

The Cypriot Man

NICOSIA IN JULY was as though Khartoum had been transplanted to Damascus. The streets, as laid out by the British, were broad, the desert was that of Khartoum, but there was that struggle between the east and west winds that I remember in Damascus.

It was British from head to toe, despite all that blood that had been spilt. I was surprised for I had expected a town of Greek character. The man, though, did not give me time to pursue my thought to its conclusion but came and sat himself beside me at the edge of the swimming pool. He made a slight gesture with his head and they brought him a cup of coffee.

"Tourist?" he said.

"Yes."

He made a noise the import of which I did not follow—it was as though he were saying that the likes of me didn't deserve to be a tourist in Nicosia, or that Nicosia didn't deserve to have the likes of me being a tourist in it.

I turned my attention from him so as to examine a woman with a face like that of one of Raphael's angels, and a body like that of Gauguin's women. Was she the wife or the other woman? Again he cut through the thread of my thoughts:

"Where are you from?"

"The Sudan."

"What do you do?"

"I'm in government service."

I laughed for in fact I didn't work for the government; anyway governments have broad shoulders.

"I don't work", he said. "I own a factory."

"Really?"

"For making women's clothes."

"How lovely."

"I've made a lot of money. I worked like a black. I made a fortune. I don't work any

longer—I spend all my time in bed."

"Sleeping?"

"You must be joking. What does a man do in bed?"

"Don't you get tired?"

"You're joking. Look at me—what age do you think I am?"

Sometimes fifty, sometimes seventy, but I didn't want to encourage him.

"Seventy", I said to him.

This did not upset him as I had presumed. He gave a resounding laugh and said:

"Seventy-five in actual fact, but no one takes me for more than fifty. Go on, be truthful."

"All right, fifty."

"Why do you think it is?"

"Because you take exercise."

"Yes, in bed, I bash away—white and black, red and yellow: all colours. Europeans, Negresses, Indians, Arabs, Jewesses; Moslems, Christians, Buddhists: all religions."

"You're a liberal-minded man."

"Yes, in bed."

"And outside."

"I hate Jews."

"Why do you hate Jews?"

"Just so. Also they play with skill."

"What?"

"The game of death. They've been at it for centuries."

"Why does that make you angry?"

"Because I . . . because I . . . it's of no consequence."

"Are they not defeated?"

"They all give up in the end."

"And their women?"

"There's no one better than them in bed. The greater your hatred for them, the greater your enjoyment with their women. They are my chosen people."

"And the Negroes of America?"

"My relationship with them has not reached the stage of hatred. I must pay them more attention."

"And the Arabs?"

"They provoke laughter or pity. They give up easily, these days anyway. Playing with them is not enjoyable because it's one-sided."

I thought: if only they had accepted Cyprus, if only Balfour had promised them it.

The Cypriot man gave his resounding laugh and said:

"Women prolong one's life. A man must appear to be at least twenty years younger than he is. That's what being smart is."

"Do you fool death?"

"What is death? Someone you meet by chance, who sits with you as we are sitting now, who talks freely with you, perhaps about the weather or women or shares on the stock market. Then he politely sees you to the door. He opens the door and signs for you to go out. After that you don't know."

A GREY CLOUD stayed overhead for a while, but at that moment I did not know that the divining arrows had been cast and that the Cypriot man was playing a hazardous game with me.

The wave of laughter broadened out and enfolded me. They were a sweet family which I had come to like since sitting down: the father with his good-natured face and the mother with her English voice which was like an Elizabethan air played on the strings of an ancient lyre, and four daughters, the eldest of whom was not more than twelve, who would go in and out of the pool, laughing and teasing their parents. They would smile at me and broaden the compass of their happiness till it included me. There came a moment when I saw on the father's face that he was about to invite me to join them; it was at that moment that the Cypriot man descended upon me. The eldest girl got up and stepped gracefully towards the pool. With the girl having suddenly come to a stop as though some mysterious power had halted her, the Cypriot man said:

"This one I'd pay a hundred pounds sterling for."

