

Tulip of
Istanbul

Iskender Pala

**Translated from the Turkish
by Ruth Whitehouse**

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PREFACE



Within a few moments of seeing the sign about an “Auction of Stamp Collections and Old Books” outside Istanbul’s Marmara Hotel, I was following the arrow into the hotel conference room. It was unusual for me to act so decisively, especially since I had neither seen the catalogue nor made a reservation to attend the auction. The simple reason was that I was extremely cold and thought a glass of hot tea might warm me up. There was also the possibility that I would see some familiar faces and be able to do a bit of networking.

For years, I had been holding public seminars under the heading “Divan Poetry Hour” at six o’clock every Wednesday evening. That particular day, the discussion had strayed somewhat from poetry and I found myself having to discuss the idea that those who dismiss the importance of anything, in reality consider everything to be important. I had been wandering around Beyoğlu on my own, pondering the questions that had arisen during the seminar, with a blizzard raging around me and a biting wind whistling past my ears and stinging my eyes. The auction room was bustling with people, many of them well-known collectors. After a few friendly greetings, I went to look at the books on sale. About half of them were handwritten works, so I asked for a catalogue to see if any might be useful for my work. The auction started and I prayed that none of the important volumes would be

sold. The very idea of a hand-written book being sold to a bidder who could not read Ottoman Turkish distressed me. No sooner had I started looking at the catalogue than I heard the auctioneer call out, “In batch twenty-eight, we present a wonderful collection of poetry!” Of course, at such auctions the word ‘wonderful’ tends to lose all value; nevertheless I headed towards the man at the lectern, senses fully alert, my ears intent on what he was about to say and my eyes fixed on the hand-written volume he was holding. The auctioneer launched into promoting the book, which he was obviously determined to sell.

“This book contains excerpts from Genceli Nizami’s *Hüsrev and Şirin*, Fuzuli of Baghdad’s *Leyla and Majnun*, and Yazıcıoğlu Mehmed’s famous *Muhammediye*. In addition, it has the whole of Hamdullah Hamdi’s *Treatise on Physiognomy*, the best poems from the *Divan of Yunus the Mystic* and famous quotes from the ballads of Karacaoğlan and Gevheri”.

That was enough to whet my appetite. The book he was holding not only contained *mesnevi* and *divan* selections written for the pleasure of aristocrats, but also an Anatolian doctrine entitled *Muhammediye*, some fine examples of Yunus’s mystical poetry and also rural folk poetry. It was an extraordinary anthology and I was curious to find out more about the person who had compiled it. According to the auctioneer, the book also contained excerpts from *Revelations of the Bards*, *The Manual of Islamic Faith, Worship and Ethics*, and various letters and stories from Veysi’s *Collected Papers*. My interest was now uncontrollable. Fortunately, the other bidders were mainly interested in the appearance and condition of covers and any miniatures that the books contained rather than their literary content. This particular book contained no miniatures and its cover, though both marbled and gilded, was torn and creased. Even I had to admit that the book did not look

to be worth much, which was perhaps why, after my third bid, I became its proud owner.

It was dark and still snowing but the wind had eased when I left the hotel an hour later. Having surrendered to a personal passion, I could not wait to get home and, once on the ferry to Scutari, I started leafing excitedly through the pages. I remember clearly how romantic and beautiful the Bosphorus looked that night with the snow falling simultaneously over Europe and Asia. To me, the cultural treasure in my hands was equally beautiful. I opened the book at random on a page with a humorous and somewhat lewd tale by Mehmet Gazali and was unable to contain my laughter. I noticed some heads turn to look at me. The people around me looked exhausted, with no thought but to reach home as soon as possible.

When I reached home, I ignored the howling wind and the snow beating on the window and impatiently searched each chapter heading for a clue as to who had compiled such a rich corpus of works. Each of the fifteen- to twenty-page *Mesneve* excerpts and the Yunus poems had been beautifully calligraphed by the same scribe, but with many errors. The prose sections seemed to have been written by the book's original owner. What sort of person would he or she have been? There were also footnotes, barely legible, in the corners of some pages in the same handwriting.

The last and longest section of my book consisted of the story I am about to relate to you. The title immediately caught my interest. It was *One Murder, Sixty-six Questions* and was written in red ink with intricately decorated titles. I poured myself some tea and started reading. Within minutes, I was transported into another world.

In what seemed no time at all, I found that it was morning and I was shivering with cold. I was only halfway through, yet my mind was completely caught up with intrigues, murders and tulip colours. I had, of course, already decided to publish the story.

