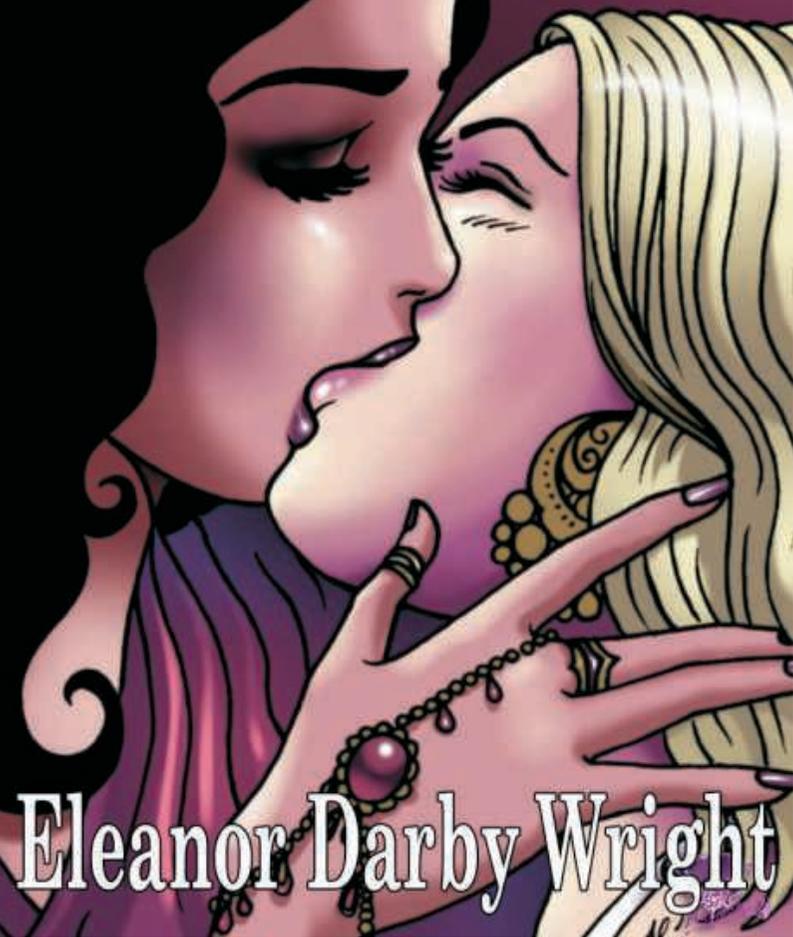


In Service To Her Majesty



Eleanor Darby Wright

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IN SERVICE TO HER MAJESTY

by Eleanor Darby Wright

******THE SHIP ROOM******

The Travellers' Club has never been well known by the media or the general public. It isn't now and it wasn't in the past. Those who have been aware of it have used its name as a byword for exclusiveness, a trait that has lasted even to this day and age. It was there that I met Captain Rodney Arthur Rayfield, late of the Ordnance Survey.

"Maps," was what he said when we asked him what he did. "Maps." We'd settled back for the expected war stories but there were none. So, someone else, Bunny most likely, began to talk about his 'fabled exploits'. Rayfield just sat and listened, a faint

smile on his thin-nosed, clear-skinned face, as he watched me serve drinks to everyone at the bar. He had a shock of fair hair that was longer than regulations allowed but then you expected that in officers. He had no eyebrows to speak of and if asked to describe him, I would have said 'effete'.

So, when Bunny Gorton began a conversation on homosexuality, I noted how fidgety Rodney became and tried to head Bunny off. Now, Bunny is slender, like Rayfield. He's also very, very English and was nominated for the Travellers' Club after being part of White's Antarctic explorations.

I don't think that Bunny is really gay but he does often make 'queer' jokes that upset the older, more traditional members of the Club. The newer, younger ones just smile and nod and wink as they listen to Bunny's affected voice and his limp-wrist gestures. It's a shame as Bunny is always enjoyable to listen to even if he is totally unfair in who he picks on.

