APPOINTMENT IN SAMARRA

Many years ago, there was a man in Bathsheba who asked his servant to go to market. His servant had known many years, and was faithful in service. Though his hair was white, he stood as tall as a young date tree in the autumn, whose leaves are beginning to fall, while the fruit of abundance draws to an end about it.

The servant went to market; and among the throng he saw Death, dressed in black and as pale as the moon that grows thin. Death made a gesture, and the servant grew frightened; for, although there were many people in the marketplace, who crowded to buy the things that would bring them joy while they lived, none of them heeded the lonely pair.

And he ran home to his master, and he said, "Master, today I saw Death in the market amid the throng. And he made a threatening gesture to me. Master, I shall make haste and I shall ride like the wind to Samarra, for Samarra is many miles from here, and Death will not find me there."

So the servant rode away to Samarra, and his master was sorely troubled, as is the traveler in the desert who is called to the side of his dying father and his long journey draws to an end. And he went to the market and he sought Death, whose dress was dark as the sea at night when the fisherman is lost, and his face was as pale as a grave on a frosty night.

And the master said to Death, "Why did you make a threatening gesture at my servant? He has done me good service, and is old in years."

And Death replied, "I made no threatening gesture at your servant. That was a start of surprise. For I saw him this morning in Bathsheba, but this night I was to meet him many miles away in Samarra."