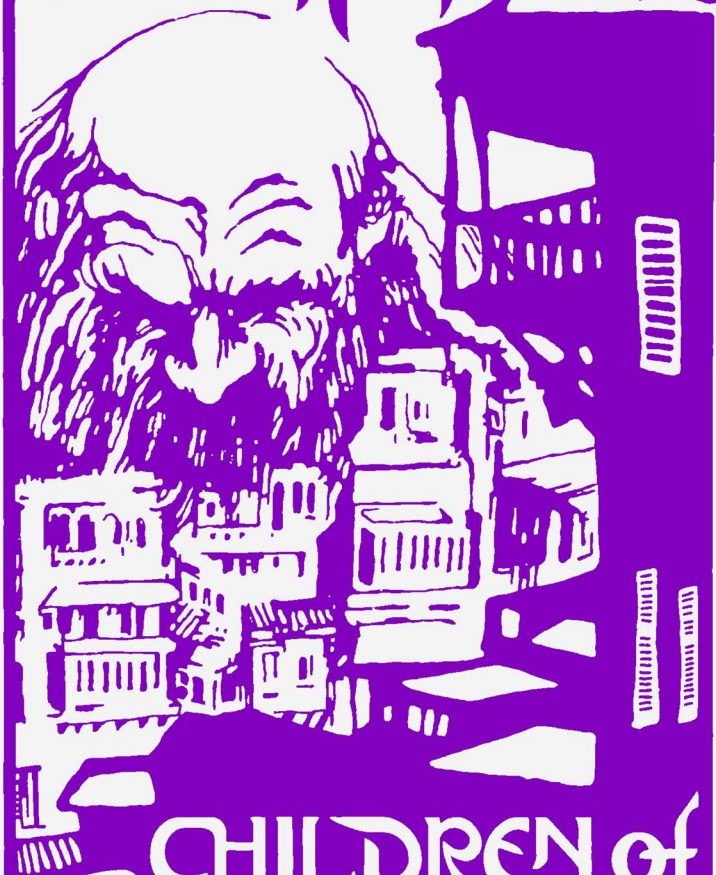


NOBEL LAUREATE FOR LITERATURE 1988

YAGUJB MATTOUZ



CHILDREN of  
GEBELAWI

PASSEGGIATA PRESS

**B**orn in 1911 in Cairo, Naguib Mahfouz is the leading Arab novelist, and the award to him of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1988) has brought him worldwide recognition. His work portrays the vigorous life of Egypt's teeming cities.

*Children of Gebelaawi* (banned in Egypt since its serialization in 1959, until two Cairo re-issues in 1994 in Arabic) is his most controversial work. On the surface it is the history of a Cairo alley through several generations. Successive heroes struggle to restore the rights of the people to the trust fund set up by their ancestor Gebelaawi, usurped by embezzlers and tyrants. Mahfouz creates in all its detail a world on the frontier between the real and the imaginary.

At a deeper level, the book is an allegory whose heroes relive the lives of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus and Muhammed. Their appearance in a modern context invites the reader to see them as human beings relevant to the present day, not as remote sacred figures — to the consternation of some traditionalists. Most controversial is the significance of Gebelaawi, the immensely long-lived patriarch. Mahfouz himself has said that his character represents 'not God, but a certain idea of God that men have made', standing for the god of those who forget the absolute transcendence of God affirmed by Islam.

All this professes to be as narrated by the traditional bards in their simple earthy style, but the reader can also dig deeper in the hope of finding the thoughts of Mahfouz himself, a graduate in Philosophy who has chosen always to express himself in fiction rather than in academic abstractions.

These are the ingredients in the swiftly moving narrative of this remarkable book. There is little to compare with it in world literature, though it may distantly recall Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, Kazantakis' *Christ Crucified* and Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

\* \* \*

This historic translation of *Children of Gebelaawi*, the first of a Mahfouz novel ever to be completed, was made in 1962 with assistance from the author and was first published in the United States in 1981. For Passeggiata Press's 1997 edition, it has been revised in light of new findings concerning the missing manuscript, and can claim to be the only version in any language to take full account of the original sources. This Passeggiata edition also boasts a new introduction which looks into the publishing history and manuscripts in some detail.

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# *Children of Gebelaawi*



# *Children of Gebelaawi*

By Naguib Mahfouz  
Nobel Prize for Literature 1988

Revised Augmented Edition

Arabic Title Is  
*Awlad Haratina*

PASSEGGIATA PRESS  
PUEBLO, COLORADO

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# TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

A major work by a great writer should need no introduction. *Children of Gebelaawi* by Naguib Mahfouz is an exception, for it has been much misunderstood — even to the extent of endangering the life of its author.

From the beginning the novel posed problems for its readers as a new departure not only in the work of Mahfouz but also in Arabic or indeed in any Islamic literature, being a religious allegory based on the lives of the prophets. It consists of five closely inter-linked fables, the heroes of the first four of which relive the lives of Adam, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad while the chief actor in the fifth stands for the scientist. The story is set on the edge of the real Cairo, and its world is almost completely cut off from any outside events.

Trouble began within days of the publication of the first episode in the semi-official Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* on 21 September 1959. The protests grew steadily in intensity led by members of Al-Azhar, the ancient Mosque-University. More than once, the preacher of a Friday sermon led his congregation through the streets of Cairo to demonstrate against

publication. Serialization could be carried through to the final episode on 25 December only thanks to the personal support of President Abdul-Nasser.

As soon as the last chapter had been printed, all public mention of the work was banned by the censor, and its publication in book form was prohibited. As the sets lovingly cut from the newspaper yellowed and frayed, so the memory of the novel gradually faded. There was a limited revival of interest in 1967, when an edition in book form was published by a Beirut publisher, but the work remained banned in Egypt and was officially condemned in 1968 by a committee of theologians from Al-Azhar. It continued to be quietly bought by those with a special interest in Arabic literature, but there was no repeat of the outcry of 1959. The present English translation, made as a scholarly exercise in 1962 with the author's assistance, was published as an academic paperback in 1981. It sold only four thousand copies in its first eight years.

By 1988 the novel had been largely forgotten, to the extent that Mahfouz said: 'Even I forgot it.'. The award to him of the Nobel Prize for literature in October 1988 reopened the controversy, for *Children of Gebelaawi* in the present translation was one of the five works cited in the Nobel Committee's press release (the others being *The Cairo Trilogy*, *Midaq Alley*, *Adrift on the Nile* and a collection of short stories, *This World of God's*). President Mubarak let it be known that he wished the banned novel to be issued in Egypt. However, Al-Azhar renewed its opposition, and Mahfouz indicated that for the sake of peace he would not support publication.

The fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie on 14 February 1989 by the Ayatollah Khomeini brought a new element of danger to the situation. In March, the blind Egyptian Muslim leader, Sheikh Omar Abdurrahman, said in an interview with a Kuwait newspaper, *Al-Qabas*, that if Mahfouz had been punished for his blasphemous novel, Rushdie would not have dared publish his. Soon after this, the sheikh was arrested on

other charges, but he escaped by way of Sudan to New York, where he was eventually found guilty — in spite of his protestations of innocence — of conspiring to plant bombs. In January 1996 he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

After the Sheikh's remarks of 1989, Mahfouz was offered police protection but refused it, except for a token guard in front of his home for the sake of his family. He continued to go about Cairo as before, confident that he would be protected by his manifest innocence and his enormous popularity. For six years he was proved right, but in 1994, the day after the anniversary of the Nobel Prize, Mahfouz was stabbed as he boarded a friend's car to go to his usual Friday literary evening. Sixteen men were tried for their alleged part in the attempt on his life and thirteen of them were found guilty. They had, however pleaded not guilty, and it was claimed by their supporters that the attack had been organized by the Egyptian secret services, with the aim of discrediting Islamic activists. According to the prosecution, they confessed under interrogation that they were trying to execute Sheikh Omar's 'fatwa'.

The Nobel Prize and the subsequent events made the novel a subject of morbid interest for journalists, and of speculation for unscrupulous publishers who had never shown any concern for Arabic literature, but who were ready to sensationalize what is essentially a serious book for commercial gain. In particular, much was made, even by academics who should have known better, of the supposed similarity between *Children of Gebelawi* and *The Satanic Verses*, and of the 'fatwa' supposedly pronounced by Sheikh Omar.

This so-called fatwa is widely assumed to be real. However, we have Sheikh Omar's own authority for the fact that he did not pronounce a fatwa. Interviewed in his New York prison by Mary Anne Weaver (*The New Yorker*, 30th January 1995), he reacted indignantly when she put it to him that:

'It has been reported that you issued a *fatwa* against Mahfouz,

by declaring him an apostate.'

'No, no, no,' he replied, and his voice began to rise. 'This whole matter is *so* misunderstood. What I said — and this was when 'The Satanic Verses' — was making headlines — was, if we had punished Naguib Mahfouz for what he wrote in 'Children of Gebelaawi', then Salman Rushdie never would have dared to write that book. This was a reply to a question asked by a journalist. It was a reply, an opinion. It was *not* a *fatwa*.'

'How should he have been punished?'

'You've got to understand the rule of sharia law. Al-Azhar should have brought Mahfouz before a committee where he would have been judged. He would have been given an opportunity to defend himself, and, if found guilty, he would have been given an opportunity to repent.'

[Italics in the original.]

There was no apostasy trial, no formal charges were brought, and Mahfouz never offered any coherent defence of his novel. Readers must make up their own minds whether what he wrote was -or was intended to be — anti-religious or anti-Islamic. Three main complaints were made in 1959 against the work: that in general the allegorical treatment of the lives of the prophets in modern dress was irreverent, that in particular the treatment of the character who relives the life of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, was unworthy of him, and above all that the death of the patriarchal figure Gebelaawi signified the 'death of God'. A fourth charge, even more serious, was added retrospectively: that Mahfouz had written an 'anti-Koran', as indicated by the fact that the number of its chapters, 114, was the same as that of the suras of the Holy Koran. Mahfouz vigorously rejected all four charges, maintaining that his novel was 'a deeply religious work'.

The last charge is the most easily dealt with, for it does not bear examination and cannot be made without malice; the

novel bears no resemblance to the Holy Book, apart from the coincident numbering of the last subdivision. When I put it to Mahfouz in 1962, his first reaction was 'a'udhu billah — God forbid!'. His longer reply was: firstly that, including the Prologue, the novel has 115 chapters; secondly that he numbered the chapters consecutively all the way through only after he had finished writing the five constituent parts; finally that a chapter is not at all the same as a sura. The most cursory inspection of the Holy Koran will confirm this last point; the suras into which it is organized vary in length between three very short verses and nearly three hundred very long ones, and the longer suras could easily be subdivided — as indeed they are in some translations. In any case Muslims do not usually refer to the suras by their numbers but by their names.

As regards comparison between the prophets and normal human beings, this is refused by many religious people. Similar objections were raised by some Christians to Kazanzakis' novel *Christ Recrucified*. At the root of such criticism lies a fear of accepting the humanity of the prophets; if we imagine them dressed like us, eating like us, walking about ordinary streets, talking about ordinary subjects, is there not a danger that we shall decide that they were after all not such special people? A contrary view is that unless we see the prophets as flesh-and-blood human beings in the real world, their message will seem not to apply to normal men and women. Defenders of Mahfouz can find support in the Holy Koran itself, which describes the enemies of Islam as asking: 'What is it with this "apostle" who eats food and goes in the markets?' (25:7). In any case, Mahfouz was not writing biographies of the prophets; his concern was only to throw light on certain aspects of their lives and missions. Even if he showed occasional lapses of taste or judgement, it is hard to believe that he intended disrespect to his heroes.

The portrayal of Qaasim, whose role recalls that of the Prophet Muhammad, was singled out for special criticism,

partly because he was thought to be made less attractive than Rifaa, who relives the life of Jesus, partly because he was shown — unlike Rifaa — as smoking hashish, and partly because his work is so soon undone. It is true that Qaasim is a more abrasive character than Rifaa, but he is a man of action while the latter is a dreamer. Hashish is introduced simply to symbolize the fact that he is a companionable man, at ease in the society of ordinary people, unlike the introverted Rifaa. There is of course no implication that the Prophet Muhammad indulged in any such way; Qaasim is a Nineteenth Century Cairene, not a Seventh Century Meccan. As for the swift undoing of Qaasim's work, it has always been the view of Muslims that Islamic society has repeatedly failed to live up to the Prophet's standards. Calls for a return to the purity of early Islam are indeed at the heart of movements of renewal. The failures of his successors do not diminish the towering status of Qaasim.

As regards the 'death of God', this meaning can be extracted from the novel only if Gebelaawi is equated with God. Marxist readers in 1959 were quick to make this equation, claiming that Mahfouz was depicting scientific socialism as the religion of the future. The Nobel Prize committee itself made this mistake in its press release, referring to 'the primeval father Gebelaawi's (God's) death'. Mahfouz however consistently refused this interpretation. For him Gebelaawi represented not the eternal and transcendent One but, as he told me in 1962, 'a certain idea of God that men have made': the man-like god of infantile religion, made in the image of man, the 'old guy in the sky' who has friends and enemies, is pleased or angry, makes decisions and changes his mind...