"Now, among the Lakithi," Bunny said airily to those of us gathered in the wood-panelled Ship Room, "they have an initiation ceremony for everyone who wants to try it. Anyone who succeeds is considered to be a warrior and they're awarded a sort of codpiece, with an appendage like, well, like the one Willie has."

Most of us had had too much to drink then and so we chortled at that. In the men's lavatory was a portrait, moved there when we took in our first female member six years before. She hadn't lasted but the picture had stayed. William Polley had travelled naked the length of the Zambezi and portaged across to the Congo. The artist had taken liberties I am sure in depicting the naked Polley. Either that or

the poor man had crossed Africa in a state of constant erection.



“The codpiece is called an ugatha,” said Bunny, downing his Scotch and bitters and handing me his glass for more. “Anyone who wears one can carry a spear and a knife and sit in the Council of Men.”

“I don’t understand,” said Paul Gardiner, the yachtsman. He’s the kind of member who gives the Club its reputation of upper class snobbery. While Bunny Gorton would deserve a place in the Club for his exploring and writing accomplishments, Paul has money to pave his way. He’s made several large donations to our General Fund and is thus a mainstay in keeping our Club running along in the same fashion that it has for over one hundred and fifty-three years.

“Does everyone take the, er, the initiation in the Kithli?” Paul asked. “And what happens if someone fails?”

“They make it easy enough,” said young Tom Scully, our resident skeptic, “so that no-one ever fails.”

Even Bunny laughed as he was shaking his long, wavy hair. He waited while I filled the glasses again with Martell brandy for most of the club, Armagnac for Paul, who claimed a more refined French palate.

“Not so,” said Bunny amiably. “And the clan’s name is Lakithi. They’re distantly related to Johnson’s Unlith.” We all looked blank. We aren’t a very intellectual group on the weekends, I’m afraid. “The Stone Age people,” Bunny prompted us.

“Oh, of course,” said Tom Scully, exaggerating Bunny’s frightful accent. “The Stoners. How could I forget?” We all sniggered together then. Rayfield smiled at me familiarly, as if he was a real friend of mine. There was something familiar about him but,

for the life of me, I couldn't place him in any group but this one, at an Explorers' Meeting at the Travellers' Club.

Bunny waited for the laughter to stop. "Several women do pass the initiation," he said, returning to his subject, "but most, of course, don't enter in the first place. They don't want to be warriors."

"So the women who passed the initiation became men?" I asked with a smile. Rayfield's smile grew broader as he nodded, pleased by what I'd said.

Bunny's smile was larger than both of ours. "Why, David, old fellow, how intelligent of you," he said as if there had been some doubt in the past. "Of course they became men, and the reason for the codpiece now becomes evident, I expect."

"They hunted?" asked Paul, aghast.

"And cut their hair into crests as they were men," Bunny affirmed. "They carried weapons and took wives and wore the ugatha."

"Pretty liberated conduct, it seems to me," guffawed Tom Scully.

Paul Gardiner's forehead was creased in a frown. "But after this initiation," he persisted. "What about the men who failed? Were they killed?"

"Oh no, dear boy," drawled Bunny. "Failing the initiation just proves that you are not a man at all, doesn't it? That's all the initiation was for, to sort out the roles of the adults."

"But," began Paul, as we all tried to figure that out. "The men who failed ...?"

"They became women," sighed Bunny in mock exasperation. "They couldn't cut their hair. They had to braid it and blacken their eyes, redden their

lips and wear the long skirt like the women do. They even wear halter-type imitation bras and were the prettiest of all the Lakithi women, probably because they don't have to put up with childbearing though most of them seemed to be nursing other women's children, at least the ones Warner and I saw when we were there. The chief had two wives like that."

"Wives?" asked Paul, shocked. I glanced at the stunned faces of all of my colleagues and that's when I noticed that Rayfield was just glancing at Bunny and smiling to himself, not disturbed at all. Yes, I'd seen that expression before somewhere but I still couldn't place it.

"What else could they do in a society that said they were women?" asked Bunny, his eyes gleaming at the outcry he'd stirred up with one of his little stories again.

