old Idriss.”

“Idriss? How much for?”

“He gave it to me.”

“In that case, he certainly didn’t mean you to sell it.”

“Not even for 1,500 maidins? With that he could buy a house, new clothes; hire a maid; perhaps even get married.”

Boumeh didn’t feel like laughing. He seldom does.

“If I understand you correctly, you intend to give all this money to Idriss.”

“Yes - without even putting it in our till!”

I stood up, put the coins in a leather purse, and left the house.