There is a long and honorable tradition in Islam of opposition to anthropomorphic ideas of God, going back to the Mu'tazila and beyond. This school of theology, which predominated through most of the second and third Muslim centuries, has influenced many of the greatest Muslim thinkers, including the Egyptian architect of the Islamic renaissance

sance, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Mahfouz may be seen as an inheritor of Mu'tazilite philosophy, the essence of which is '*al-tawhid* — affirmation of Divine Unity', rejecting any comparison between God and created things. It finds confirmation in the Holy Koran, which clearly warns against belief in a man-like god, and indeed makes it absolutely clear that no human figure could ever stand for God. Sura 112, said by the Prophet Muhammad to be equal in value to a third of the Koran, spells it out with wonderful economy:

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful,  
 Say: 'He is God, One,  
 God the Eternal;  
 He begets not, nor is begotten,  
 And no one and nothing is like Him.'

The great adversary of the Mu'tazila in the Third Century of Islam was Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who said that God must in some mysterious sense have hands and eyes and sit on a throne, since the Holy Koran says so. The argument was eventually resolved by orthodoxy with the formula that God has such attributes but 'without our knowing how (*bila kayf*)'. In the end Ibn Hanbal's legacy turned out to be not so different from that of the Mu'tazila; the movement that looks back to him as its inspiration, the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, call themselves '*al-Muwahhidin* — the affirmers of Divine Unity', and they are the fiercest of all opponents of anything that could be called idolatry.

The anthropomorphic god is seen as endangering religion, for like an idol he takes the place of the true God. His removal is necessary if we are to discover the Eternal. By revealing a self-organising universe of myriads of galaxies, billions of years old, in which there is no place for a man-like god, modern science may be said to have cleared the way for true religion. However, many people have taken the meta-

phors of religion literally and have not found the transcendent Being behind the anthropomorphic language; Gebelaawi's death leaves a great void. This is seen at once by Arafa, the hero who has caused the old man's death. He makes it his mission to 'bring Gebelaawi back to life', not as an external agent but as a transcendent reality in the heart of each person.

If Gebelaawi does not represent the true God, one may ask whether anything in the novel does. When I put this question to Mahfouz, he said: 'Nothing can represent God. God is not like anything else. God is gigantic.' It would be hard to give a more impeccably Islamic reply.

There is nevertheless one element in the novel that seems to point to the Eternal, without representing it: the sky and the heavenly bodies are mentioned in almost every chapter, even though so much of the action takes place in poky rooms, shadowy courtyards or narrow alleys. The heroes in particular frequently gaze up at the sky, Adham through the foliage of the trees in his father's garden, Humaam, Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim as they muse in the desert; and Arafa at night in the garden or on the roof of his house. I asked Mahfouz what this signified and he said: 'the greatness of the cosmos, which is the greatness of us, since we are part of the cosmos.'

However, Mahfouz was writing fiction, not theology, and this prevented him from spelling out clearly how he saw the true religion that is threatened by worship of the anthropomorphic god, so the field has been left open to his critics. The author's view is nevertheless clearly Islamic in many respects. Firstly there is the very rejection of anthropomorphism, a rejection that is peculiar to Islam and Judaism, since all other theistic religions believe in incarnation. Then there is the choice of subjects: Adam, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad — the supreme prophets of Islam — with no sign of, say, Krishna or Buddha. Of these the greatest by far is Qaasim/Muhammad, whose reign is a period of peace and happiness unparalleled before or since. As for Rifaa/Jesus, Mahfouz has the common



Muslim difficulty in seeing him as other than a lovable but finally a defeated figure. Islamic too is Mahfouz's amalgamation of religious and social concerns.

The whole ethical framework of the novel is deeply Islamic. In Egypt, as in most of the Muslim world, the head of a family is expected to treat his children equally, making it easy for brothers to stick together and in due course in many cases to marry their daughters to each other's sons, creating a cooperative society of cousins. There is no place in Islam for the unequal treatment of brothers that is so prominent in the Bible, with the consequent conflicts between Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau... and ultimately between Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is against this background that one should see Gebelaawi's repeated favouritism and the restoration of justice between cousins that Qaasim alone is able to achieve.

The last chapter of the book may seem to pose problems for the above interpretation. Writing in the 1950s, the era of Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro and the Algerian maquis, was Mahfouz prophesying a world revolution? His Marxist readers thought so, and many Muslim critics shared their view. The ending of his later novel, 'The Epic of the Have-nots' (*malhamat al-harafish*) may seem to confirm it. However, this is hard to square with the 'Animal-Farm' theme that runs through the rest of the book, and the repeated observation that violence produces no lasting solution. It seems more plausible that Mahfouz was pointing forward to a spiritual revolution.

Clues to all this may be found in G B Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, which Mahfouz mentioned to me in 1962 as having particularly influenced him. It is the one Western book that can be suspected of having contributed to the genesis of *Children of Gebelaawi*. The play itself bears certain resemblances to the novel; it too is a history of humankind in five parts, beginning with Adam and Eve and reaching into the future, and it too has longevity as a prominent theme. It ends not with

proletarian victory in a Marxian class war, but with a world in which humans have evolved beyond their preoccupation with wealth, power and sensual pleasure and spend their lives in mystical contemplation.

Shaw's introduction is equally relevant. In it he explains that he has written to rescue true religion from the loss of faith caused by Darwinism. Mahfouz himself had undergone a religious crisis on reading Darwin, as described in the autobiographical portrait of Kemal in *Palace of Desire*, and Shaw's ideas must have seemed personally addressed to him. Shaw contends that it is only the anthropomorphic God, William Blake's 'Nobodaddy', who has been killed off by Darwin, leaving the way clear for faith in the Creative Power that presides over an evolving universe.

For Western readers unfamiliar with the rest of Mahfouz's work, there is another way in which this book may be misunderstood. It seems to be a work of great naivety, its characters drawn in black and white and with little psychological depth, its narrative hurrying along from event to melodramatic event, its language stripped down to a simplicity devoid of all pretension. This however is deliberate self-limitation by an author whose earlier work, particularly the *Cairo Trilogy*, had shown him to be a master of deep and subtle analysis. Mahfouz is here evoking the style and conventions of the folk-epics chanted until the advent of radio by the bards of Cairo's cafes.

Closer inspection reveals in fact that the book is not by any means as naive as it seems at first sight. In particular, a general atmosphere of tentativeness is created by the way that events are recounted at several removes from their occurrence. The author puts the stories into the mouth of a narrator who derives them from bards who learnt them from a succession of earlier bards whose sources are obscure. Mahfouz once remarked that in this work, unlike Swift who in *Gulliver's Travels* 'made a critique of reality by means of myth', he had 'subjected

myth to the critique of reality'. But because the reality that he uses is seen through so many veils, the critique is often very subtle, and the reader must frequently ask what Mahfouz himself thinks or intends, as opposed to what is said.

Not only does the book need to be seen in the context of Mahfouz's work as a whole; it also provides an essential clue to an understanding of the rest, for it marks the turning point between the copious early novels with their lovingly detailed description of ordinary reality, and the spare later novellas with their exploration of inner experience and their fascination with Sufism. It was written in 1958 after six years of silence following the Young Officers' Revolution of 1952 — six years that had seen his marriage, his move from his mother's home to a houseboat on the Nile, the birth of his elder daughter, the diagnosis of his diabetes, the beginning of therapeutic summers in Alexandria, the award to him of the State Prize for Literature and his transfer from the Ministry of Religious Trusts to the Ministry of Culture. Its completion was followed by a further two years of silence. The book cannot be seen as merely transitional; rather, it makes up by itself a whole period in the author's work, reflecting an exceptionally eventful chapter in his life.

This biographical background suggests a deeper level of symbolism in the book. It can be read not just as a veiled account of the prophets, but also as an allegory of the interior life of a man, with the various characters representing different facets of his personality, their successes and failures his internal conflicts. It ends with the search for the truth and hope hidden in a garbage heap — symbolizing the spiritual quest for the eternal amid the vanities of worldly existence. Mahfouz told me: 'When I finished it, I felt that I had found my faith.'

As if its other difficulties were not enough, *Children of Gebelaawi* is unusual among modern novels in that it poses

textual problems. The version published in Beirut in 1967 (hereafter referred to as *B*) differs at many points from the first version, published in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* (hereafter referred to as *A*). I have counted 961 discrepancies between the two texts, (not including the thousands of differences in punctuation). They involve 1241 Arabic words, including 129 removed by the editors of *B* in a vain attempt to avoid offence. A couple of hundred of the discrepancies are attributable to an obvious mistake in one text or the other, *A* being marginally the less inaccurate, but otherwise choice between the alternatives is a matter of taste. In some two hundred cases the difference is significant even in translation, affecting who does what, with what or to whom.

Mahfouz told me in 1962 that his manuscript had not come back from *Al-Ahram* and that he feared it was lost. He later informed me that he had not approved the Lebanese publication and had not participated in its production. From this one might conclude that *B* had been typeset from *A* and had no value as an independent witness to the author's original intentions. However, careful comparison of the two texts suggests that *B* was almost certainly based on the manuscript, for in 75 places it adds a word or phrase missing from *A* — a total of 145 words which no typesetter could have felt the need to invent. In 54 places, *A* supplies a word or phrase missing from *B*, a total of 188 words, so both texts are indispensable.

One day there may be a critical edition of the Arabic. However, unless and until the original manuscript resurfaces, the author's exact intentions will have to be deduced from comparison of *A* and *B*. In the meantime, this revised English edition can claim to be the only version in any language to take full account of both the original sources.

The translation here offered is aimed at the general reader with no prior knowledge of the Arab world; no words have been used that cannot be found in a good English dictionary. A few words need a little explanation. 'Trust' has been used to

translate *waqf*, the technical term for property held in trust under Islamic law to provide an income in perpetuity either for an institution, such as a mosque or school, or, as in this novel, for the descendants of a particular family. The rationale for such a trust is that it avoids the division of the property between various heirs, which would otherwise be required by Islamic law. Mahfouz worked for many years as a civil servant in the Ministry for Religious Trusts.

The key term *futuwwa* is translated as 'strongman'. Its original meaning is 'young-manliness', from the word *fata*, 'young man'. In the middle ages it became the name of something between a guild and an order of chivalry, but by modern times this had degenerated and most strongmen had become the protection-racketeers met with in Mahfouz's work. It is important, however, not to use a word such as 'gangster', which necessarily implies someone bad, because ambiguity is needed, especially when the term is applied to Gebelaawi and Qaasim.

*Hara* is translated as 'alley', and it is worth insisting on the fact that this is correct. Several learned critics have imagined that it means 'quarter' or 'district', and one has even claimed that it is the whole of the old city. Any attentive reader will agree that in this book 'alley' is right; it is a single thoroughfare (chapter 67), short enough for someone at one end to follow what goes on at the other (chapter 104), and narrow enough for conversation to take place across it (chapter 97). Its people live in apartments opening on to the stairways to the central courtyards of tenement-houses. These form two facing terraces, and their flat roofs provide alternative routes from one end of the Alley to the other (chapters 33, 60, 83).

The hookah that the men of the Alley use for smoking hashish is not the heavy narghile, which stands on the floor or on a table, and which is smoked through a flexible tube. It is a smaller version, in Egyptian Arabic the *goza*, 'coconut', from the shape of the brass reservoir that is held in the hand of the

smoker. A vertical stem carries the smoke from the clay bowl, on which the drug is placed with glowing charcoals, down to the bottom of the water in the reservoir, and a bamboo pipe draws the smoke up to the smoker's lips.

I have taken slight liberties with some of the foods and drinks, replacing them with the nearest equivalent familiar outside the Arab world. *Buza* is translated as 'ale'; it is an illegally brewed drink, based on stale bread soaked in water.

Proper names have presented the most difficult problem, and several solutions have been adopted side by side. Place names have been given a standard guidebook spelling, except that the *jebel* of *Jebel Muqattam* has been spelt with a *J* in order to retain the form familiar in English. *Jebel*, usually translated 'mountain', is such an important word in the book that the Arabic form has been preferred; 'mountain' in any case has the wrong associations for readers from more humid countries; besides, *Jebel Muqattam* rises only a few hundred feet above the level of *Cairo*.

Given names have usually been transliterated, using a system that reflects standard Arabic pronunciation. Most readers will not want to be bothered with the fact that in *Cairo* *J* and *Q* are replaced by *G* and the glottal stop. *J* can be pronounced as in 'jam' and *Q* as a throaty variety of *K*. Most long vowels have been represented by doubled letters: *AA* as in 'bazaar', *EE* as in 'beet', *OO* as in 'boot'. Departures from the strict system have been allowed in a number of cases. In particular, *G* replaces *J* in the names *Gebel* and *Gebelaawi*, in order to avoid confusion in the many puns on *Gebel* and the *Jebel*. *Narjis* has been spelt *Narciss* to recall the corresponding flower name.

Most nicknames have been translated, with a great deal of freedom. They constitute almost the only comic element in an otherwise serious book (though it is often sinister comedy), and to fail to translate them would be a loss for the reader, besides depriving the translator of a rare opportunity for some amusement. Note that the spelling of 'Bullrush' is deliberate;

the Arabic has the meaning of impetuosity as well as a botanical sense. The name 'Omnibus' is particularly interesting; the obsolete colloquial word 'Swaars' is from Herr Schwartz, who gave his name to the horse-drawn omnibus service that he established in Cairo in the mid-Nineteenth Century.

The most difficult problem is posed by the names of the main heroes and heroines, all of which have meanings and overtones. It would be possible to translate them, in the style of *Pilgrim's Progress*, but all semblance of realism would be lost. The solution adopted has been where possible to supply nicknames, sparingly used usually by an enemy or a neutral figure: 'Blacky' Adham; 'Little Mother' Umayma; 'Master Up-in-the-Air' Rifaa; 'Mr Know-All' Arafa; 'Passion-Flower' Awaatif. Others have defeated me: Humaam (noble); Qadri (fateful); Qaasim (distributor, allotter of fates, decider), which also echoes the parenting-name of the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Qaasim, after his deceased infant son Qaasim; Qamar ('moon'); Badria (from *badr*, 'full moon' and name of the first victory of the Muslims over the polytheists). Idrees rhymes with Iblees (Diabolus), the Islamic name of the Fallen Angel Lucifer, and Qindeel with Jibreel (Gabriel), the name of the archangel who transmitted the Holy Koran.