"But that means," said a red-faced Tom Scully. "The ugatha."

"Of course," said Bunny, his smile now positively wicked. "A lot of the real men had wives whom we would call men. And the warriors we knew were women, all had wives who were male to us. Ilithin, a warrior woman, had the prettiest wife, Janna. It was funny because Ilithin looked fat and we never saw another fat Lakithi. Warner whispered to me when I remarked on it that Ilithin was pregnant and I mustn't notice it.

"When we came back on the return half of that trip, we found that Ilithin had died in childbirth and the cute, adorable Janna had been remarried to the chief's son who had just become a man, a husband and a father to Janna's new little girl. He was really affectionate to her in public, hugging her all the

time, much to the amusement of the other men and women.

“That’s when we learned that the Lakithi can blush as well as Janna used to blush all the time, especially when she had to put the ugatha on her husband for the Council meetings. Most of the men just let their wives give them a peck before the women were sent on their way. Janna was one of the few we saw who was really kissed passionately by her husband.. The chief complained that seeing how affectionately his son treated his wife was making all the women jealous and the men were feeling compelled to compete.”

“Oh, Bunny,” cut in Joe Adair, who’d been quiet up till then. “You’re just being preposterous as usual.” At some time in our formal dinners, Old Joe, an ex-general, could be relied upon to become apoplectic at somebody. “No society is ever going to tolerate a horde of men taking on women’s roles. It just isn’t, isn’t natural!”

Bunny just smiled, I noticed, and Rayfield smiled just like him, but his was directed at me, as hubbub and argument burst out all over the small audience around the Ship Room bar.

There were perhaps just seven of us left when Rayfield, by himself at one end of the bar, signalled to me to come and refill his glass. I stared at him, at his clean, clear face and something tickled at my memory but I couldn’t make it come to the surface.

“It’s surprising what a society will tolerate, isn’t it,” Rayfield whispered to me, “when it is the gods who command what they must do.” I know I gaped at him. He flushed and nodded. “I mean, Bunny’s story is very likely to be true,” he added.

The group sort of broke up then. I was left with just Rayfield, leaning on the bar, clearly wanting to say something more to me.

“Did something similar to what Bunny described happen to you on your travels, Captain?” I asked him, more to give me time to think where I had seen Rayfield before, other than the meetings he’d begun to attend again, after a five-year hiatus.

“Well, it wasn’t precisely the same story,” said Rayfield, swirling the last drops of his brandy in the large snifter.

When Old Joe had stalked off to the Common Room and, grinning, Tom Scully and Bunny Gorton had gone after him, the others left their glasses all over before following them. I sighed and went to retrieve them. I wasn’t the barman. I was actually an archivist for the Club but I was around so often that I helped out wherever I could.

“Would you like to talk about it?” I asked Rayfield. There were only the two of us left in the bar. “For the archives?” I added with a smile. We’d had a lively discussion going on earlier that night that no-one ever read the archives of the society any more. The planet had become too well known.

The Captain was reluctant. “Well, I did come here tonight to talk to you about something else,” he said, watching me as I collected glasses. I brought up a Cognac from beneath the bar that he hadn’t seen before. He tasted it and a smile of pleasure lit up his thin, patrician face.

“It wasn’t an exploit that I’m terribly proud of,” Rayfield said quietly, staring down at his long, clean fingernails, almost womanish and effeminate, I noticed, but which he hid from me when he saw me

notice them. “I guess I can tell you about it first. I haven’t told anyone this real story ever before. I’ll tell you, and you can understand me better, if you want to, but I’d appreciate it if, this time, you didn’t put this one into your records.”

Then he told me all about his strange journey to the city of Subbujah and the girl, Anisoyya, who was the handmaiden of the Kon, ‘the Living God’, who ruled one of the most ordered cities I had ever heard of, a handmaiden who wasn’t a woman.

*******TRADE GOODS*******

I had no definite reason to make the trip up to Subbujah. My colleague and junior by a few months, Lieutenant Martin Davenport, was against us taking the time for a side trip up the isolated valley. We were mapping the Upper Intra system and the Dallah was an important tributary of the great river. We’d been out for so long that I felt the need for contact with people, any civilized people, and so I ordered our party to divert just a little to the city of Ahdallah.

