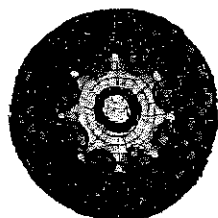
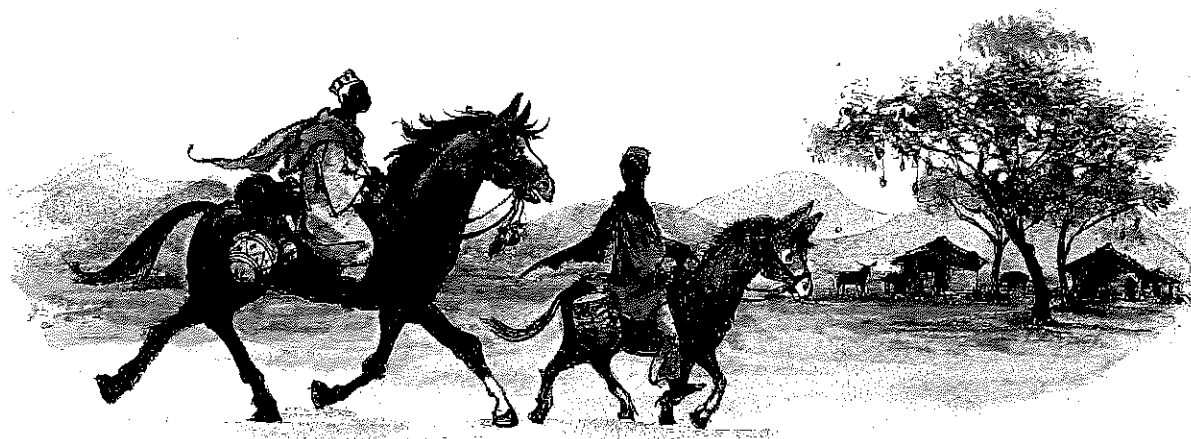


# THE MARRIAGE OF TWO MASTERS



nce there was a girl named Aisatou Djili, who was so intelligent that she may have been the wisest person in the whole world. She was also extraordinarily beautiful, and all the young men wanted to marry her. But whenever they came to court her, it didn't go well. As soon as she started speaking, the suitor would become confused. She would have to tell him to go home. She was too intelligent, and nobody could understand her. She lived this way for a long time.

One day a man from the east heard about this woman. He thought he had to meet her for himself. He climbed onto his donkey and set out on the dusty road toward her village. It so happened that this very day Aisatou's father was traveling on the same road. He had been in the capital to do business, and now he was going home. He was riding on his horse, so it wasn't long before he overtook the young man.

"Peace be with you, Father," the young man called in greeting.

"And so with you," the father replied.

Aisatou's father asked the young man where he was going, and when it turned out they were going to the same place, they agreed they would travel together. "But who will carry whom?" the young man wondered aloud. "Will I carry you or will you carry me?"

Hearing these words, Aisatou's father began to think maybe this man was a little crazy. "Well, since you're riding a donkey and I'm riding a horse, surely we've no need to carry each other," he answered sternly.

"Of course you are right, Father," the young man replied politely.

After they had ridden for a while, the young man spoke again. "There's snow on the mountain," he observed.

Once again, Aisatou's father wondered if the man was completely sane. "How can there be snow on the mountain? It's the middle of the dry season and hot as an oven," he snapped.

"Yes, Father, that is true," responded the man.

Soon the travelers passed a small cotton field, surrounded by a sturdy fence. "Look at how beautifully this field is fenced!" the young man cried in admiration.

"Yes, it is a very sturdy fence," the father agreed. "It will last a full year."

A little later they passed a cotton field that stretched for acres and acres into the wilderness.

"That is a very big field," the young man observed, and the old man agreed with him.

"Father, concerning these two cotton fields — which would you prefer to own, the large one or the small one?"

"My son, do you take me for a fool? I would choose the large one, of course."

"Of course, Father."

As they continued down the road, they saw a funeral procession going in the opposite direction. After the mourners had passed out of hearing, the youth again asked a curious question. "Father, that man in the coffin, do you think he is living or dead?"

"I assure you, young man, he is dead."

"What a tragedy." The young man sighed, shaking his head.

At last they came to the village. Unfortunately the laws of hospitality demanded that Aisatou's father offer this odd stranger shelter for the night, and he reluctantly did so. The young man thanked him a thousand times but assured him he would be well lodged "in the home of the people," whatever that meant. Aisatou's father was relieved as he and the young man went their separate ways.

Aisatou was happy to see her father again, and after he had washed off the dust of the road and refreshed himself with a good dinner, she asked him to tell her all about his journey.

"I traveled with the strangest fellow today," her father began. "I think he must be a little out of his mind." He told his daughter about all the strange things the young man had said.

When Aisatou heard the story, she began to laugh. "Oh, Father, he isn't out of his mind — you just didn't understand him. When first he greeted you, he said, 'Who will carry whom? Will I carry you or will you carry me?' By this he meant that since you were traveling together, you should try to entertain each other with conversation. In this way you don't notice the hardships of the road much, and you are each carried along by the other.

## *The Marriage of Two Masters*

"When he said that there was snow on the mountain, he meant that the hair on your head is white. You should have replied, 'Time has done this to me.'

"You passed two fields of cotton, one large and one small, and he asked you which you would prefer to own. You chose the larger one, but Papa, the larger one had no fence around it. Don't you see that anyone could steal from it or damage the crops? In the end the small field is sure to yield more cotton."

"What about when he asked if the man in the coffin was living or dead? Only a crazy person would ask such a question," her father insisted.

"What he was really asking was whether the man had left any children. When we have children, we can never die because our spirit lives on in them. Papa, I want to meet this man. Where is he staying?"

"He said he was staying 'in the home of the people,' wherever that is."

"By that he meant the mosque. He must be hungry, then, for there won't be any food in the mosque at this time of night. I am going to send him something to eat."

Aisatou packed a dozen boiled eggs and a bowl of porridge, which she gave to her father along with a gourd full of clean drinking water. "Take these to that young man, and ask him to come and visit me tomorrow," she said.

The father went to the mosque to find the young man. On his way he met an old beggar who asked him for something to eat and drink, so he gave him two eggs and filled his cup with water from the gourd.

At the mosque he found the young man, just as his daughter had predicted. He gave him the food and her message.

"Thank you a thousand times, Father. Tell your daughter that the year lacked two months and the river was at low tide, and that I will come to visit her tomorrow with my house in my hands."

Aisatou's father hurried home and delivered the message. "You see, my child, I told you this man is crazy. What was he talking about?"

"Father," she asked him, "whom did you meet on the way to the mosque?"

"I met an old beggar. Why do you ask?"

"Did you give him two eggs and fill his cup with water from the gourd?"

A puzzled expression passed over the old man's face. "Yes, I did. How in God's name did you know?"

"When the stranger said that the year lacked two months, he meant that two of the twelve eggs I sent him were missing. When he said the river was at low tide, this was to tell me that the drinking gourd was only half full. Tomorrow he is coming with his house in his hands. Father, he wants to marry me! When he asks your permission, you must say yes. This is the man I want to marry."