I have retained the 'continental' punctuation of dialogue favoured by Mahfouz (and before him by English-speaking writers such as James Joyce). It makes clear on the page the structure and dramatic vividness of the dialogue, and it does away with the usual sandstorm of inverted commas.

From the Al Ahram edition, episode 55,  
printed on 14th November 1959 (Chapter 66)

Words missing from the other edition are underlined>: words different from the other edition are circled.

زكى بان يراه يوما فتوة الجرابيع .  
ولما انتهى العشاء دلمت المرأة الطيبة  
وقادر عم زكوبا الربيع ، ولبت المدبقان  
بالشرفه حتى تراسى اليهما صوت من  
الحوش يتادى  
- يا لقاسم ..  
فقام الشابان ولقاسم يجيبه  
- نحن لادمان يا صادق  
وتنقاهما صادق بشر صادق ، وكان  
مقاربا لقاسم في سنه وطوله ولتته انحل  
منه عودا . وكان يعمل مساعدا لبيبي

ل روحه من بهجة فامرة . ليت  
لذلك مضامرات الخلاء المحرفه ، بجوعها  
المنهب الاعمى وشجبهه الخامد المكتب .  
وهرول نحو دار عمه ملقيا عماء ملي  
كفه ، لا يكاد يرى ما بين يديه لشدة  
انغماله . وجد أسرة عمه مجتمعة ل  
الشرفة المظلة على حوش الربيع تنتظره .  
جلس مع ثلاثتهم حول الطيبة . وولد  
اعد عليها عشاء من طعمه ليراسى بطنخ  
وكان حسن لى السادسة عشرة من عمره  
طويل القامة متن البناء حتى حلم عم





فقال يحيى لى لى

- وادهم مات كندا . وهما قتل .  
ورفاه قتل ! . . .

اولئك هم الطيرون حقا من اهل  
الجاز . سرة مطرة ونهاية مؤسفة .  
هكذا كان يناجى نفسه وهو جالس لى  
ظل الصخرة الكبيرة . وانبعثت من  
صدره رغبة حارة لى ان يكون مثلهم .  
اما الفتوات فما البع لعالمهم . وداخله  
حزن غامض ، وساوره قلق . وقال  
لنفسه ليهده خاطره : كم شهدت هذه  
المصخرة من احداث واناس . كقرام  
فدرى وهند . ومقتل همام . ولغناء  
جبل والجلالوى . وحدث رفاهه وجده .  
ولكن ابن الاحداث وابن الاناس ! .

ولكن الذكرى الطيبة تبقى وهى امن  
من طعام **الماذن** والضان ! . وشهدت  
ايضا جدنا العظيم وهو بجوب هذه  
الاقاى وحده . يمتلك ما يشاء ويرهب  
الاشقياء . نرى كيف حاله لى عزله ؟ .  
هل مازال يعنى ام خرف ؟ . وهل يذهب  
ويجىء ، ام اقمده الكبر ؟ . وهل يدري  
بما يقع حوله ام عن كل شىء ذهل ؟ .  
وهل يذكر احفاده ام نسي نفسه ؟ .

وعند الاصيل نهض ثم تحطى متشابها .  
وتناول عصاه وهو يصغر صفرا متغيا .  
ثم لوح بعصاه ونمق بالغم فعمت  
تجمع وتحرك فافلتها نحو العمران .  
وبدا يسمر بتجوى ولم يكن تناول لى  
نهاره الا سردية ورغيفا . ولكن مشاه  
طيبا ينتظره لى بيت عمه . وحت السير  
حتى بدأ له اول مابدا من بعيد البيت  
الكبير بأسواره العاليه ونوافذه المقلقة  
ورؤس اشجاره . نرى ما تكل الحديفة  
اللى يتفنى بها السمره . واللى مات  
ادهم حسرة عليها . ولدى اقترابه من  
الحارة نرأت الى سامعه القوضاء .  
ومضى بعذاه السور الكبر الى الداخل .  
والغيب يهمنى على الجو سمرته .  
وشق طريقه بين جماعات من الفلمان  
بلعبون ويماذلون بالطين . وملاذ اذنيه  
ندادات الباعة باحاديث النساء  
وسغريات الساخرين وشاتمهم .  
واسفانات المجنوبين وجرس مربة  
النظر . على حين اغم انه برانحة

المصل النافذة . والزبالة انحنة .  
والتقليبة المثرة . وعرج الى الربوع  
يحيى جبل يعيد اليها اغنامها . كذلك  
فصل يحيى رفاهه . فلم يبق لديه الا  
نعجة واحدة . تملكها ست فسر البدة  
الوحيدة التى تملك مالا لى حى الاجرايع .  
وكانت تقيم لى بيت مكون من دور واحد  
**ل** حوش متوسط تتوسلته نخله ولذ دكنه  
الافصى شجرة جوافه . ودخل الحوش  
ساتفا امامه « نعمة » فصادف لى طريقه  
الجارية سكينه بشعرها المفلفل الذى  
وخطه الشيب . فحياها فردت تحته  
بابتسامه وسأته بصوت نحاسى  
- كيف حال نعمة ؟

فاسرب لها من اعجابها بالنعجة .  
وتركها لها ومضى لى سبيله . واذا  
بصاحبة البيت والمنعجة تدخل الحوش  
ماتدة من الحارة . بدت امامه لى ملاة  
لف حوت جمعها الملىء . وطالعت من  
برلمها ميان سوداوان بندبان بالحنان .  
نحى جانبا وهو يقض بعمره فقالت له  
برعه مهذبة

- مساء الخير

- مساء الخير باسى ..

وتنهلت المرأة لى سرها وهى تنضح  
نعمه . ثم نظرت نحوه . وقالت  
- نعمه سمن يوما بعد يوم والفضل  
لك !

فقال متائرا من نظرتها العتونة قبل  
كلماتها الطيبة

- الفضل للمولى وبراءتك ..

والتفتت ستفمر نحو سكينه فقالت  
- احسرى نه غشاء !

فرجع يديه بالشكر الى راسه وقال .  
- خيرك سابق باسى ..

وفاز بنظرة اخرى وهو يحييها مودعا  
ثم ذهب . ذهب شديد التائر برقتها  
وعطفها ، كحالها كلما اسعده الحظ  
بلقائها . وذلك عطف لم يعرف مثله  
الا فيما يسم احيانا عن عطف الامهات  
اللى لم **يجريه** . ولو امتد العمر بانه  
لكانت اليوم لى مثل عمر هذه البدة  
الاربعينية . ولم بدأ هذا العطف عجبا  
لى حارته التى تنامى بالقوة والعنف .  
وليس اعجب منه الا جمالها للمهم وما

From the Beirut edition, published by Dar al  
Adab 1967 (chapters 11-12)

وهو ينفض التراب عن جلبابه :

– الخيار (القشطة) ! .. الخيار السكر ! . والعرق (بتصبب) من جمدي  
والغلمان يتلون بمعاكستي ، والأرض تأكل قدمي ، في سيل ملاليم ..

ودخل الكوخ فبعته وهي تقول :

– لكن سيأتي يوم المرح والغناء .

– لو كنت تشقن ما وجدت وقتاً للإحلام .

ورقد كل منها على خيشة محشوة بالقش ، وهي تقول :

– أليس الله بقادر على ان يجعل من كوخنا بيتاً كالكابيت الذي  
طردنا منه .. ؟

فقال أدهم وهو يتشاءب :

– أمبتي أن أعود إلى البيت الكبير .

ثم زهو يتشاءب بدرجة أعلى :

-- العمل لعمرة !

فقال بصوت هامس :

– ريء ، ولكنها نعمة لا تزول الا بالعمل !

١٢

وذا. ليلة استيقظ أدهم على تأوهات عميقة . ولبث وهو بين النوم

واليقظة -ننى تبين صوت أميمة وهي تتوجع هاتفة : آه يا ظهري ..

آه يا بصي ، فجلس من فورهِ وهو يحملن صوبها ، ثم قال :

– هذا حالك هذه الأيام ثم ينجلي عن لا شيء ، أشعلي الشمعة .

فقال وهي تثن :

– اشعلها بنفسك : هذه المرة جد .

فقام بتحس موضع الشمعة بين أدوات الطهي حتى عثر عليها ،

فأشعلها ، وثبتها على الطلبة ، فبدت أميمة على الضوء الخافت جالسة

- عد إلى كوخك .

فقال ادريس بلهجة جدية مفتعلة :

- اني مثلك اقول إن العمل لعنة لا تليق بكرامة الانسان .

- انك تدعوني الى البلطجة وهي أقدر من اللعنة .

- اذا كان العمل لعنة والبلطجة قذارة فكيف يعيش الانسان ؟

فلم يرتح الى محادثته فصمت ، وانتظر ادريس ان يتكلم فلم يتكلم ،

فقال :

- لملك تريد رزقاً بلا عمل ؟ ولكن ذلك سيكون حتماً على حساب

الآخرين !

وثابر أدهم على صمته فعاد الآخر يقول :

- أم لملك تريد رزقاً بلا عمل دون ان يضار به أحد ؟!

وضحك ضحكة كريمة وقال :

- هذه فزورة يا ابن الجارية !

وصاحت أميمة بغضب :

- عد الى كوخك واخذ الشيطان .

ونادته امرأته بحدّة ، فرجع من حيث أتى وهو يتنم : « عجائب والله

عجائب » .

وتولت أميمة الى زوجها قائلة :

- تجنب الاشتباك معه بأي ثمن .

- اني اجده فجأة فوق رأسي دون ان ادري كيف جاء .

وساد صم اتخذاً منه مكنأ لانفعالها . وعادت أميمة تقول برقة :

-- قلبي يحدثني بانني ساجعل من كوخنا بيتاً شيبهاً بالبيت الذي

طردنا منه ، لن تنقصه الحديقة ولا البلابل ، وسيلقى وليدنا فيه كل

راحة ومتعة .

فوقف أدهم وهو يتسم ابتسامة لم ترها في الظلام ، وقال ساخراً



# PROLOGUE

This is the story of our Alley, or rather these are its stories. I have witnessed only the most recent events, which have happened in my own lifetime, but I have recorded everything as it is related by our numerous bards. Everyone in our Alley tells these tales, just as they have been heard in the local cafe or handed down in the family, and such have been my only sources. There are so many occasions that call for the stories to be told. Whenever people suffer trouble or oppression or injustice, they point to the Great House at the head of the Alley where it meets the desert, and say sadly: 'There stands our Ancestor's house. We are all his children and we all have a right to his Trust. Why should we be hungry and wretched?' Then they start telling the stories of the glorious sons of our Alley: Adham, Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim.

This Ancestor of ours is a riddle. He lived so much longer than a human being can hope for or even conceive that he became proverbial. He had been shut away in his house long ago because of his age, and since then no one had seen him at all. The legend of his isolation and longevity defies understanding, and imagination or wishful thinking no doubt helped it to grow. Be that as it may, he was called Gebelaawi or 'Old Man of the Jebel', and our Alley is named after him. He was the

Founder of its Trust Fund and the master of all that stood on its soil and of all the property around the nearby desert.

I once heard a man say of him: 'From him came our Alley, from which came Cairo, mother of the world. He lived here alone when it was a desolate wasteland and mastered it by the strength of his arm and by his standing with the Governor. Time will not bring another like him. He was a strongman so tough that wild animals cringe at the mention of him.' I heard someone else say of him: 'He was truly a strongman, but not like the others. He never extorted protection money from anyone, nor did he strut about the world proudly, and he was merciful to the weak.' Then came a time when a few people spoke of him in ways unworthy of his power and position; such is the way of the world.

I myself have always found conversation about him fascinating, never dull. How often it has made me walk round the Great House in the hope of catching a glimpse of him, but always in vain! How often I have stood in front of the huge gate, gazing at the stuffed crocodile mounted over it! How often I have sat in Muqattam Desert, not far from the great wall, able to see only the tops of the mulberry and fig and palm trees that screen the house, and a few shuttered windows that show no sign of life!

Was it not sad to have such an ancestor without our ever seeing him, nor he us? Was it not strange that he should be hidden away in this great, locked house, while we lived in the dust? If you ask what brought us all to such a pass you will at once hear the stories of Adham, Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim. You will learn nothing to comfort your heart or ease your mind. As I have said, no one saw our Ancestor after his withdrawal, but that did not matter at all to most people. From the beginning they were interested only in his Trust and in the famous Ten Clauses, about which so much has been said. This is the source of the conflict that has been raging ever since I was born, which

has grown more dangerous with every generation up till this one — and the next.

I do not want any sarcastic comment when I point out that our people have always been one family, into which no outsider has married. Everyone knows everyone, both men and women, yet no alley has seen such savage feuds as ours, nor has conflict divided its people as it has ours. For each person who tries to do good you will find ten strongmen brandishing their cudgels and looking for a fight, so people are accustomed to buying security with protection money and peace with submission and degradation. They are severely punished for the slightest wrong word or deed, or even for looking as if they think the wrong thoughts.