The marketplace at Ahdallah was one of the most incredible sights I’ve ever seen. We stabled our horses and pack mules, found rooms for ourselves and our assistant, actually my batman, Cochrane, and headed out to see the sights through streets of vendors of every conceivable product. Davenport even got to smile and relax himself and say that it wasn’t such a bad idea to stop for a day or so but I knew that he was really preoccupied with getting back to his lady friend before she moved on from her stay in the cool foothills and the tea plantations to Singapore. I knew because he told me that every

time we made a side trip to make our records accurate.

“We don’t have to go all the way up to Subbujah,” he told me. “Let’s leave something for Hedges and his mob.”

“Subbujah, sir,” one of the vendors exclaimed, jumping in front of us. I’m short and Davenport is even shorter than me but this dirty, brown-skinned man was even smaller than either of us. He had a dirty, red cloth about his head and a lank, black hair hung about his face. He had a straggly growth of black beard like so many other people milling about us. He seemed more Turkmen in origin, I thought, than most people in that part of the Himalayas.

“Sedrip Golapal at your service, honored sirs,” the wiry, little man said making a deep salaam, adding another culture to the myriad I was trying to place him in. “Is it that the honored gentlemen are contemplating a caravan to Subbujah?”

Up to that moment, I hadn’t been entirely sure of what I wanted. Beggars swarmed about Martin and me, babbling away in Urdu, Kashmiri, Punjabi and all the other dialects of Northern India. I tried to ignore them.

“You’re from Subbujah?” I asked the little man, Golapal, who was smiling most obsequiously and showing a mouth full of yellow, peglike teeth.

“Born there, sir,” said the little man, bobbing his head. “And ready to return as guide if the honorable gentlemen so desire.”

“We don’t have time,” said Martin.

“Never been an Englishman, ever, to have set foot in the City of Splendor,” said Golapal with a bright smile.

That made up my mind. In all my travels, I’d never set foot in a place where an Englishman hadn’t set his foot before me. I looked at Martin and smiled.

“And, if I go with this man as my guide, an Englishman still won’t have set foot in Subbujah,” I said to Martin, who scowled at me. Since the War was over, I’d taken advantage of my British heritage, even though I was American, to be one of the few officers loaned to the Ordnance Survey which had been trying for eighty years or more to get accurate maps of the Northern frontier states.

We weren’t volunteers exactly. We were loans to an understaffed, allied armed service, from an army that was reducing itself in size as isolationist forces took over American politics. Working in India was a good way to blood up and coming officers, or so it was put to me when I ‘volunteered’.

It had been thrilling to start out to be in so many strange and wonderful places and to correct the work of people whose names had been legends to us. Now we had a chance, if we believed Golapal, to put our own names on a map, maybe even declare where the border was. The Rayfield Line, I thought smugly. Then I looked at my partner.

“The Rayfield-Davenport Line?” I asked and he considered it.

“The Davenport-Rayfield Line,” he suggested, knowing exactly what I meant and why I’d suggested it.

“I would like to go up to Subbujah,” I told Martin. “Wouldn’t you like to see the Palace of Splendor?” We’d heard the name of Subbujah’s wonder, at least.

“Oh, that is marvellous, sir, absolutely marvellous,” said Golapal gleefully, jumping up and down and rubbing his hands together while he gave us both sly looks. “We shall need supplies, sir, yes, sir. Yes, many supplies, honored gentlemen.”

I was amused by the little man’s enthusiasm. I allowed myself to be led all through the Ahdallah bazaar while Sedrip Golapal suggested what supplies were necessary for the diversion into the foothills up the Dallah River to its junction with the Subbah and the city of Subbujah.