Despite extensive research, I was unable to find another copy of the story in any library. All my efforts to discover who had written it reached a dead end. Although there is a personal note in the prologue, it does not reveal the author's identity. By the time I had read to the end, I could understand why. In fact, unlike most Ottoman works, this book contained not a single reference to the author, calligraphist, binder, painter, dedicatee or publisher. Maybe, one day the annals of history will reveal to us who they were. Undoubtedly, researchers will come across the name of the author and perhaps even find another copy of the tale I am about to relate to you and say that a part of Ottoman history needs to be re-written. However, until that time, it is I who will be telling you this story and you will regard me as its author.

I have lived a happy and fortunate life, filled with love and affection, poetry, roses and hyacinths, so it was not a little disturbing for me when transcribing this book from Arabic into Latin script suddenly to encounter sickening crimes by merciless gangs, tyrannical plunderers and revolutionary mobs. I have to confess that the lines which gave me most pleasure during this work were in the postscripts about love that appeared at the end of some chapters. These postscripts add to the main story by providing a flavour of the deep passions that prevailed in those days.

Needless to say, I have updated the language of the Tulip Period in which this tale was originally written.

And now, it is time to leave you alone to read the story.

PROLOGUE



As I dip my pen into the inkwell – two weeks after the October revolution which was marked by Sultan Ahmet III being deposed and his son-in-law Grand Vizier İbrahim Pasha of Nevşehir being slain – I am undecided as to whether or not I should write about the events to which I have been witness. I feel an obligation to write about certain matters, but the idea of possibly committing the treason of disclosing state secrets weighs heavily on my conscience. I might also be accused of interfering with perceived views on the tulip, that sacred flower of the East, and cause offence to the horticultural community. However, it would be an injustice to history and to the city of Istanbul if nobody were ever to tell the story of Prince Ahmet and the dastardly deeds of the insurrectionists, or describe the supreme elegance of this heavenly city and the tulips of Sadabat. I therefore find myself compelled to undertake this challenging task.

I shall attempt to contain everything that happened within sixty-six chapters. As I am sure you know, the word *lale*, meaning tulip, represents the number sixty-six in the ancient *abjad* writing system. I have no doubt that I will be risking not only my reputation but also my personal safety by revealing the tragic events that took place in Istanbul, our beautiful city, which rests so gracefully on two continents in the embrace of two seas. However, the truth must not remain concealed. It is one of God's mysteries that everything

is revealed in time, as a poet once said. What is the point of writing
the truth if it is never read?

But I might yet tear this up and throw it away!

Who am I?

That is of no consequence.

PART I

EXPOSITION: ONE MURDER AND SIXTY-SIX QUESTIONS

(October 1729)

This story has two heroes, as is the convention.

QUESTION 1

Is There No Limit to Self Sacrifice?



“Children of Layhar! This is your home. Yours, not mine. You are all brothers. Those with two parents have been known to cut each other’s throats, but the children of Layhar, who know neither father nor mother, see themselves as one and the same. The pain of a needle piercing the flesh of one is felt by his brother as if it were his own. Those who don this robe regard each other as equal in life until death. It is union within a duality. He is your right hand, you are his left. Two sides of one. One body, two heads. You watch out and care for each other all your life. Here, there is no ‘mine’ and no ‘yours’. If there is little, it is made to go far; if there is plenty, it nourishes you all. There is one pot that feeds all, by the grace of God!”

This was the twinning ceremony for two new arrivals at the Gedikpaşa Hamam stokehouse. Two youths, one a fourteen-year-old and the other about ten years older, were standing in the flickering light of a three-armed candelabrum, waiting to be twinned as brothers. Chef, who looked after everything at the stokehouse, brought in the Layhar robe with its two collars and two sleeves. The Foreman then gently stripped the two recruits naked and dressed them in the robe, using the right sleeve for one and the left sleeve for the other so that they appeared as a single figure with two heads and two hands. The clothes they had been wearing on arrival were immediately sent off to be sold at the flea market and any proceeds handed to the Foreman. Stokehouse Baba then turned towards the furnace and recited a prayer, to which the youths, who only knew

the Fatiha, the first verse of the Koran, responded, “Amen”. This was followed by a feast consisting of pilaf and halva which had been made with ingredients collected from the market by the two brothers now wearing the robe. For three days, dressed only in dirty, ragged undergarments, they had been sent out by Stokehouse Baba to beg with sacks on their backs.