The amazing thing is that people in heighboring parts, such as Otouf, Kafr el-Zaghari, Derrasa and Husseinia, envy us and talk of ours as an invincible alley with an inexhaustible Trust and unbeatable strongmen. This is all very well, but they do not realize that we are as poor as beggars, that we live amidst filth and flies and lice, that we have to be content with crumbs, and that we go about half naked. They see these strongmen of ours strutting around and are overcome with admiration, forgetting that it is on our chests that they strut. Our only consolation is to look at the Great House and say: 'There is the home of Gebelaawi, the Founder of our Trust. He is our Ancestor and we are all his children.'

I have witnessed the latest period of our history and lived through the events brought about by Arafa, a worthy son of the Alley. It is thanks to one of Arafa's friends that I am writing our stories. He said to me one day: 'You are one of the few who can write. Why not set down the tales of the Alley? Till now they have been told in any old order, and each bard twists them according to his whims and prejudices. It would be invaluable if you wove them reliably into a single complete account for people to use. I'll supply you with whatever information and secrets you don't know.'

So I busied myself carrying out this plan, partly because I was satisfied by its soundness and partly out of friendship for the person who suggested it. I was the first in the Alley to make a profession of writing, although it earned me a great deal of scorn and sarcasm. My job is to write down the complaints of those who are oppressed or in need. Although many unfortunates come to me, my work cannot raise me above the general level of our beggars; but I have gained a heart-breaking knowledge of people's secret sorrows. But steady on! I am not here to write about myself and my troubles, which are nothing compared to those of the Alley.

Amazing Alley with your amazing events! How did it all begin? What was it all about? Who were these sons of our Alley?



# ADHAM

1 \* \* \* \* \*

In the beginning the place of our Alley was wasteland. It was a fringe of Muqattam Desert, which now lurks on the edge of our world. Alone stood here the Great House that Gebelaawi had created as if to defy fear and desolation and banditry. Its long, high wall enclosed a large area with the three-story building in the eastern half and the garden to its west.

One day the Founder of the Trust summoned his sons to attend him in the lower drawing room, which opened on to the veranda. They all came: Idrees, Abbaas, Radwaan, Jaleel and Adham, dressed in silk jellabas. They stood in front of him, so respectful that they hardly dared look at him directly. He made them sit down on chairs arranged round him. For a while he fixed them, hawk-like, with his piercing eyes, then stood up, crossed to the great door to the veranda and stood there gazing out at the huge garden, crowded with mulberry and fig and palm trees, up which were trained henna and jasmine, and in whose branches singing birds thronged. The garden was bursting with life and song, but in the room there was silence.

It seemed to the brothers that the Strongman of the Desert had forgotten them. With his great height and breadth he seemed superhuman, a being from another world. They ex-

changed enquiring glances; this was how he was when he had made an important decision. They were worried, because he was as despotic at home as he was outside, and compared to him they were nothing. He turned towards them without moving from the spot where he stood, and he spoke in a deep, raucous voice that filled the great room, with its tapestried walls.

— I've decided it will be best if somebody else manages the Trust.

He examined their faces again, but their expressions betrayed nothing. Managing the Trust was not a prospect to please those who loved leisure and freedom and youthful rowdiness. However that might be, Idrees, the eldest, was the natural choice for the job; none of them could question that. Idrees said to himself: 'What a bore! All those ground-rents and those dreadful tenants!'

Gebelaawi went on:

— I've chosen your brother Adham to manage the Trust under my supervision.

Their faces changed at this sudden shock, and they exchanged furtive glances of consternation, except for Adham who looked down in shame and confusion. Gebelaawi turned his back on them and said impassively:

— That's why I sent for you.

Idrees felt a burst of rage, as if he were drunk with hostility. His brothers looked at him miserably. Each of them — except Adham, of course — hid his anger over his own honor, silently resenting the way that each had been passed over at the same time as the eldest. Idrees spoke in a voice so calm that it might have been someone else's:

— But Father...

His father cut in, spinning round to face them.

— But?!

They all looked down, in case he should read their thoughts, except Idrees, who said with determination:

— But I'm the eldest.

Gebelaawi said indignantly:

— I'm aware of that; I am your father.

Idrees went on, his anger mounting:

— The eldest has rights that can't be set aside without good reason.

Gebelaawi gave him a long look, as if to leave him a chance to change his mind, then said:

— I assure you I've made my choice for everybody's good.

This blow exhausted Idrees's patience. He knew that opposition enraged his father and that he must expect worse to come if he persisted, but he was so furious that he did not give a thought to the consequences. He strode across to Adham till he was almost on top of him, puffed himself up like a cock in full display, to point up the contrast between himself and his brother in stature and complexion and beauty, and spat out his words with the violence of a sneeze:

— Me and my full brothers are sons of a real lady, the best of women. As for this creature, he's the son of a black slave.

Adham's brown face paled, but he sat quite still. Gebelaawi shook his fist and warned:

— Behave yourself, Idrees!

But Idrees was wild with fury. He roared:

— He's the youngest of us, too; give me one reason why you should prefer him to me, or is this the age of servants and slaves?

— Hold your tongue, you idiot, for your own sake!

— I'd rather die than be humiliated.

Radwaan looked up and said very gently:

— We're all your sons, and we have a right to be upset if we lose your favor. You have the last word in any case. We just want to know the reason.

Gebelaawi turned to Radwaan, keeping calm for some reason of his own, and said:

— Adham is familiar with the tenants and knows most of

them by name. He's also learnt writing and arithmetic.

Idrees and his brothers were amazed by their father's words. Since when had knowing the masses been a distinction for which a man was preferred? And going to school — was that too a distinction? Would Adham's mother have sent him to school if she had not despaired of him succeeding in the world of strongmen? Idrees asked bitterly:

— Are those the reasons for humiliating me?

Gebelaawi waved this aside angrily.

— It's my decision, all you have to do is to hear and obey. (He turned sharply towards Idrees's brothers.) What do you say?

Abbaas could not bear his father's gaze; he spoke thickly:

— I hear and obey.

Jaleel said hastily, looking away:

— It's your decision, Father.

Radwaan swallowed hard and said:

— At your service!

Idrees's angry laugh twisted his face horribly. He thundered:

— Cowards! All I could expect of you was a miserable defeat. Because of your cowardice, this son of a black slave will push you around.

Gebelaawi thundered:

— Idrees!

But Idrees was out of his mind and shouted:

— What sort of a father are you? You were born a bullying strongman, and all you know is how to be a bullying strongman. You deal with us, your sons, the same way as with all your other victims.

Gebelaawi took two ponderous steps forward and said quietly, his contorted features warning of the worst:

— Hold your tongue!

But Idrees went on shouting:

— You're not going to frighten me; you know I can't be

frightened. And if you want to raise that son of a slave above me, I shan't give you any sweet nonsense about hearing and obeying.

— Don't you know what impudence leads to, you damned idiot?

— The real damned idiot is that son of a slave.

The father's voice grew louder and more rasping.

— She's my wife, you fool. Now behave yourself or I'll floor you.

The other brothers were terrified, Adham as much as any of them, for they knew the violence of their despotic father. But Idrees thought no more of danger than would a madman plunging into a raging fire. He shouted:

— You hate me. I didn't realize it, but there's no doubt that you hate me. Perhaps it was that slave girl who made you hate us; you're master of the desert, Founder of the Trust, the dreaded strongman, but a slave girl can play with you. Tomorrow people will be saying all sorts of amazing things about you, lord of the desert!

— I told you to hold your tongue, damn you!

— Don't insult me for blacky Adham's sake; even the rocks will protest against that and curse him. Your crazy decision is going to make us the laughing-stock of all the neighborhood.

Gebelaawi shouted in a voice so loud that it was heard all over the garden and in the women's quarters:

— Get out of my sight!

— This is my home and my mother's home, and she is its true mistress.

— You shan't be seen here again — ever.

His great face darkened like the Nile in flood, and he moved forward, stately as a ship, clenching a fist of granite. They all knew Idrees was finished. It would be just one more of the tragedies that the house had witnessed silently. How many fine ladies had been turned by a single word into miserable beggars! How many men had reeled out after long service, carry-

ing on their bare backs the weals made by leaded whips, bleeding from nose and mouth! The respect that protects everyone when all is well avails no one, however important, when tempers are lost. And so they were all certain the end had come for Idrees — of all people, the eldest, his father's equal in strength and good looks! Gebelaawi took two more steps towards him, saying:

— You are not my son and I am not your father. This is not your home, and you have here no mother, no brothers and no servants. In front of you is the wide world. Go, with my anger and my curse! Time will teach you your true importance as you wander aimlessly, stripped of my love and my care.

Idrees stamped his foot on the Persian carpet:

— This is my home, and I'm not leaving it.

His father was upon him before he could defend himself and seized his shoulder in an iron grip. He forced Idrees backwards, stumbling, through the door on to the veranda and down the steps, then hustled him along the path, roofed over with roses, henna and jasmine, to the great gate. He thrust him out, locked the gate and roared in a voice that reached everyone in the house:

— Death to any man who helps him or allows him to come back! (Then, raising his eyes to the shuttered windows of the women's quarters:) Immediate divorce for any woman who helps him!

2 \* \* \* \* \*

From that sad day on, Adham went every morning to work in the Trust office, in the garden-house to the right of the gate of the Great House. He worked hard, collecting the rents for the holdings, paying out to beneficiaries and presenting the

accounts to his father. In his dealings with the tenants he showed discretion and tact, and they liked him although they were notoriously rude and quarrelsome.

The Clauses according to which the Trust was run were a secret known only to his father. By choosing Adham to manage it, Gebelaawi aroused the fear that he was preparing to prefer him in his will. In fact he had never before shown any favoritism between his sons. The brothers had lived in peace and harmony thanks to their father's fairness and their respect for him. Even Idrees, in spite of his strength and beauty and his occasional excesses, had never been unpleasant to any of his brothers before that day. He was a generous, good-tempered fellow, loved and admired.

The four older brothers may perhaps have had a secret sense of the distance between themselves and their half brother Adham, but none of them showed it, and there had never been any hint of insulting words or behavior on their part. Adham may have felt this distance more than they, and may have compared their light complexion with his, which was dark, their strength with his weakness, or the nobility of their mother with the lowliness of his. He may have suffered on account of this some sorrow, some inward pain. But the atmosphere of the house, sweetened by aromatic herbs, submissive to the father's power and wisdom, had not allowed him to have any persistent feeling of unhappiness, and he had grown up pure in heart and mind.

Adham said to his mother before he first went to the Trust office:

— Give me your blessing, Mother. This work is just a difficult test for you and me.

She replied humbly:

— May success go with you, my child; you're a good son, and good people succeed in the end.

So Adham went to the garden house, followed by many pairs of eyes on the veranda, in the garden and behind the windows.

He sat down on the Trustee's seat and began his work. His was the most responsible position held by anyone in that desert area between Jebel Muqattam in the east and Old Cairo in the west. Adham made reliability his motto, and wrote down every millieme in the ledger for the first time in the history of the Trust. He used to give his brothers their allowances with a tact that made them forget their resentment. Then he would take his father the money he had collected.

One day his father asked him:

— Adham, how do you find the work?

— As long as you entrust it to me, it will remain the most important thing in my life.

A smile spread across his father's broad face, for in spite of his harsh nature, he was softened by flattery. Adham used to love being with him, and would sit looking up at him admiringly. He used to enjoy it when his father told him and his brothers of the old days and of his youthful adventures as a strongman: how he had gone round in these parts, brandishing his terrible cudgel and mastering every spot he trod on.

After Idrees was driven out, Abbaas, Radwaan and Jaleel kept up their old practice of meeting on the roof of the house, eating and drinking and gambling, but Adham only liked sitting in the garden and playing on his bamboo flute. He continued this after he took over the affairs of the Trust, although it no longer filled most of his time. After he had finished the day's work he used to spread out a rug beside a stream, lean his back against the trunk of a palm or fig tree or lie down beneath a canopy of jasmine, and watch the doves and the song birds. Then he would play his flute, imitating their trilling and twittering and cooing, or he would gaze up through the branches at the sky.

His brother Radwaan once came upon him when he was lying there like this, eyed him scornfully and said:

— What a waste of time, all those hours you spend managing the Trust!



Adham smiled.

— If I wasn't afraid of annoying my father I might complain.

— *We* can thank God for our leisure.

Adham said candidly:

— I hope you enjoy it.

Radwaan smiled to hide his annoyance and said:

— Wouldn't you love to be like us again?

— I prefer being in the garden with my flute.

Radwaan said bitterly:

— Idrees would have loved to work.

Adham looked down.

— Idrees had no time for work; it was for other reasons that he was furious. As for real happiness, you find that here in the garden.

When Radwaan had gone, Adham said to himself: 'The garden, with its song birds, the flowing water and the sky casting its spell on me — that's the real life. But it's as if I was looking for something. What can it be? The bamboo flute almost tells me sometimes; but I still don't know the answer. If only the birds spoke my language, they would surely tell me. And the stars too must have something to say. As for collecting the rent, it clashes with the music.'

Adham stood one day looking at his shadow on the path by the roses when suddenly another shadow grew out of the side of his own, announcing that someone had come round the corner behind him. He turned and saw a brown girl about to retreat on discovering him. He signalled her to stop, which she did. He took a good look at her, then asked gently:

— Who are you?

She answered hesitantly:

— Umayma.

He remembered the name; she was a servant, a relative of his mother's, who must have been just like this before she married. He felt a desire to talk to her and asked:

— What has brought you to the garden?

Her eyelids dropped as she replied:

— I thought it was empty.

— But you're not allowed.

Her voice was almost inaudible:

— I've done wrong, sir.