“What can we trade for in Subbujah?” I asked our guide as we fingered delicately-designed, yet hard-wearing, Pushtun rugs. The thin-faced dealer looked at our white faces and uniforms with surprise and kept watching us as we moved on to finely-wrought brassware. All about us, brown-skinned people, of short stature, milled about gesticulating and arguing. Bargains were struck and there were smiles but often the customer stalked off in a huff. Young children passed in front of us with trays of aromatic, roasted meat, thrusting their trays at anyone who looked to have money.

“The silk you can get in Subbujah is finer than anything in this market,” Golapal told us. “Leave it to me, honored sirs, and I will find the right products for you to take up to Subbujah. I know exactly what will trade well.”

I smiled to Martin. “Well, that settles it. We can’t pass on acquiring the finest of silk for Dorothy and

Enid, can we?" I was referring to Davenport's lovely sisters who had asked him for that in their last letter to him, three months on the road reaching us after a month at sea.

Martin nodded in resignation. I gave Golapal a generous advance for 'trade goods' and his eyes widened in pleasure.

"Do you think we'll see him again?" Martin asked with a smile.

"If we don't, we'll head right back to Delhi," I promised him.

But the next morning, in a marketplace almost devoid of people, Golapal was waiting with packs and packs of stuff, ready to be loaded onto our mules.

"Strewth," said Cochrane, my English batman. He'd paid off the helpers who had been with us across the north as Golapal had said that we would only need another groom besides him and he would get someone. "How much did you give him, sir? I think he's bought up the 'ole bleeding market."

There was even a line of small, tough mountain ponies and near to the brazier, two small, dark, robed figures, warming their hands. A slim youth, his dark hair covered by a burnoose, watched us approach.

Cochrane spat in the dirt as the youth looked insolently at him, clearly making him out to be a servant to us, the officers. "Papers?" asked Cochrane and surprisingly the youth had them.

"Ghani," said Cochrane to us. "Says here he's nineteen. Don't look it, does he?"

“Well,” said Davenport to me as Golapal brought up one of the ponies and began to put a load onto its back. “I guess he can be trusted with gold at least.” He, like Cochrane, was staring at the two figures in what appeared to be black chadors. One lifted his head to look at us. His face was framed by the black robe that covered his hair but not his face. He was beardless like Ghani. His eyes were large and framed by the curliest, dark eyelashes I have ever seen.

I knew then why Davenport and Cochrane were distressed. We had heard and seen the custom of ‘caravan’ wives before all across the North. Women were not travellers at this time. When the men went out on long, trading expeditions, young men served the older men in ways that were ‘not nice’. Such boys were treated as women.

I noted that neither made any move to help with the ponies or loading them. We had seen them before, Davenport and me, boys in lipstick and jewels, earrings visible if their hair was not, riding while their husbands trudged beside them, the ‘wives’ occasionally giving a gentle caress of encouragement to the men who provided them with food and employment.

Golapal frowned at the paper in Cochrane’s hand. Cochrane snapped his finger at him and so he produced three battered identity papers, similar to Ghani’s. “Dajir and Adi Allal,” said Cochrane as Golapal looked shocked as our batman read the documents with ease. His abilities with written and spoken language were the reasons why he’d been assigned to me in the first place. “Says here that they both turned eighteen at the beginning of the year.”

Golapal indicated to Ghani to assist in bringing up the ponies and lightly laden mules and began putting more packs onto the ponies as they arrived.

“What’s in all the packages?” asked Martin.
“What goods are we taking to trade?”

Cochrane moved over and opened one pack as Golapal called to him to stop.

“Blimey, sir,” squawked Cochrane to me. “There ain’t nothing in here but women’s clobber.” He held up a woman’s white, whalebone corset, taken from the bundle, a black and a red soon following.

I began to laugh at the incongruous sight while Martin blushed. Cochrane dropped the parcel. Golapal moved to tidy it up as Ghani just stood, holding the pony, watching Cochrane opening more packs.

“Women’s dresses,” he said, turning to another. “Women’s undies and shoes,” Cochrane reported, showing me a dainty high-heeled shoe he pulled from that pack.

My laughter died as I saw all the packs had nothing but women’s wear, and cosmetics for women, in them. There was one pack just with stockings.