¹ The doctrinal formula is Islam: "There is no god but God and Mohammed is the Messenger of God."

"What for?" I said to him in alarm.

The Cypriot man made an obscene gesture with his arm.

At that moment the girl fell face-down on to the stone and blood poured from her forehead. The good-natured family started up, like frightened birds, and surrounded the girl. I immediately got up from beside the man, feeling for him an overwhelming hatred, and seated myself at a table far away from him. I remembered my own daughters and their mother in Beirut and was angry. I saw the members of the delightful family making their departures, sadly, the daughters clinging to their mother, the mother reproaching the father, and I became more angry. Then I quietened down and the things around me quietened down. The clamour died away and there came to me my friend Taher Wad Rawwasi and sat beside me: on the bench in front of Sa'eed's shop. His face was beaming, full of health and energy.

"Really", I said to him, "why is it that you haven't grown old and weak though you're older than all of them?"

"From when I first became aware of the world", he said, "I've been on the move. I don't remember ever not moving. I work like a horse and if there's no work to be done I create something to busy myself with. I go to sleep at any old time, early or late, and wake up directly the muezzin says 'God is great, God is great' for the dawn prayer."

"But you don't pray?"

"I say the *shahada*¹ and ask God's forgiveness after the muezzin has finished giving the call to prayers, and my heart finds assurance that the world is going along as it always has. I take a nap for half an hour or so. The odd thing is that a nap after the call to prayers is for me equal to the whole night's sleep. After that I wake up as though I've been woken by an alarm clock. I make the tea and wake Fatima up. She performs the dawn prayer. We drink tea. I go down to meet the sun on the Nile's surface and say to God's morning Hello and Welcome. However long I'm away I come back to find the breakfast ready. We sit down to it, Fatima and I and any of God's servants that destiny brings to us. For more than fifty years it's been like this."

One day I'll ask Taher Wad Rawwasi about the story of his marriage to Fatima bint Jabr ad-Dar, one of Mahjoub's four sisters. His

loyalty was not to himself but to Mahjoub, and he used to make fun both of himself and of the world. Would he become a hero? It was clear that if it really came to it he would sacrifice himself for Mahjoub. Should I ask him now? However, off his own bat, he uttered a short phrase compounded of the fabric of his whole life:

“Fatima bint Jabr ad-Dar—what a girl!”

“And Mahjoub?”

Taher Wad Rawwasi gave a laugh that had the flavour of those bygone days; it indicated the extent of his love for Mahjoub. Even mentioning his name would fill him with happiness, as though the presence of Mahjoub on the face of the earth made it less hostile, better, in Taher Wad Rawwasi’s view. He laughed and said, laughing:

“Mahjoub’s something else; Mahjoub’s made of a different clay.”

THEN HE FELL SILENT and it was clear to me that he didn’t, at that time, wish to say any more on that particular subject. After a time I asked him:

“Abdul Hafeez said you’d never in your whole life entered the mosque. Is that so?”

“Just once I entered the mosque.”

“Why? What for?”

“Only the once. It was one winter, in Touba or Amsheer,² God knows best.”

“It was in Amsheer”, I said to him, “after you’d buried Maryam at night.”

“That’s right. How did you know?”

“I was there with you.”

“Where? I didn’t see you that morning, though the whole village had collected on that day in the mosque.”

“I was by the window, appearing and disappearing till you said ‘And not those who are astray. Amen.’”³

“God be praised. Poor Meheimeed was calling out ‘Where’s the man who was here gone to?’”

“And then?”

Suddenly the dream bird flew away. Wad Rawwasi disappeared, as did Wad Hamid⁴ with all its probabilities. Where he had been

² Winter months in the Coptic calendar.

³ The final words of the Fatiha, the equivalent in Islam of the Lord’s Prayer.