She retreated round the corner. Then he heard her running away. He murmured with feeling: 'You lovely girl!' He felt that he had never been more truly one of the creatures of the garden than he was now, and that the roses, the jasmine, the carnations, the song birds, the doves and he himself were part of one great melody. He said to himself: 'Umayma is lovely — even her thick lips. All my brothers are married, except proud Idrees. She is the same color as me, and how beautiful it was to see her shadow grow out of mine, as if she was part of my body with its confusion of desires. My father will not disapprove of my choice, or how could he have married my mother?'

3 \* \* \* \* \*

Adham went back to work still enraptured by a beauty as precious as perfume. He tried hard to concentrate on the day's accounts, but all he could see was the image of the brown girl. It was not surprising that he had not seen her before, as the women's quarters in this house were like a man's heart, of whose existence he knows and by virtue of which he lives but which he never sees. Adham gave himself over completely to rosy daydreams, till he was wrenched out of them by a thunderous voice so loud that it seemed to be coming from the garden house itself.

— Here I am in the desert, Gebelaawi, cursing everybody.

Damn all your men and your women! I defy anybody to disapprove my words. Do you hear me, Gebelaawi?

Adham shouted 'Idrees!' and shot out into the garden. Radwaan was coming towards him, looking distraught, and burst out:

— Idrees is drunk. I saw him from the window, staggering about. What further scandals can fate have in store for our family?

Adham closed his eyes with pain:

— It breaks my heart, Radwaan.

— What's to be done? Disaster threatens.

— Don't you think we should talk to our father about it?

Radwaan frowned.

— Your father never changes his mind. Idrees's present state would only anger him even more.

Adham groaned.

— As if we hadn't already had enough trouble!

— Yes! The women are crying in their quarters. Abbaas and Jaleel are so upset that they've shut themselves away. Our father's alone in his room and nobody dares go near him.

Adham asked anxiously, feeling that the circumstances were pushing him into a tight corner:

— Don't you think we should do something?

— Of course, we all want peace, but the surest way to lose it is to want it at any price. I'm risking nothing, not even if the heavens fall. As for the family's good name, Idrees is already dragging it in the dust.

Adham asked himself: 'Then why did you come to me?' Overnight he had been turned into a bird of ill omen. He moaned:

— I'm innocent in all this, but I shan't enjoy life any more if I say nothing.

Radwaan said as he was about to go:

— There are plenty of reasons why *you* should do something.

He left Adham on his own with the phrase echoing in his ears: 'There are plenty of reasons...' Yes. The blame fell on him though he was innocent. Whenever people were sorry for Idrees, they cursed Adham. He went to the gate, opened it quietly, and slipped out. He saw Idrees not far off, reeling round in circles and rolling his eyes. His hair was tangled, and the front of his jellaba was open showing his hairy chest. When his eye fell on Adham he sprang to the attack, like a cat that has sighted a mouse; but drink had weakened him and he bent down, filled his hand with soil and threw it at Adham, hitting him on the chest and dirtying his coat. Adham called gently to him:

— Brother!

Idrees raved as he swayed.

— Shut up, you dog, you son of a bitch! You're not my brother, and your father's not my father, and I'm going to bring down this house over your heads.

Adham said with sincere affection:

— You are the finest and noblest son of this house.

Idrees guffawed mirthlessly and shouted:

— What have you come for, son of a slave girl? Run back to mummy and take her down to the servants' quarters!

Adham spoke as warmly as ever:

— Don't get carried away by anger, and don't close the door to your friends.

Idrees shook his fist and said:

— Damned house! Only cowards can be happy in it — people who accept scraps humbly and worship the one who humbles them. I'll never return to a house in which you are master. Tell your father I'm living in the desert he came from, and that I've become a bandit like he was, and a bad, quarrelsome crook like he is. Wherever I go, smashing things up, people point to me and say 'Gebelaawi's son'. And so I'll drag you through the mud, you who think you're lords when you're really thieves.

Adham implored him:

— Stop, dear brother! Don't say things you'll regret. The way will not be closed to you unless you close it with your own hands. I swear all the good things will come back.

Idrees came one step towards him, as slowly as if he were walking against a gale:

— What will you swear by, son of a slave?,

Adham looked at him carefully.

— By brotherhood!

— Brotherhood! I stuffed that down the first lavatory I came across.

— Until now I never heard anything but good from you.

— Your father's tyranny has taught me to speak the truth.

— I hope nobody sees you in this state.

Idrees let out a drunken laugh.

— They will see me in a worse state every day. Shame and evil and scandal will haunt you because of me. Your father chased me out shamelessly and he must bear the consequences.

He flung himself at Adham, who side-stepped, so that Idrees almost fell to the ground but managed to catch hold of the wall. He stood there choking with rage and searching the ground for stones. Adham retreated quietly to the gate and went in. His eyes swam with tears. Idrees's shouts were still ringing out. Adham happened to turn towards the veranda and saw his father through the door, crossing the drawing room. Without knowing why, he went to him, too sad to be afraid. Gebelaawi looked at him with expressionless eyes. He was standing, tall and broad-shouldered, in front of a picture painted on the wall. Adham bowed his head and greeted him. Gebelaawi probed him with a deep look, then said, in a voice that pierced him to the heart:

— Explain why you've come.

Adham almost whispered:

— Father, my brother Idrees...

His father cut him short with a voice like iron on flint:

— Don't ever mention his name in front of me! Get back to your work.

4 \* \* \* \* \*

With every day and night that passed in the desert, Idrees fell deeper into disgrace, adding some new antic to his record. He would circle round the house, hurling the foulest insults at it; or he would sit near the gate, as naked as the day he was born, pretending to sunbathe and singing the lewdest songs. He would swagger about the nearby districts with the haughtiness of the strongmen, provoking passers-by with offensive stares and picking a quarrel with anyone who got in his way, while people whispered to one another, 'Gebelaawi's son'. He had no worries about meals; he would simply grab the food where he found it, in a restaurant or on a barrow, eat his fill, then go off without thanks or payment. When he felt like revelling he would go into the first tavern he came across, and the ale would come to him till he was drunk. Then his tongue would be loosened and he would pour forth his family's secrets, its unheard of behavior, its idiotic traditions and its despicable cowardliness, winding up to his rebellion against his father, the greatest tyrant in all these parts. Then he would start joking and laughing helplessly, or singing and dancing. His happiness was complete if the night's entertainment ended with a fight. Then off he would go, shouting greetings at everyone.

He became well known everywhere for this way of life, and people avoided him if they could, but they accepted him like a natural disaster. The family suffered pain and sorrow from all this. Misery consumed Idrees's mother and she sickened and lay dying. Gebelaawi came to take leave of her, and she pointed

at him an accusing hand, which showed no sign of disease. She died of grief and resentment, and mourning entangled the family in its net. The brothers' evenings on the roof came to an end, and Adham's bamboo flute was silent in the garden.

One day their father burst out again. The victim this time was a woman. He raised his great voice to curse a maid called Narciss, and he chased her out of the house. He had learnt that the girl was pregnant and she was interrogated till she confessed that Idrees had seduced her before his expulsion. So Narciss left the house, wailing and beating her cheeks, and wandered about all day long till Idrees came across her. He took her in tow without either welcome or rebuff, treating her like an object that might come in useful later.

But there comes a day when every misfortune, however grave, is accepted. So life began to return to normal in the Great House, just as people return to the homes that an earthquake forced them to leave. Radwaan and Abbaas and Jaleel went back to their parties on the roof, while Adham started to spend his evenings in the garden again, whispering through his flute. He found that Umayma lit up his thoughts and warmed his feelings, and the picture of her shadow embracing his was firmly printed on his imagination. He went to see his mother in her room, where she was embroidering a shawl, and he confided in her.

— It's Umayma, mother, your relative.

His mother smiled a pale smile which showed that her happiness at the news could not overcome the pain of her illness.

— Yes, Adham, she's a good girl; she'll be as good for you as you'll be for her. She'll make you happy, please God!

When she saw the blush of pleasure on his cheeks, she went on:

— You mustn't court her yet, my child, or you'll spoil everything. I'll speak to your father about it, and perhaps I'll have the joy of seeing your children before I die.

When Gebelaawi summoned him into his presence, Adham found him smiling so sweetly that he said to himself: 'The only thing equal to my father's sternness is his kindness.' Then his father said:

— So you're looking for a wife, Adham; how time flies! This house despises the poor; but you're honoring your mother by choosing Umayma. Perhaps you'll produce some good children. Idrees is lost, and Abbaas and Jaleel are childless, and as yet none of Radwaan's children has lived, and all that any of them has inherited from me is my pride. So fill the house with your children; otherwise my life will have been in vain.

The district had never seen anything like the bridegroom's procession of Adham. Even today, the memory of it is still proverbial in the Alley. That night, lamps were hung from the branches of the trees and from every wall, so that the house was a pool of light in the darkness. A marquee was erected on the roof for the musicians. Food and drink were spread out in the great drawing room and in the garden and in the wasteland adjoining the gate.

The procession started out from the far end of Gemalia soon after midnight. It was joined by everyone who loved or feared Gebelaawi, till it included the whole district. Adham strode along in a silk jellaba and a brocaded scarf, between Abbaas and Jaleel, with Radwaan in front. To the right and left people carried candles and flowers. In front went a great troop of singers and dancers. The noise of the singing, of the band, of the greetings shouted out by the admirers of Gebelaawi and Adham, and of the women's whoops of joys, awakened the whole district. The procession wound its way from Gemalia through Otouf and Kafr el-Zaghari and Mabyada. Greetings were showered on it even by the strongmen. There was much stick-fencing and dancing, and the taverns handed out free ale, so that even the urchins got drunk. Hookas were offered to the guests in every hashish den, and the air was fragrant with the smell of fine hashish.



Suddenly Idrees appeared at the end of the road, like a demon emerging from the darkness. At the corner leading to the desert he was lit up by the torches at the head of the procession. The torch-bearers stopped dead and Idrees's name was whispered around. The singers caught sight of him, and fear choked off their song. The dancers saw him and froze in their tracks. At once the drums fell silent, the pipes died away, and the laughter ceased. People wondered what to do; if they yielded to him they would not be safe, but if they attacked him they would be attacking the son of Gebelaawi. Idrees brandished his cudgel and shouted:

— Whose is this procession, you cowardly scum?

There was a deathly hush, and all necks were craned towards Adham and his brothers. Idrees asked again:

— When did you make friends with the slave girl's son and his father?

At that Radwaan took a few steps forward and cried out:

— My brother, you'd better let the procession pass.

Idrees scowled.

— You should be the last to speak, Radwaan, you traitorous brother, you cowardly son, you weakling! You sold honor and brotherhood for an easy life.

— People aren't interested in our disagreements.

Idrees guffawed.

— Everybody knows what villains you are; if they weren't such utter cowards, you wouldn't have found a single musician or singer for your procession.

Radwaan said with determination:

— Your father has entrusted your brother to us; we must defend him.

Idrees guffawed again, and asked:

— Do you think you can defend yourself, let alone the slave girl's son?

— Where's your common sense? You'll only get back to the house by being sensible.

— You're a liar, and you know it.

— I don't blame you as far as I'm concerned, but now let the procession pass in peace.

Idrees's answer was to hurl himself on the procession like a mad bull. His cudgel began to rise and fall, smashing torches, bursting drums, scattering flowers. The people panicked and fled like sand in a gale. Radwaan, Abbaas and Jaleel stood shoulder to shoulder in front of Adham and the fury of Idrees grew still greater.

— Cowards! You defend the man you hate for fear of losing your food and drink.

He rushed at them, and they retreated, taking his blows on their sticks without trying to retaliate. Suddenly he threw himself between them, forcing his way to where Adham stood. The clamor from the windows rose to a peak. Adham shouted as he got ready to defend himself:

— Idrees! I'm not your enemy. Come to your senses.

Idrees raised his cudgel. At that moment someone yelled: 'Gebelaawi!', and Radwaan shouted to Idrees:

— Your father is coming...

Idrees leapt to the side of the road and turned to see Gebelaawi surrounded by a ring of servants carrying torches. Idrees gnashed his teeth and shouted as he made off:

— Soon I shall present you with a bastard grandchild to gladden your eyes.

Then off he went towards Gemalia, into the darkness, while the people drew back to make way for him. Gebelaawi reached the spot where the brothers stood, and he made a show of calmness under the stare of thousands of eyes. Then he said in a commanding voice:

— Proceed as before!

The torch-bearers returned to their places, the drums sounded, the pipes started up, the singers sang, the dancers danced, and the procession resumed its course.

The Great House was awake till morning with singing and

drinking and merry-making. When Adham entered his room overlooking Muqattam Desert, he found Umayma by the mirror, her face still veiled in white. He was drunk and stoned and hardly able to stand. He moved towards her, exerting a great effort to control his limbs, and lifted the veil from her face, which looked up at him with exquisite loveliness. He bent his head to kiss her full lips, then said in a drunken voice:

— All's well that ends well.

Then he tottered over to the bed, and collapsed on it, still wearing his scarf and red pumps. Umayma looked at his reflection and smiled with anxious yearning.

5 \* \* \* \* \*

Adham found with Umayma a happiness he had never known before. Because of his simple nature, he showed this happiness in his conversation and behavior so much that his brothers made fun of him. At the end of prayers he would stretch out his hands and cry out: 'Praise be to the Lord of grace, for my father's pleasure, for my wife's love, for raising me above those who deserve to be above me, for the fertile garden and my friend the flute, praise be to Him.'