“Golapal!” I snapped at him. He stopped his re-packing and came to me. He stopped on the way just enough to tell the two figures to assist him. They both stood gracefully and flowed over the ground in their dark robes like wraiths.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. “Is this what you are trading for in Subbujah?” I looked at the youths who seemed taller, older, now that they weren’t huddled over the fire. “And those two. Slav-

ery is absolutely forbidden.” I didn’t want to mention that I thought they were ‘caravan wives’.

“Oh, honorable sir,” said Golapal, rolling his eyes so that the whites showed. “How could you think that of me, Sedrip Golapal, son of Golapal the moneylender? Have I not shown you how you can trust me with your gold and returned to you that which I did not use?” He had returned a few silvers and a small bag of what looked like copper washers. “These unfortunates,” he indicated the boys, “I return to Subbujah as a favor to their father, my cousin, in exile over a small matter in regard to money. He wishes them to learn the life of the Ajji from the monks at Kejja.” He shrugged.

“And him?” I asked, pointing at the slim youth holding the ponies’ reins.

“Ghani?” asked a seemingly puzzled Golapal. “He is a groom. I bought him here in Ahdallah since you have so many mules and horses.”

“Bought?” asked Martin in distaste at the word.

“I paid the family well, honorable sir,” said Golapal indignantly. “In truth, sir, it is to you whom he belongs since it was your coins that purchased him.”

I saw Martin’s jaw clench and I knew he wanted to dispute more with the bewildered little man. I had long ago learned, however, that observing and respecting local customs gave us the least grief in the long run.

“We can return the lad and his ponies to his family when we return,” I told Martin Davenport. “Perhaps we can get our old grooms back.”

Martin wasn't mollified but at least we were able to get under way. Golapal packed the horses and mules with a shrewdness that boded well for his acumen in other things. I began to think that, if he felt there was a market for women's clothing in Subbujah, then there probably was a fortune to be made. I hoped so as I hadn't told Martin that it was our reserve funds that I had mistakenly given to Golapal instead of our travel and trade fund, golden guineas instead of silver shillings. Well, I couldn't tell the difference by weight. I just hoped Golapal had chosen well enough for us to recoup most of our money in this strange city of Subbujah.

Along the way, I raised the matter of our strange 'trade goods' and Golapal smiled sheepishly at me as he explained. "As for the trade goods, sir," he said, "the Kon's sister, that is our ruler's sister, sir, wishes to travel. She needs proper clothing like your women use. So do the womenfolk of many noble families who have said that they would like to travel as well."

I was pretty doubtful of that explanation but, since I had trusted him so far, I decided in the end that I should just carry on doing that. What an idiot I was!

*******THE CITY OF SPLENDOR*******

It took us five days to reach Subbujah after we forded the slow-moving Dallah and headed north-eastwards across dry, yellow-grass plains into the foothills. An abrupt turn of the river as it flowed out of a sandstone gorge and we were headed due north and off normal trade routes.

Subbujah had not been visited before, not because it wasn't worth it. The city and valley were not poor. We could see that. Simply, it was off the beaten track. The High Khirani Mountains stood beyond the Dallah valley like a wall. The gorge route was magnificent but daunting. We mapped the route as we went, adding a day to our travel by all the stops that we made for Martin and I to do our work.

As we'd found throughout our work, the distances on the maps we had were woefully out of kilter. Subbujah itself was nearly thirty-five miles further north than the last expedition had placed it. I might never have gone up there if I'd known it was so far away.

Golapal and his nephews and the groom stayed out of our way and behaved with remarkable patience as we set up our instruments with Cochrane wherever we could. It inevitably meant a long wait in the hot sun for the boys. I noticed they never took off the chadors, I thought it the wrong word as it was a word for a woman's form of dress, but I used it because that's what they looked like to me.

At night, I did notice once or twice, a gleam of color at times as the boys quietly ate their food and the robe opened just a little. They would clutch the robes to themselves when that happened and I thought at the time that I had seen the neckline of a pretty, girl's dress and the sparkle had been from a necklace. But it was covered so quickly that I thought I was seeing things. I should have paid more attention. Then, perhaps, we wouldn't all have paid so dearly for our visit to Subbujah as we finally did.