⁴ The village in which most of the writer’s novels and short stories are placed.

sitting I saw the Cypriot man, I heard his voice, and my heart contracted. I heard the shouting and the hubbub, the slapping of the water against the sides of the swimming pool, with spectres shaped in the form of naked women and naked men and children leaping about and shrieking. The voice was saying:

“For this one I’d only pay fifty pounds sterling.”

I pressed down on my eyes so as to be more awake. I looked at the goods on offer in the market. It was that woman. She was drinking orange juice at the moment at which the Cypriot man had said what he did. She spluttered and choked; a man leapt to his feet to help her, then a woman; servants and waiters came along; people gathered, and they carried her off unconscious. It was as if a magician had waved his wand and, so it seemed to me, the people instantly vanished; and the darkness too, as though close at hand, awaiting a signal from someone, came down all at once. The Cypriot man and I on our own with the light playing around on the surface of the water. Between the light and the darkness he said to me:

“Two American girls arrived this morning from New York. They’re very beautiful, very rich. One’s eighteen and she’s mine; the other’s twenty-five and she’s for you. They’re sisters; they own a villa in Kyrenia. I’ve got a car. The adventure won’t cost you a thing. Come along. They’ll be really taken by your colour.”

The darkness and the light were wrestling around the swimming pool, while it was as if the voice of the Cypriot man were supplying the armies of darkness with weapons. Thus I wanted to say to him All right, but another sound issued from my throat involuntarily, and I said to him, as I followed the war taking place on the water’s surface:

“No, thank you. I didn’t come to Nicosia in search of that. I came to have a quiet talk with my friend Taher Wad Rawwasi because he refused to visit me in London and I failed to meet him in Beirut.”

THEN I TURNED to him—and what a ghastly sight met my eyes. Was I imagining things, or dreaming, or mad? I ran, ran to take refuge with the crowd in the hotel bar. I asked for something to drink; I drank it, without recollecting the taste of it or what it was. I calmed down a little. But the Cypriot man

came and sat down with me. He had bounded along on crutches. He asked for whisky, a double. He said that he had lost his right leg in the war. What war? One of the wars, what did it matter which one? His wooden leg had been smashed this morning. He had climbed up a mountain. He was waiting for a new leg from London. Sometimes his voice was English, sometimes it had a German accent; at others it seemed French to me; he used American words.

"Are you. . .?"

"No, I'm not. Some people think I'm Italian, some that I'm Russian; others German . . . Spanish. Once an American tourist asked me whether I was from Basutoland. Just imagine. What's it matter where I'm from? And Your Excellency?"

"Why do you say to me Your Excellency?"

"Because you're a very important person."

"And what's my importance?"

"You exist today and you won't exist tomorrow—and you won't recur."

"That happens to every person—what's important about that?"

"Not every person is aware of it. You, Excellency, are aware of your position in time and place."

"I don't believe so."

He put down his drink in one gulp and stood up, on two sound legs, unless I was imagining things, or was dreaming or mad, and it was as though he were the Cypriot man. He bowed with very affected politeness, and it was as though his face as I had seen it at the edge of the pool made you sense that life had no value.

"I won't say goodbye", he said, "but au revoir, Excellency."

IT WAS TEN O'CLOCK when I went to bed. I did everything possible to bring sleep about, being tired and having swum all day. I tried talking to Taher Wad Rawwasi. I asked him about the story of his marriage to Fatima bint Jabr ad-Dahr. I asked him about his attendance at dawn prayers on that memorable day. I asked him about that singing which was linking the two banks with silken threads, while poor Meheimeed was floundering about in the waves in pursuit of Maryam's phantom, but he did not reply. Music was of no help to me, neither was reading. I could have gone out, gone to a night club or for a walk, or I

could have sat in the hotel bar. There was nothing I could do. Then the pain began: a slight numbness at the tips of the toes which gradually began to advance upwards until it was as though terrible claws were tearing at my stomach, chest, back and head: the fires of hell had all at once broken out.