The women of the house all said Umayma was an attentive wife, looking after her husband like a son. She got on well with her mother-in-law and loved serving her and even her family. She cared for her home as though it were part of her body. Adham was a loving and considerate husband. His work for the Trust had already taken up part of the time he had previously spent on his innocent pleasures in the garden, and now love took up the remainder of the day, and he gave himself up to it completely.

Delicious days passed — lasting too long for the scornful

brothers Radwaan, Abbaas and Jaleel — then gave way to an even tranquility, just as a rushing stream flows down into a smooth-flowing river. Questions returned to Adham's mind and he felt that time was no longer flying by, and that night was following day. He saw that the duet lost all meaning if it went on indefinitely, and that the garden had been too faithful a source of pleasure to be deserted. He did not feel that any of these things meant that his heart was turning away from Umayma. She was still at the center of it, but life goes in stages, of which one only gradually becomes aware. He returned one day to his old haunt by the stream, and his gaze wandered over the flowers and birds, gratefully and apologetically. Suddenly, there was Umayma, looking very pretty. She sat down beside him and said:

— I peeped out of the window to see what was keeping you; why didn't you ask me to join you?

He smiled as he replied:

— I was afraid of boring you.

— Boring me? I have always loved this garden. Don't you remember our first meeting here?

He took her hand in his and rested his head against the trunk of a date-palm, looking up at the branches and the sky between them. She assured him again of her love for the garden, and the more he wanted silence, the more she insisted on talking, for she hated silence as much as she loved the garden. Her favorite subject of conversation was their life together, but she was also not unwilling to chatter about recent events in the house, especially whatever concerned the wives of Radwaan, Abbaas and Jaleel. Then she said reproachfully:

— You're very far away from me, Adham.

— How can that be when you fill my heart?

— But you aren't listening to me.

This was true. But although he had not welcomed her arrival, neither did he resent it. And if she had tried to go away again, he would have stopped her quite sincerely. The truth

was, he felt her to be an integral part of himself. He said almost apologetically:

— I love this garden. Nothing in my past life was sweeter to me than sitting in it. Its tall trees and its twittering birds and its brimming streams know me as well as I know them. I want you to share my love for it. Have you seen how the sky looks through the branches?

She raised her eyes for a moment, then looked at him with a smile.

— It really is lovely — lovely enough to be the dearest thing in your life.

He detected the hidden reproach in her words and said hurriedly:

— That's how it was before I knew you.

— And now?

He squeezed her hand lovingly.

— Its beauty is incomplete without you.

She raised her eyes to his.

— One good thing about it is that it doesn't mind when you desert it for me.

Adham laughed, drew her closer so that his lips rested against her cheek, then asked her:

— Don't these flowers deserve our attention rather than gossip about my brothers' wives?

Umayma said sadly:

— The flowers are more beautiful; but your brothers' wives never stop talking about you and the management of the Trust, always the management of the Trust, and your father's faith in you, over and over again.

Adham frowned, forgetting the garden, and said bitterly:

— They don't miss anything.

— I'm really afraid they'll give you the Evil Eye.

Adham cried out angrily:

— Damn the Trust! It's weighed me down and turned

people against me and taken away my peace of mind. To hell with it!

She put her finger on his lips.

— Don't be ungrateful, Adham; managing the Trust is important and it may bring benefits we haven't thought of.

— Up till now all it's brought is trouble. The sufferings of Idrees are bad enough.

She smiled, but without joy, and her eyes showed that she was seriously worried.

— Look at our future as hard as you look at the branches and the sky and the birds.

After that Umayma regularly shared Adham's sessions in the garden, and was hardly ever silent. But he got used to her, and learned to listen with only half an ear, or not to listen at all. When he felt like it he would take out his bamboo flute and make music. He could really say with complete satisfaction that everything was good. He got used even to Idrees's sufferings. But his mother's illness was getting worse, and she was racked by new pains. His heart grieved for her. She used to call for him often, and prayed countless prayers for him. One day she entreated him: 'Pray to God constantly to protect you from evil and to lead you on the right path.' She would not let him leave, but went on moaning to herself and murmuring her last wishes, till she died in his arms. Adham and Umayma wept for her, and Gebelaawi came and looked on her face, then shrouded her reverently, his keen eyes filled with anguish.

Hardly had Adham's life returned to normal than a sudden change came over Umayma, for which he could see no reason. It started with her giving up her visits to the garden, which did not please him as he had sometimes thought it would. He asked her why she had stopped coming and she made various excuses such as work or tiredness. He noticed that she did not welcome him with the old ardor, and that when he made advances to her, she accepted them without real passion, as

though she were humoring him reluctantly. He wondered what could be the matter. He had already been through something like this himself, but his love had sustained him and conquered it. He could have been harsh with her, and wanted to very much at times, but her fragility and paleness and her politeness held him back. Sometimes she seemed unhappy and sometimes confused. One time he caught a look of repulsion on her face, and he was both angry and sad, and said to himself: 'I'll be patient a while; either she'll improve, or to hell with her!'

He went to his father's study one day to present the month's accounts. Gebelaawi glanced through them casually, then asked:

— What's wrong?

Adham looked up at him in astonishment.

— Nothing, Father.

Gebelaawi's eyes narrowed and he said quietly:

— Tell me about Umayma.

Adham lowered his eyes from his father's piercing glance.

— She's all right. Everything's fine.

Gebelaawi said impatiently:

— Tell me what's wrong.

For a time Adham was silent, believing his father omniscient. Then he confessed:

— She's changed very much and seems cold.

A strange look came into his father's eyes:

— Have you quarrelled?

— Never!

Gebelaawi smiled contentedly:

— Be gentle with her, you ignorant fellow, and don't make advances to her till she asks you to. Soon you will be a father.

6 \* \* \* \* \*

Adham sat in the Trust office receiving the new tenants, one

by one. They were queuing up, the first in front of him, the last at the back of the garden house. When the last tenant came, Adham asked brusquely without lifting his head from the ledger:

— Your name?

A voice replied:

— Idrees Gebelaawi.

Adham looked up fearfully and saw his brother standing before him. He leapt up to defend himself, watching him warily. But Idrees's appearance was new and unfamiliar. He was poorly dressed and seemed peaceable and unassuming, sad and sincere, changed like a starched garment steeped in water. The sight of him drove out of Adham's heart any remaining anger, though he did not feel completely at ease. With a mixture of mistrust and hope he exclaimed:

— Idrees!

Idrees nodded and said with amazing gentleness:

— Don't be afraid. I'm simply your guest in this house, if your generosity can stretch to that.

Could these friendly words really come from Idrees? Had suffering tamed him? His meekness was just as disconcerting as his former rudeness. Would treating him as a guest not still be defying his father? But he had come uninvited. Adham found himself motioning Idrees to take a seat beside him. They sat looking at each other strangely, till Idrees said:

— I slipped in with that crowd of tenants so as to be able to speak to you alone.

— Did anybody see you?

— Nobody from the house saw me, you can be sure of that. I haven't come to spoil your happiness, but to throw myself on your mercy.

Adham looked away, deeply moved. The blood rushed to his face. Idrees went on:

— Perhaps you're amazed at the change in me. Maybe



you're wondering: 'Where have his pride and boastfulness gone?'. I want you to know that I've suffered more than a man can bear, but in spite of all that I haven't behaved like this with anybody but you. A man like me can only forget his pride in the presence of somebody gentle.

— I pray God to make things easier for you and for us. What has happened to you has spoilt life for me and made me miserable.

— I ought to have known that from the beginning, but I was mad with rage. Then drink took away my honor. Living as a tramp and a parasite put out the last spark of humanity in me. Did you ever know your big brother to act like that?

— Never! You were the best of brothers and the noblest of men.

Idrees said in an agonized voice:

— Those were the days! Now I know nothing but misery. I wander about the desert dragging a pregnant woman after me, swallowing insults everywhere and making my living by being hateful and making enemies.

— You break my heart, my brother.

— Forgive me, Adham. That's you as I've always known you. Didn't I hold you in my arms when you were little? Didn't I watch you as a child and as a young man, seeing your fine, noble character? Damn anger, wherever it flares up!

— Damn it indeed!

Idrees sighed and spoke as if to himself:

— For the wrong I've done you, I deserve worse than I got.

— I pray that God may make things easier for you. You know I've never given up hope of you returning. Even when our father was at his angriest, I risked talking to him about your situation.

Idrees smiled, showing teeth that had become dirty and yellow.

— That's what I felt. I said to myself, if there was any hope of our father relenting, it wouldn't happen without your help.

Adham's eyes shone as he said:

— I'll be guided by your generous spirit. Don't you think the time has come to speak to our father about the matter?

Idrees shook his dishevelled head hopelessly.

— One day older, one year wiser! And I'm not even just one year older than you but ten years. I know that our father will forgive anything except being humiliated. He'll never forgive me after what has happened. I have no hope of coming back to the Great House.

There was no doubt that Idrees was right, which depressed Adham. He murmured wretchedly:

— What can I do to help you?

Idrees smiled again:

— You needn't think about helping me with money. I'm sure you're an honest Trustee, and I know that if you helped me in that way, it would be out of your own pocket, which I couldn't accept. You're already a husband and you'll soon be a father. No, it isn't poverty that has driven me to come. I'm here to tell you how I regret what I let myself say about you, and to win back your friendship, and also because I have a favor to ask.

Adham looked at him anxiously and asked:

— Tell me the favor.

Idrees brought his head close to his brother's, as if afraid that the walls might overhear.

— I want to be sure of the future, now that I've ruined the present. I'm going to be a father too; and what's to become of my children?

— You'll find me ready to do anything I can.

Idrees put his hand affectionately on Adham's shoulder.

— I want to know whether my father has cut me out of his will.

— How could I know anything about that? But if you want my opinion...

Idrees cut him short impatiently:

— I'm not asking for *your* opinion; I want your father's.

— But you know perfectly well he doesn't tell anybody what he has in mind.

— But he'll certainly have written it into the Trust Deeds.

Adham shook his head and said nothing. Idrees repeated:

— Everything is in the Deeds.

— I know nothing about it. You know that nobody in the house knows anything about it. My job as Trustee is completely under my father's direction.

Idrees gave him a melancholy look.

— The Deeds are in a fat leather-bound book. I once saw it when I was a boy, and asked my father what was in it. At that time I was the apple of his eye, and he told me it contained everything about us. We didn't talk about it any more, and when I did want to ask about it he wouldn't let me. I have no doubt now that my fate's already fixed in it.

Adham felt that he was in a tight corner.

— God only knows!

— It's in the private chamber off your father's bedroom. You must have seen the little door at the far end of the left hand wall; it's always locked, but the key's kept in a tiny silver box in the drawer of his bedside table. The fat book itself is on a table in the private chamber.

Adham raised his thin eyebrows in confusion and muttered:

— What are you after?

Idrees said with a sigh:

— If there's any peace of mind left to me in this world, it depends on my knowing what's signed and sealed about me in the Deeds.

Adham, relieved, replied:

— The simplest thing for me will be to ask him straight out what's in the Ten Clauses.

— He wouldn't tell you. He'd be angry. He'd probably think worse of you for it. Or he'd guess the real reason for your question and lose his temper. How I'd hate you to lose your father's confidence as a reward for your kindness to me. He

certainly doesn't mean to reveal his Ten Clauses or he'd have told us all what they are. No! The only safe way to the Deeds is the one I've described to you. It'll be very easy at daybreak, when your father walks in the garden.

Adham's face grew pale.

— What a wicked thing you've asked me to do!

Idrees masked his disappointment with a faint smile.

— It's not a crime for a son to find out the things that affect him in his father's Deeds.

— But you want me to steal a secret that our father insists on keeping.

Idrees sighed heavily.

— When I decided to seek your help, I said to myself: 'It will be very difficult persuading Adham to undertake something against his father's will.' But I was hopeful and thought: 'Perhaps he'll agree when he realizes how much I need his help.' It'd be no crime and it'd be so easy to succeed, and you'd save somebody from torment without losing anything.

— God keep us from doing wrong!

— Amen! But I beg you to put me out of my agony.

Adham stood up, troubled and confused. Idrees stood up too. He smiled a hopeless smile and said:

— I've really upset you, Adham. One thing about my unhappy state is that whoever I meet suffers in some way or other. Idrees is still a dreadful curse.

— How it hurts me not being able to help! It's just one torment after another.

Idrees came close to him, put his hand gently on his shoulder, kissed him on the forehead and said:

— It's all my fault that I'm in a mess. Why should I burden you with more than you can do? Let me leave you in peace. God's will be done!

And with those words Idrees left.

7 \* \* \* \* \*

Umayma's face came alive for the first time in weeks and she asked Adham anxiously:

— Didn't your father ever tell you about the Deeds?

Adham was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, looking out through the window at the desert plunged in darkness.

— He's never spoken about it to anybody.

— Not even to you?

— I'm just one of several sons.

She smiled gently.

— But he picked you to manage the Trust.

— I tell you he's never spoken about it to anybody.

She smiled again as if to soften him and said cunningly:

— Don't let it bother you. Idrees isn't worth it; his nastiness to you can never be forgotten.

Adham turned his head towards the window.

— The Idrees who came to me today is not the Idrees who did me wrong. I'm haunted by his look of sadness and regret.

She said triumphantly:

— That's what strikes me most about what you say, and it's what really worries me. But you seem depressed, which is not like you.

He was peering into the pitch dark night, but his busy head provided no answer. He said:

— Worrying won't get us anywhere.

— But your brother's repented and he's begging for mercy.

— I can see that, but what can I do?

— You must patch things up with him — and with his brothers. Otherwise you're going to find yourself alone against them one day.

— You're more worried about yourself than about Idrees.