“Feel no shame. Don’t be put off if you are thrown out of shops,” Stokehouse Baba had said, “Try to avoid getting beaten up but don’t be afraid to answer back. If they don’t give you what you ask, then ask again. If they still give you nothing, keep asking. Wherever you are, whatever time of day and whatever is happening, just keep asking. Whinge, plead, hang around those shops like flies and don’t give up. If anyone gives you grief, play dirty. Go and pester the customers. If they look disgusted, pester them more.”

The banquet that day was lavish and the other stokers were rejoicing in the belief that these new ‘gentlemen’ would be beneficial to the stokehouse, or at any rate lighten their workload and therefore give them more time for pleasure. The new brothers had now been stripped of the Layhar robe and were serving the others semi-naked. Whenever anyone yelled out, “I’m parched, brother!” they would pour him wine from an ice-cold pitcher and serve him with pilaf and halva. “To Sultan Layhar!” they all cried, and drank the ‘rooster’s blood’ as confirmation of their covenant.

“Nobody ever refuses to obey an order here,” warned Stokehouse Baba. “Even were we to carve your flesh for *meze* to accompany our wine or for preparing kebabs, you would submit and say nothing. Agreed?”

“Yes, Baba, of course, Baba!”

QUESTION 2

How Do You Feel When You Lose What You Have Just Found?



The scent of philadelphus and sweet basil permeated the mild evening breeze as the couple embraced in their marital bliss. The young man trembled as his beloved's ringlets touched his cheek for the first time.

"Do you see that light?" he asked.

"You mean the light that never goes out?"

"Yes, I do! Just as you remain alight in my heart."

"Will I be a light in your heart for ever?" she asked, her eyes welling up with tears.

The maiden trembled as her beloved's hand touched hers for the first time.

"Do you like tulips?" she asked.

"You mean tulips that are the colour of your cheeks?"

"No, I mean tulips that are the colour of my love: purple tulips!"

With delicate fingers, she placed a tulip bulb into the hands of the young man. It was a twin bulb, like two bodies embracing.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

At that moment, she was totally unaware of being drawn away by the full moon and tides. How could she have known?

She was like a secret treasure trove of pearls. When people spoke of beautiful nymphs in Paradise, they might have been describing her, with her black eyebrows, dark eyes fringed with long eyelashes, pure white skin, tall slender figure and swan-like neck, the braided hair that tumbled down her back, and her gentle demeanour.

She wept with happiness as she nestled in the arms of the young man, who embraced her even more tightly as he answered her question. In the distance, the sound of owls could be heard and heavenly lights lit up the night sky.

All night, the young man gazed into her face with an ardour that belied the coolness of autumn, sometimes marvelling at the grace in her eyes, sometimes weeping at the innocence of her cheeks.

“Nakşigül, my treasure,” he murmured. “Nakşigül, you are my fate and my fortune. Nakşigül, you are all I ever dreamt of, Nakşigül...”

On that blissful night, he envisaged only happiness ahead. He barely slept a wink, but spent the night planting little kisses on her head, inhaling the scent of her tresses and exploring every part of her face with his fingers.

“You are the love of my life, my princess with rosebud lips and rose-tinted cheeks,” he whispered to her, wondering with each passing minute whether he deserved such bliss.

The two enraptured lovers whispered these unfamiliar nuptial words to each other and, as their words turned into a spiritual embrace, their bodies also became united. When sleep came, it was an integration of two souls, rather than a satisfaction of physical desire.

Finally, as night was turning into dawn, they closed their eyes and lay cradled in each other's arms, now tired from love and tears.

When Falco awoke, he felt himself linger in that state between sleep and wakefulness, his lips still bearing a smile of rapture and his eyes an expression of deep, delirious love. He inhaled the scent of Nakşigül's hair as she lay in his arms and, drawing back a stray lock, started whispering words of love in her ear. They had embarked on that night together, become united and fallen asleep together and now he was ready to start their first day of marital life together.

“Nakşigül. My princess! My darling, my only Nakşigül!”

Nakşigül was in a deep sleep and did not wake up. Falco stroked her face with his hand. He lifted her hair and kissed her forehead. But still she did not wake up. Then he noticed that her face was icy cold. He wanted to take her by the shoulders to wake her. Suddenly, he sensed a void beneath the quilt, as if the woman he loved was no longer there in his arms and their marriage had all been a dream. He flung back the quilt.

“Nakşigüüüüüül!”