

# Rhapsody

## A Literary Insert

Editor Robert A. Hibberd

### A Very Different Five Centuries

by Kevin Haines

From the moment he arrived at the longhouse, it was obvious that Haji Alim had something on his mind. But he smiled at the children who leapt up in delight when they saw him coming in.

"Peace!" he exclaimed over their small, excited voices, shuffling back to keep them from trampling the curled toes of his shoes. "Let me live!" he laughed. "Lady Summer-Songs, help!"

Summer-Songs stood, but pretended not to understand, for he had spoken in Arabic. "Quiet, children!" she said gently. "In all your noise, Haji Alim forgot how to speak!"

He looked puzzled; Summer-Songs beckoned one of her sons to usher him in and close the outer doors, shutting out the busy clatter of hooves and wagon-wheels on the paved road. As Haji Alim brushed street-dust from his silk tunic and trousers, he realized what had happened. He laughed, and walked about the small courtyard, greeting the daughters, sons, and grandchildren of Summer-Songs in Onondaga, their native language.

"I was across the sea for so long," he apologized as he sat down, "and Arabic was the only language I needed." He spoke Onondaga with a strong accent, giving it an exotic spice; but he could still be understood.

Summer-Songs nodded, her eyes smiling above her veil.

"Besides," he went on, "I am always thinking you must understand Arabic—you write so beautifully in it!"

She lowered her eyes, in humility and to conceal her thoughts, for she understood spoken Arabic quite well. "The Holy Qur'an taught my pen," she said simply. "If there is beauty in my books, praise Allah, not me."

"We praise Allah for all things," Haji Alim agreed. "Many across the sea told me I should praise Allah that I count among my friends so great a poet as She-Who-Writes-Summer-Songs."

She shook her head. Looking away to end the subject, she said, "My husband will be home soon; you must stay for dinner."

"Oh, no! After last night, I won't need to eat for days! I came to see your husband, not wear out my welcome at your table," said Haji Alim, but he knew his protest was useless.

"You are always welcome here," she persisted. "You know that. And the children would love to hear you again."

"Thank you, but—"

"Haji Alim!" came a voice. "You would be unwise to refuse!"

Haji Alim stood, smiling. "Is that a threat?" he asked, lazily fingering the jeweled hilt of his dagger.

"Call it a friendly warning from your Harbormaster," said He-Who-Sails-Through-Storm-Clouds, as he stepped into the courtyard. He was dressed as finely as Haji Alim, and might have been mistaken for an Arab if he could have grown a beard. Storm-Clouds was tall, strongly built, and fair to look upon, but Haji Alim had taken years to grow accustomed to his beardless face.

"A friendly warning is what I would speak to you about," said Haji Alim. "Did you receive my message from Barcelona?"

Storm-Clouds held up a hand. "Please, old friend, let business talk wait until after dinner." Before Haji Alim could protest, he found himself ushered from the courtyard into the banquet-chamber, where a place was already set for him.

"Well, if you insist," said Haji Alim as he sat down.

The children and grandchildren of Summer-Songs and Storm-Clouds came in and took their places, some bearing dishes of food: dishes of squash; of maize seasoned with herbs; of fresh cod-fish from the cold waters of the Atlantic; of caribou from the northern mainland; of fragrant rice brought around the world from far India. When all was ready, Storm-Clouds stood, and gave

thanks and praise to Allah for the beautiful earth which gave them such wholesome foods. Then he sat, and the meal began. Everyone ate slowly, to savor the food.

"Haji Alim," said Summer-Songs, "last night you spoke only of the Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, as befits their greatness. Now tell us of the other cities and places you have seen."

As the family ate and listened, Haji Alim told them of the glorious cities and lands he had visited on his long journey of pilgrimage. He told of the exciting and wealthy port-cities his ship had touched, in Denmark, Britain, and Spain, across North Africa, and finally great Alexandria, where all western pilgrims left ship to go on foot to Mecca. He told of wonders of land and sea, from the Pyramids of Egypt to the Rock of Gibraltar to the Ice-Rivers of Greenland. He told of great capital cities he had visited: Damascus, Cordova, Rome; and the marvelous capital of all the Muslim world, Constantinople.

"In all these places," he said, looking at the young children, "I met learned scholars, wealthy merchants, and powerful princes who love to read your grandmother's poetry."

The children looked at She-Who-Writes-Summer-Songs in silent awe and disbelief; they had never heard from her, or from their grandfather, that she was so famous. None of them were old enough to know anything of poetry.

### 1st place Gary I. Beck Memorial Short Fiction Contest

beyond the simplest rhymes.

Summer-Songs shook her head, but her eyes smiled above her veil. "Haji Alim," she said, "if you wish to educate these children, please remember to tell them Who is the source of all our gifts, and Who truly deserves our praise."

At that moment, as if to confirm her words, a distant voice called out in Arabic, "Allah is Most Great!" For a moment, they all stared at her, amazed. Then they laughed at themselves, for it was sunset, and time for all faithful Muslims to pray. The muezzin's distant voice continued the call to prayer.

Dinner was over, so the children and grandchildren left to go to their chambers and pray. Some stayed to light whale-oil lamps and clear the table. When the young people had finished cleaning and left, taking the fine china dinner-plates and serving-dishes away with them, Storm-Clouds invited Haji Alim to join him and his wife in offering prayers. Summer-Songs stood behind the men as they all faced eastward, across the sea toward Mecca; she knew Haji Alim might be uncomfortable otherwise.

When their prayers were finished, the three sat at the table again, and Storm-Clouds went to the kitchen to bring tea. Haji Alim accepted this cup, added maple-sugar, and inhaled the fragrance of the fine Iranian-blend tea.

After a few minutes of restful silence interrupted only by the stirring and sipping of tea, Storm-Clouds smiled at Haji Alim. "You mentioned a friendly warning?" he asked.

Haji Alim glanced at Summer-Songs and quickly looked away, sipping his tea uncomfortably. "I learned many disturbing things in my travels," he began, then stopped, stroked his beard for a moment, and sipped his tea again.

"Oh! I promised to help put the grandchildren to bed," said Summer-Songs breathlessly, in the manner of one who has forgotten something. She stood, giving Storm-Clouds a knowing look. He nodded. The Arab would not discuss serious matters with a woman. Accepting Haji Alim's thanks for the dinner, she left quickly.

When she was gone, Haji Alim grinned slyly. "She is a fine woman, Storm-Clouds, but a man of your standing could easily support another wife—a younger woman, perhaps."

Storm-Clouds sighed, silently forgiving the old-fashioned Arab. "I have told you many times, Haji Alim, my people agree with Muhammad: it