She shook her head vigorously.

— I have a right to worry about myself — and that means about you and our baby.

What did the woman want? How thick this darkness was; it had even swallowed up the mighty Muqattam. He held his peace and was silent, but she went on:

— Do you remember ever going into the private chamber?  
He broke his short silence:

— Never! I used to want to as a child, but my father prevented me, and my mother wouldn't let me go near it.

— You surely longed to go in.

He was only talking to her about the matter in the hope that she would draw him back, not that she would egg him on. He badly needed someone to reassure him that his attitude to his brother was right. But he was like a traveller calling in the dark for a guide and attracting a bandit instead. Umayma asked again:

— Do you know the dressing table with the silver box?

— Everybody who's been in the room knows it. Why do you ask?

She left her seat on the sofa, came close to him, and said temptingly:

— My God! Don't you *want* to see the Deeds?

— Heavens no! Why should I want to?

— Who can resist the desire to know the future?

— You mean *your* future.

— My future and your future, and Idrees's future, which worries you so much in spite of what he's done to you.

The woman had given voice to his thoughts, which annoyed him. He turned his head further towards the window and said:

— What my father doesn't want, I don't want.

She raised her pencilled eyebrows.

— Why should he hide this thing?

— That's his business. What a lot of questions you're asking tonight!

She spoke as if to herself:

— The future! We'd know our future, and we'd help poor Idrees so much. And all it needs is to read a page, without

anybody knowing. I defy anybody — friend or enemy — to accuse us of bad intentions, or to say that it affected your dear father even slightly.

Adham was gazing at a brilliant star which outshone all the others. He pretended to ignore her words.

— What a wonderful sky! If the night wasn't so damp, I'd have sat in the garden looking at it through the branches.

— He must certainly have favored some people in the famous Clauses.

Adham shouted:

— I'm not interested in favors that bring nothing but trouble.

She sighed.

— If I knew how to read I'd go myself to the silver box.

He wished it could happen that way. He grew still more annoyed with her and with himself. He felt as though he had already done the forbidden thing and was thinking about it as a past event. He turned to her, frowning. By the light of the lamp that swung in the breeze wafting through the window, his face looked bothered and weak behind its scowl.

— Damn me for telling you about it at all!

— I don't mean you any harm, and I love your father as much as you do.

— Let's stop this tiresome conversation. This is a time of day when you usually rest.

— It seems my mind will not rest till we've decided to do this simple thing.

He puffed.

— God, bring her back to her senses!

She looked at him with something new in mind.

— Haven't you already disobeyed your father by seeing Idrees in the garden house?

His eyes opened wide with surprise.

— I found him there in front of me; I couldn't avoid seeing him.

— Have you told your father about his visit?

— What a nuisance you are tonight, Umayma!

She said triumphantly:

— If it's all right for you to disobey him in something which may harm you, why can't you disobey him in something which will help you and your brother and will harm nobody?

He could very well have broken off the conversation, had he wanted to, but the temptation was too strong. The truth was that he had let her run on only because something in him needed her support. He asked petulantly:

— What do you mean?

— I mean you should stay awake till dawn, or till the way is clear for us.

— I thought being pregnant had just taken away your passion, but now I see it's made you lose your good sense too.

— You agree with what I say, by God. But you're afraid, and that's not worthy of you.

Over his face came a darkness quite out of keeping with the compliance he felt within. He said:

— We'll remember this as the night of our first quarrel.

She said very gently:

— Adham, let's think about it seriously.

— No good will come of it.

— That's what you say; but you'll see.

He felt the heat of the fire that was fast approaching, and he said to himself: 'If you get scorched, tears won't quench it.' He turned his head to the window, and thought how lucky the inhabitants of that bright star were to be so far away from this house. He murmured feebly:

— Nobody loves his father as much as I do.

— You'd never do anything that would harm him.

— Umayma, you need to sleep.

— It's you who are keeping me awake.

— I hoped to hear the voice of reason from you.

— That's the only thing you have heard.



He wondered to himself in a whisper:

— Won't it destroy me?

She stroked his hand, which rested on the edge of the sofa, and said reproachfully:

— We share our fate, if you love me.

With a resignation that showed he had already made his decision, he said:

— Even that star doesn't know my fate.

She lost all caution.

— You will read your fate in the Deeds.

His gaze went out to the unsleeping stars, and to the shreds of cloud lit up by their calm light. He imagined that they had heard his conversation, and he murmured:

— What a lovely sky!

Then he heard Umayma's playful voice:

— You taught me to love the garden, let me return the favor.

8 \* \* \* \* \*

At dawn Gebelaawi left his room for the garden. Adham was watching from the end of the corridor, and Umayma stood behind him in the darkness with her hand on his shoulder. They listened to the heavy, even tread, but could not make out its direction in the dark. It was Gebelaawi's custom to walk about at this hour with neither light nor companion. The noise died away, and Adham turned to whisper to his wife:

— Don't you think it would be best to go back now?

She urged him on, whispering in his ear:

— You can curse me if I mean any harm to anybody.

He took a few steps forward, confused and unhappy, his hand clutching the little candle in his pocket. He felt his way along the wall till his hand touched the door. Umayma whispered:

— I'll stay here on guard. Go on, and good luck!

She stretched out her hand and pushed the door open, then drew back. Adham tiptoed warily into the room, and was met by a strong smell of musk. He closed the door behind him and stood peering into the darkness till he could make out the windows overlooking the desert, which let in the first light of day. Adham felt that the wrong — if wrong there was — had already been done with his entry into the room, and that he must now go through with it. He followed the left hand wall, falling over chairs once or twice, passing the door to the private chamber on the way, till he reached the end wall, which he followed, fumbling his way to the dressing table. He pulled out the drawer and rummaged in its contents till he found the box. After pausing to regain control of himself, he returned to the door of the private chamber, groped for the keyhole, put the key in and turned it.

He opened the door, and there he was slipping into the secret place that no one but his father had ever before entered. He closed the door, took out his candle and lit it. He saw a square room with a high ceiling and no opening other than the door. A small carpet covered the floor. To the right was an ornate table and on it rested the huge book, fastened to the wall with an iron chain. His mouth was dry, and when he swallowed it was as painful as if he had a sudden sore throat. He clenched his teeth as if to crush the fear that travelled through his trembling limbs to the candle in his hand. He crossed to the table and gazed at the leather binding of the book, which was embellished with gold-inlaid lettering. He stretched out his hand and opened it. It was difficult for him to compose his thoughts and overcome his confusion. He began reading in the Persian script: 'In the Name of God...'

Suddenly he heard the door open. His head was jerked round violently towards the sound, without his willing it, as though the door had pulled him as it opened. By the candle-light he saw Gebelaawi, blocking the doorway with his great

bulk, looking at him with a cold, cruel stare. Adham looked into his father's eyes, silent and motionless. All power to speak or think or move deserted him. Gebelaawi commanded him:

— Out!

But Adham was unable to move. Utterly hopeless, he stayed where he was, like a lifeless object, except that an object cannot feel despair. His father shouted:

— Out!

Terror aroused him from his paralysis and he moved. His father stepped aside from the doorway, and Adham left the private chamber, the candle still flickering in his hand. He saw Umayma standing speechless in the middle of the room, tears streaming down her face. His father motioned to him to stand beside her, then addressed him coldly:

— You will answer my questions truthfully.

Adham's expression conveyed his willingness. Gebelaawi asked:

— Who told you about the book?

Adham answered without hesitation, like a broken vessel pouring out its contents:

— Idrees.

— When?

— Yesterday morning.

— How did you meet?

— He slipped in with the new tenants and waited till we were alone.

— Why didn't you throw him out?

— I couldn't bring myself to throw him out, Father.

Gebelaawi said sharply:

— Don't call me 'Father'.

Adham gathered all his strength and said:

— You're still my father in spite of your anger and my stupidity.

— Is he the one who made you do this?

Umayma answered, though he had not addressed the question to her:

— Yes, sir!

Gebelaawi shouted:

— Quiet, vermin! (Then to Adham:) Answer me!

— He was desperately unhappy and repentant, and he wanted to feel secure about his children's future.

— And you did this for him!

— On the contrary... I apologized and told him I couldn't.

— What made you change your mind?

Adham sighed in despair, and muttered:

— The Devil.

Gebelaawi asked cruelly:

— Did you tell your wife what had passed between you?

At this point Umayma began to wail. Gebelaawi silenced her, then motioned Adham to answer:

— Yes!

— And what did she say to you?

Adham kept quiet and swallowed hard. His father shouted:

— Answer me, you wretch!

— She was keen to find out your will, and thought it would harm nobody.

Gebelaawi glared at him with utter contempt:

— And that is how you consented to betray the one who preferred you to your betters?

Adham said with a groan:

— It's no use my making excuses for my crime; but your mercy is greater than any crime or any excuses.

— So you plot against me with Idrees whom I expelled for your sake?

— I didn't plot with Idrees. I've done wrong, and my only hope is your mercy.

Umayma implored him:

— Sir...

— Quiet, vermin!

He looked from one to the other, frowning, then said in a terrible voice:

— Get out of the house!

Adham appealed:

— Father!

In a brutal voice Gebelaawi said:

— Get out of the house before you are thrown out!

9 \* \* \* \* \*

The great gate opened again, this time to see the expulsion of Adham and Umayma. Adham carried a bundle of clothes, and Umayma followed with a second bundle, some pots and pans and a little food. They left, crushed and hopeless. When they heard the gate close behind them their voices rose to a wail, and Umayma said between her sobs:

— I deserve worse than death.

Adham's voice faltered:

— For once you're telling the truth; but I deserve worse than death too.

They had gone hardly any distance from the house when a drunken laugh rang out. They looked in that direction, and there they saw Idrees in front of the hut he had built of flattened cans and pieces of wood. His wife Narciss sat quietly spinning, and Idrees was laughing spitefully, enjoying their misery. Adham and Umayma were astonished and stood staring at him. Idrees started dancing and snapping his fingers, annoying Narciss who retreated into the hut. Adham watched, his reddened eyes filled with tears of rage. He saw at once the trick Idrees had played and its monstrous wickedness. He realized too his own immense naivety and stupidity, on account of which the villain was dancing with malicious joy. This

was the real Idrees, the incarnation of evil. Adham's blood boiled and his mind was darkened. He picked up a handful of earth and threw it at him, shouting, in a voice distorted by fury:

— Damned shit! You're worse than a scorpion.

Idrees's answer was to dance still more vigorously, wagging his head from side to side and jerking his eyebrows up and down, still snapping his fingers. Adham's rage mounted still further and he bellowed:

— Bloody, lousy, low-down... liar... cheat...!

Idrees began swaying his body as skillfully as he was wagging his head, sniggering silently. Adham took no notice of Umayma who was trying to pull him away, but yelled:

— You're worse than a tart, you filthy scum!

Idrees started wriggling his behind, spinning round slowly and provocatively. Adham was blind with fury. He threw down his bundle, pushed away Umayma who tried to hold him back, rushed at him and seized his throat with all his strength. Idrees took no notice of the attack, but went on dancing slowly and artfully. Adham, by now quite mad, rained down blows, but Idrees only made more fun of him, chanting:

Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.

Then he stopped, raving and cursing, and shoved Adham in the chest with a force that sent him staggering. He lost his balance and fell on his back. Umayma hurried over to him, helped him up and brushed the dirt off his clothes, saying:

— Why bother with this savage? Let's get right away.

He picked up his bundle without a word, and she took hers, and they made their way to the other side of the Great House. Adham was already tired and he threw down the bundle and sat on it, saying he wanted a rest. His wife sat down facing him, crying again. They heard Idrees's voice once more. He stood looking defiantly at the house, thundering:

— For the sake of your most despicable child you threw me

out, and you see how he treated you? And now you've thrown him into the dirt — and yourself with him. Tit for tat — and the one who acts first ends worst. This is so that you shall know that Idrees can't be beaten. Stay alone with your useless, spineless sons. You won't have any grandsons except those who will run about in the dirt and roll in the filth. Tomorrow they'll be peddling sweet potatoes and melon seeds. Tomorrow they'll be at the mercy of the strongmen in Otouf and Kafr el-Zaghari. Soon your seed will be mixed with that of the lowest of men. You'll sit alone in your room, changing things in your book in anger and frustration. You'll grow old alone in the shadows and, when the end comes, you'll find nobody to cry for you.

Then he turned to Adham and continued his crazy shouting:

— And you, blacky Adham, you weakling, how are you going to face life on your own? You have no strength to help you, nobody strong to rely on. In this desert what's the use of your reading, writing and arithmetic? Ha! Ha! Ha!

Umayma went on weeping till it got on Adham's nerves and he said wearily:

— Stop crying!

She dried her eyes.

— I'll often be crying, Adham. I'm to blame for all this.

— I'm just as much to blame. If I hadn't been so weak and cowardly it wouldn't have happened.

— It's all my fault.

He shouted angrily:

— You're only blaming yourself to prevent me from blaming you.

She lost her eagerness for self-reproach and sat for a while with bent head. Then she went on in a faint voice:

— I never thought he could be so hard.

— I know him; I have no excuse.

She hesitated a while, then said:

— How can I live here when I'm pregnant?

— After the Great House we must live in this desert. If only tears could help! There's nothing for it but to build ourselves a hut.

— Where?

He looked round, and his glance fell for a second on Idrees's hut.

— We can't go too far from the Great House, even if it means living near to Idrees. Otherwise we'd die, all alone on the edge of this desert.

Umayma thought for a while, then bowed her head in acquiescence.

— Yes, and we should stay in sight of your father in case he softens towards us.