On the fifth day, we caught our first sight of Subbujah. It was built into the point made by the

junction of the two rivers. We stayed on the eastern side so that we went past the town to the ford across the flat, slow-moving river just north of the city. At the pinnacle of the rock that stood high and on guard over the widespread city, stood what Golapal called the Palace of the Kon, the ruler of the city.

“A derivative of ‘khan?’” suggested Martin to me but Golapal, at our elbow as guide immediately denied any connection between the long-ago Moslem invaders of Northern India and the rulers of Subbujah.

The high, sandstone towers of the Palace took on a golden glow in the evening as we splashed across the Dallah, pausing to water our horses, ponies and mules. There was a sprawl of buildings along the low shore where we could enter freely, Golapal said. The bridges we’d seen on the far side were toll bridges, he told us, where ‘greedy’ guards would demand payments for letting our trade goods into the city.

Golapal urged us on as the sun began to set through the beggars’ town, as he called it, though, strangely, we saw none. He said we should hurry and get inside the city walls for the night where we would all be under the protection of the gods of Subbujah.

“You mean under the protection of the Kon,” said Davenport, echoing Golapal’s short, flat pronunciation of the word.

Golapal rolled his eyes again. “The Kon,” he stated, giving me a sideways’ glance as well, “is a God.” Then, he went off way in front of us so that we didn’t have the chance to ask him what that meant.

Not that we would have understood anyway that his words meant exactly what he'd said.

We followed him through a high, narrow gate in the sand-brick wall. The sentries, in sand-colored uniforms, stared at us on our horses. They spoke rapidly to Golapal as we sat on our big mounts and he shrugged several times at them. Several went to the packs and checked them but then they ignored everything but our sidearms. They jabbered at me and wanted my revolver but I shook my head in refusal and finally they shrugged and just gave up.

With cursory waves of brown arms, we were permitted, to my amazement to ride into the narrow streets of Subbujah. We had no tolls to pay and no-one, no beggars at all crowded about us. Oh, people stopped to look at us. Many looked down, solemn-faced from four and five storey buildings.

“Have you ever seen so many pretty girls, sir?” remarked Cochrane, smiling and waving as the girls in their gorgeous dresses, very much like saris, but not exactly the same. They had long, black hair down their backs and, even from horseback, we could see that the girls of Subbujah wore a lot of makeup, their lips like strings of red roses as we rode by.

There were few people actually on the streets and the girls watched us solemnly, not waving back at all. Our caravan seemed finally all alone as we made a sudden turn under an archway and followed Golapal into a stable yard.

Two stocky, bearded men came forward and argued with Golapal. It must have been about the price of our lodging for suddenly they shrugged, headed to our ponies and mules and began to take

the packs off the animals before leading them off to various stalls in another yard past and through another archway.

“This is an inn of my cousins, honorable sirs,” said Golapal, bowing low to us as we dismounted. “Please follow me, sirs, to a most welcome evening meal. My cousins will prepare a room for you while you dine. It is quite safe, I assure you, as everyone here is a member of the landlord’s family.”

I was wondering which of the men were Golapal’s cousins and why he made a point of mentioning our safety; but our guide darted off into the building and so we had no choice but to follow. We stepped through a curtained doorway into a scented room, long and brightly lit. Low tables were spread about the room and many people sat in groups cross-legged on the cushions and low divans that surrounded the tables. There were no chairs as we knew them.

On the low tables were set out dishes which were the source of the spicy, mouth-watering aromas that made my mouth salivate. There were meat stews, breads, and steaming vegetables covered with spices and sauces. Beside each of the men, who looked up at us in varied degrees of surprise, there were little pots of a steaming brown liquid that couldn’t have been just tea the way it seemed to induce much lip-smacking and shuddering when it was imbibed.