I would lose consciousness then enter into a terrible vortex of pains and fires; the frightful face would show itself to me between unconsciousness and a state of semi-wakefulness, leaping from chair to chair, disappearing and reappearing all over the room. Voices I did not understand came to me from the unknown, faces I did not know, dark and scowling. There was nothing I could do. Though in some manner in a state of consciousness, I was incapable of lifting up the receiver and calling a doctor, or going down to reception in the hotel, or crying out for help. There was a savage and silent war taking place between me and unknown fates. I certainly gained some sort of a victory, for I came to to the sound of four o'clock in the morning striking, with the hotel and the town silent. The pains had gone except for a sensation of exhaustion and overwhelming despair, as though the world, the good and the evil of it, were not worth a gnat's wing. After that I slept. At nine o'clock in the morning the plane taking me to Beirut circled above Nicosia; it looked to me like an ancient cemetery.

On the evening of the following day in Beirut the doorbell rang. It was a woman clad in black carrying a child. She was crying and the first sentence she said was:

"I'm Palestinian—my daughter has died."

I stood for a while looking at her, not knowing what to say; however, she entered, sat down and said:

"Will you let me rest and feed my child?"

While she was telling me her story the doorbell rang. I took the telegram and opened it, with the Palestinian woman telling me her formidable misfortune, while I was engrossed in my own.

I crossed seas and deserts, wanting to know before all else when and how he had died. They informed me that he had as usual worked in the garden in his field in the morning and had done those things he usually did during his day. He had not complained of anything. He had entered his relations' homes, sat with his friends here and there. He'd brought some

half-ripe dates and drunk coffee with them. My name had cropped up in his conversation several times. He had been awaiting my arrival impatiently, for I had written to him that I was coming. He supped lightly as usual, performed the evening prayer, then about ten o'clock the harbingers of death had come to him; before the dawn prayer he had departed this world, and when the aeroplane was bearing me from Nicosia to Beirut they had just finished burying him.

At forenoon I stood by his grave, with the Cypriot man sitting at the side of the grave, in his formal guise, listening to me as I gave prayers and supplications. He said to me in a voice that seemed to issue from the earth and the sky, encompassing me from all sides:

"You won't see me again in this guise other than at the last moment when I shall open the door to you, bow politely and say to you 'After you, your Excellency.' You will see me

in other and various guises. You may encounter me in the form of a beautiful girl, who will come to you and tell you she admires your views and opinions and that she'd like to do an interview with you for some paper or magazine; or in the shape of a president or a ruler who offers you some post that makes your heart lose a beat; or in the form of one of life's pranks that gives you a lot of money without your expending any effort; perhaps in the form of a vast multitude that applauds you for some reason you don't know; or perhaps you'll see me in the form of a girl twenty years younger than you, whom you desire and who'll say to you: 'Let's go to an isolated hut way up in the mountains.' Beware. Your father will not be there on the next occasion to give his life for you. Beware. The term of life is designated, but we take into consideration the skill shown in playing the game. Beware, for you are now ascending towards the mountain peak."

Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

Nightmare

"A female monster supposed to settle upon people and animals in their sleep producing a feeling of suffocation." O.E.D.

The house was filled
with heavy sleepers;
the children's breath
clouded the lamp like
moths across the moon;
and she, pregnant

beside him, heaved
her bulk towards dawn.
It was the same
with all his children,
she was unaffected,
he spent listless nights.

He turned towards
the window and sleep.
Her breath clutched
at his chest, her hair
filled his throat,
something shifted

under her ribs and she
turned an open mouth
towards his face.

The stairs were cavernous
in the dark, the dog
dreamed of history

beside a dying fire.
He heard a bell
stick out its tongue.
Alone in the back yard
the wind was thrashing
the panes, the clouds

were hiding nothing.
About his feet lay
laundry, scattered scraps,
below ground stood
caverns toothed by
stalagmite and stalactite

where rivers flushed
their debris to the sea;
and up above, among
the cluttered stars,
the moon's gape
cried for continents.

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