Beside each man, as well, a beautiful girl sat, a pretty picture in her colorful, silk sari. Each wore a great deal of golden jewellery and a great deal of makeup. Many of the girls had her long hair taken up or piled at the back of their heads in a bun. I had never seen so many attractive girls in one room in my life. It was funny, though, how demure they all

were. They all tended to look away, and many seemed to be blushing, though the makeup made it hard to tell, whenever one of us men looked at them.

The babble of conversation died as Martin and I entered and went to where Golapal and one of the bearded men were plumping up cushions arranging them beside several low divans. Cochrane had stayed with our packs and belongings. He had insisted, quite rightly, that our survey instruments were too precious to be allowed to fall into the hands of those only searching for weapons. And he was certain that we would be searched for small arms.

“Here, honored sirs,” said Golapal, bowing and showing us where to sit. As soon as we did, the conversation around us resumed again. His taller, thinner cousins disappeared through curtains at the end of the room.

“The best inn in Subbujah,” proclaimed Golapal as he sprawled on one divan, smiling as we were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a long-legged, dark-haired girl. She walked barefoot over the carpet, her anklets tinkling, announcing her passage. She sank gracefully in her long, silk skirts and placed dishes on the low table before Martin and me.

She was followed by more girls who looked like her sisters who brought us pots of the steaming drink, a hot, spiced tea with some alcohol also added to it, and plates to eat from, painted with scenes of the gods at play, or so Golapal said. He gestured to the fine tapestries that descended the walls from the beams that supported the ceiling. Several I noticed with interest seemed to be of woven silk. They would have brought a fortune back in San Francisco if we could ever get them there.

The girls, heavily made up and scented, long hair pinned up in large, colorful ribbons at the backs of their heads, moved on about the other tables replacing cold pots with warm ones, flashing long fingernails of painted reds and golds. They moved so gracefully, like dancers, that it was almost a shame to see them leave. Not one of them. I noticed, had smiled at us or at any of the other men in the room.

Our table groaned at the weight of the succulent foods they had brought us down the long, narrow room. "Your cousin has very beautiful daughters," I told Golapal who was greedily shoving food into his mouth as if he had not eaten in a year.

Golapal shook his head and glanced at me with narrowed eyes. "The landlord has no daughters," he said. I recalled what he had said earlier about all being members of the family. I should have pursued that. It might have made us leave right away to learn the truths about Subbujah at the beginning but a line of musicians suddenly entered from the far end of the inn, moving past us to an empty set of tables where they set up with their instruments.

Several moved around the room with guitar-like instruments stopping at what I had begun to think of as family groups at the various tables at the innermost end of the room. The strolling players stopped at the pretty daughters in almost every family who smiled at their serenades which clearly seemed to be aimed at them. I guessed that they were complimenting the girls on their feminine beauty which made it quite odd that most of the people, I noticed, looked quite glum as the music progressed.

The musicians finally settled in the middle of the room, seated in a circle about the tables now cov-

ered in a fine cloth. Then the girls I had thought were the landlord's daughters entered again in a procession of glittering, bejewelled, silk-dressed women. I had thought them as graceful as dancers and that is what they were. They formed an inner ring with the musicians outside them.

We watched in fascination as they danced, swirling out their skirts over the heads of the musicians. I would have liked to be closer as I saw so many skirts of so many different colors swirled by. Then each girl took a turn on the table to dance most gracefully, many wiggling their hips and shaking their covered breasts most suggestively to the music.

The dancing girls were as serious as the audience that watched them. I felt a tension rise unbearably as one of the musicians set down his stringed instrument and stood up with the last dancer, a girl in purple skirts. What made her dance so sensual was that she didn't look at him, even though he held her tightly about her waist and spun her about him, his chin caressing her soft shoulders and hair as he ran his hands all down her body, touching her in places that I wouldn't have liked my daughter to be touched.

As I observed the girls, I noticed little differences between them. Each had long, black hair now worn loosely as it fell below their shoulders. Their eyes were outlined in thick, black lines and their upper eyelids were also covered with black 'kohl'. Their eyebrows were very thin and outlined in kohl as well while their skins were lightened by some kind of cream or powder. Their cheeks were rouged softly unlike the vivid slash of red paint on their lips.