Adham sighed.

— I'm going to die of grief. If you weren't here with me I'd think this was a nightmare. Have I lost his love for ever? But I shan't fight back at him like Idrees. Oh no! I'm not at all like Idrees, so how can I be treated the same?

Umayma said bitterly:

— Nobody round here has ever known a father like yours.

— When will your tongue stop wagging?

— For goodness' sake, I haven't committed a crime. Tell anybody what you've done and how you've been rewarded; I bet you anything they won't believe it. My God! There's never been a father like yours.

— The world has never seen so fine a man. This Jebel, this desert, and the sky itself bear witness to that. Anybody else would have shrunk back from the challenge.

— With his tyranny soon none of his sons will be left in the house.

— We are the first to go, and we are the worst.

She denied it angrily:

— I'm not — we're not.

— The truth comes out only at times of trial.

They fell silent. In the desert there was no living thing to be



seen, except a few people moving about far away at the foot of the Jebel. The sun beat down cruelly from a cloudless sky, drenching the vast expanse of sand, in which glinted a few stones or bits of glass. The only things that broke the monotony were the Jebel on the horizon, a great rock that lay to the east like the head of a body buried in the sand, and Idrees's miserable hovel, planted defiantly to the east of the Great House. The whole atmosphere was harsh, dreary and frightening.

Umayma heaved a deep sigh and said:

— We're going to have a hard time of it, making life comfortable.

Adham looked at the Great House and said:

— We'll have an even harder time waiting till that gate opens again.

1 0 \* \* \* \* \*

Adham and Umayma set about putting up a hut for themselves, to the west of the Great House. They fetched stones from Muqattam and collected slates from the foot of the Jebel, and they picked up pieces of wood around Otouf, Gemalia and Bab el-Nasr. They soon realized that building a hut would take longer than they could manage. By then they had finished the supplies of cheese, eggs and molasses that Umayma had brought from the house. Adham made up his mind to go and work for his living. He decided to sell some of his fine clothes to buy a barrow for peddling sweet potatoes, melon seeds, cucumbers and whatever else was in season. When he began collecting his clothes together, Umayma burst into tears, but he took no notice. Half angry half mocking, he said:

— These clothes no longer suit me. Wouldn't it be a joke if I went to sell sweet potatoes in a brocaded camel-hair coat!

In no time he was pushing his barrow across the desert to Gemalia — the same Gemalia that still remembered his wedding procession. He felt oppressed and at first could not bring himself to cry his wares. His eyes were almost blinded with tears, and he fled to more distant neighborhoods. From morning till night he kept on walking and shouting till his hands were tired and his shoes worn out and his feet and all his joints ached. How he disliked the women's haggling, and having to rest on the ground in the shelter of a wall, and having to stop in a corner to relieve himself! And when he came back to Umayma in the evening, it was not to peace and quiet but to the work of building the hut.

Life seemed unreal, and the garden and managing the Trust, and the room looking out over Jebel Muqattam began to seem like a fairy tale. He said to himself: 'Nothing in this world is real: neither the Great House, nor the unfinished hut, nor the garden, nor the barrow, nor yesterday, today and tomorrow. Perhaps I have done well to live beside the Great House, so that I shall not lose the past as I have lost the present and the future. Would it be strange if I lost my memory as I have lost my father and my true self?'

Once he sat dozing at midday in Watawit Alley, when he was wakened by a movement and saw some urchins about to make off with his barrow. He stood up to threaten them, and one boy noticed him and warned his friends with a whistle, pushing the barrow over to distract him from giving chase. The cucumbers spilt all over the ground while the urchins bounded away like locusts. Adham was furious and poured forth a torrent of the foulest curses. Then he bent down to gather up the cucumbers which were smothered in dirt. His rage mounted without any outlet till he burst out passionately:

— Why did your anger burn without pity? Why did you love your pride more than your own flesh and blood? How can you be happy with your life of ease and plenty, knowing that we are

trampled on like insects? There's no forgiveness or sweetness or tolerance in your Great House, you tyrant.

He took hold of the shafts of the barrow and was about to push it far away from this wretched alley, when he heard a jeering voice:

— How much are those cucumbers, mister?

He saw Idrees standing with a mocking smile on his lips, resplendent in a brightly colored jellaba and a white scarf. At the sight of his smirk Adham's whole world went dark. He gave his barrow a push, meaning to go, but Idrees blocked his path saying:

— Doesn't a customer like me deserve better treatment?

Adham's head jerked back nervously.

— Leave me alone.

— Can't you find anything better to say to your big brother?

— Idrees, aren't you satisfied with what you've already done to me? I just don't want to know you or you to know me.

— How can you say that when we're neighbors?

— I didn't want to live near you, but I decided to stay near the house which...

Idrees interrupted him gleefully:

— Which you were thrown out of.

Adham said nothing, but his discomfort was plain from his pale face, Idrees persisted:

— Your mind stays in the place it's been thrown out of, doesn't it?

Adham kept silent, and his brother went on:

— You're hoping to get back into the house, you schemer; you may be weak, but you're full of crafty schemes. But let me tell you, I'm not letting you go back without me, not if the sky falls.

Adham's nostrils dilated with anger as he asked:

— Aren't you content with what you've done to me?

— Aren't *you* content with what you've done to *me*? I was thrown out because of you, though I was the light of the house.

— On the contrary, you were thrown out because of your arrogance.

Idrees roared with laughter.

— And you were thrown out because of your weakness. There's no room in the Great House for either strength or weakness. You see your father's tyranny; he won't allow anybody but himself to combine strength and weakness, but he's so strong that he destroys his loved ones, and so weak that he marries a woman like your mother.

Adham frowned angrily and said in a trembling voice:

— Let me go! And if you want to start a fight, pick somebody your own size.

— Your father is ready to start a fight with weak or strong.

Adham said nothing, and frowned still more. Idrees said mockingly:

— You don't want to get into trouble by insulting him! That's one of your clever tricks and proof that you still dream of going back.

He picked up a cucumber and looked at it with repulsion.

— How can you bring yourself to go around with these filthy cucumbers? Can't you find anything better to do?

— I'm content with it.

— Or rather, necessity has driven you to it. And all the while your father enjoys the good life. Think about it a bit; wouldn't it be best for you to join up with me?

— I wasn't made for your sort of life.

Look at my jellaba. Its owner was strutting about in it only yesterday, which he had no right to do.

— So how did you get it?

— The way strong people do these things.

Had he stolen or killed? Adham said sadly:

— I can't believe that you're my brother, Idrees.

Idrees guffawed.

— You won't be surprised as long as you remember I'm Gebelaawi's son.

Adham's patience was exhausted and he shouted:

— Won't you get out of my way?

— If that's what you're stupid enough to want!

Idrees filled his pocket with cucumbers, threw a scornful glance at him, spat on the barrow and left.

Umayma stood up to meet Adham as he neared the hut. Darkness covered the desert, but inside the hut a candle flickered like a dying breath. The stars shed their faint light on the gigantic shape of the Great House. Umayma realized from his silence that he was in no state to be confronted. She brought him a jug of water to wash in and a clean jellaba. He washed his face and his feet and changed, then sat on the ground with legs outstretched. She approached him cautiously, sat down and said soothingly:

— If only I could bear some of your tiredness for you.

It was as if she had scratched a wound. He shouted:

— Shut up! You're the source of the mischief and misery.

She moved away till she was almost hidden from him, but he yelled after her:

— You're good for nothing except to remind me how blind and stupid I've been. Damn the day I first saw you!

He could hear her sobs in the darkness, but his temper grew worse, and he said:

— To hell with your tears! They're just your badness spilling out.

He heard her tearful voice:

— Words can't tell you how I suffer.

— Don't let me hear your voice again. Get out of my sight.

He screwed up his dirty clothes and threw them at her. They hit her in the abdomen and she let out a cry of pain. At once his anger cooled and he felt anxious about the consequences. She sensed a change of heart from his silence, and said:

— I'll go away, as you want me to.

She stood up and walked out, but he called after her:

— Do you think this is a time for joking? (Then, getting to his feet:) Come back! I'll leave you in peace.

He peered into the darkness till he saw her shadowy figure returning. Then he propped his back against the wall of the hut and looked up at the sky. He wished he could be reassured about her bulging abdomen, but he was too proud to ask and put it off for a while. He prepared the way by saying:

— Wash some cucumbers for supper.

1 1 \* \* \* \* \*

'The place is not without peace. No plants; no water; no birds nor branches for them to sing on; but at night the bare, hostile desert clothes itself in mystery, breeding ground for dreams. Above, the dome of the sky is sown with stars. The woman is in the hut. Loneliness speaks, and sorrow smolders like coals buried in the ashes. The high wall of the house repels the yearning heart. How can I make this terrible father hear my cry? Wisdom tells us to forget the past, but it is the only time we have had. I hate my weakness and curse my vileness, and am content with hardship for a companion; and I shall father children for him. The smallest bird is happier than my dreams, for no power can keep it out of the garden. My eyes long for the streams flowing between the rose bushes. Where is the scent of henna and jasmine? Where is peace of mind? And my flute? You cruel man! Half a year has passed. Will the ice in your heart never melt?'

From the distance came the sound of Idrees singing in a hateful voice: 'Strange things, my God, strange things!' There he was, lighting a fire in front of his hut. It threw out sparks that fell to the ground like shooting stars. His wife came and went, very pregnant, bringing food and drink. He shouted drunkenly at the Great House: 'It's time for cream of jute leaves and

roast chicken, you lot; smother it with poison!' Then he started singing again.

Adham said to himself sadly: 'Whenever I am by myself in the dark that devil goes and lights his fire and gets rowdy and spoils my solitude.'

Umayma appeared at the door of the hut, and he realized that she was not asleep as he had supposed. She was wearied by pregnancy and depressed by hardship and poverty. She asked with gentle concern:

— Aren't you coming to sleep?

He replied crossly:

— Leave me alone in the one hour when life is good.

— You'll be going off with your barrow first thing in the morning; you need rest.

— When I'm alone I become a gentleman again, or so it seems to me, gazing at the sky and remembering the old days.

She sighed heavily.

— I'd love to see your father coming out of the house or going in. I'd throw myself at his feet and beg him to forgive us.

— I've told you over and over again to give up those ideas. It's quite impossible for us to get back his favor that way.

She was silent for a while then murmured:

— I'm thinking of the fate of the baby inside me.

— And that's my only concern too, although I've become a filthy animal.

She said in a low, sad voice:

— You're the best man in the whole world.

Adham laughed bitterly and said:

— I'm not a human being any more. Only an animal worries all the time about the next meal.

— Don't be so gloomy. Lots of men start off like you, then life gets easier and they end up owning shops and houses.

— I think pregnancy has turned your head.

She said with conviction:

— You'll be an important man, and our child will grow up in the lap of luxury.

Adham struck his hands together in disbelief and asked sarcastically:

— Am I to do this by drink or hashish?

— By work, Adham.

— Working for a living is a curse. I used to spend my life in the garden, with no work except looking at the sky and playing my flute, but now I'm just an animal, pushing my barrow every day for the sake of a few scraps to eat in the evening and crap in the morning. Working for a living is the worst curse of all. True life is in the Great House, where there's no drudgery but only pleasure and beauty and music.

The voice of Idrees chimed in:

— Well said, Adham; work is a curse, and we weren't made for that sort of humiliation. Didn't I tell you we should join forces?

Adham turned towards the voice and saw the figure of Idrees standing near to him. He used to slip across like this unnoticed in the darkness, and listen to the conversation as long as he wished, joining in when he felt like it. Adham stood up miserably and said:

— Get back to your shack.

Idrees spoke with mock seriousness:

— Me too I say work is a curse. It's an insult to human dignity.

— You're inviting me to be a crook, which is worse than a curse.

— If work's a curse and crookery's worse, how's a man to live?

Adham did not like talking to him and kept quiet. Idrees waited for him to speak but, getting no response, he continued:

— Perhaps you want to get a living without work? But that would be at the expense of other people.



Adham still kept quiet, so he went on:

— Or perhaps you want to get a living without work and still not harm anybody? (He laughed hatefully.) It's a problem, son of a slave.

Umayma shouted furiously:

— Go home! The devil has bitten you.

His wife called him with a piercing voice, and he went the way he had come, singing 'Strange things, my God, strange things!' Umayma implored her husband:

— Don't get mixed up with him at any price.

— I keep finding him standing over me without knowing how he came.

Silence reigned and they found in it a refuge from their anxiety. Then Umayma spoke again, gently:

— My heart tells me I'll make this hut into a house like the one we've been thrown out of, including the garden and the nightingales, and our child will know ease and pleasure in it.

Adham stood smiling a smile she could not see in the darkness. He spoke sarcastically as he brushed the dust from his jellaba:

— 'Fine gherkins! Sweet cucumbers!' The sweat pours from my body, and urchins bait me, and my feet kill me, and all for a few piasters.

He went into the hut and she followed, saying:

— But the day of wealth and happiness will come.

— If you suffered more you'd have no time for dreams.

They both lay down on the straw-filled sacking, and she said:

— Isn't God able to turn our hut into a house like the one we've been thrown out of?

Adham yawned.

— What I wish for is to go back to the Great House itself. (Then, yawning more:) Work is a curse!

She whispered:

— Maybe, but a curse you get rid of only by working!

1 2 \*

One night Adham woke to the sound of groaning. As he was half asleep, it was a little time before he made out Umayma's voice crying: 'Oh my back! Oh my tummy!' He sat up at once, peering at her, and said:

— You're always in this state these days, and then it turns out to be nothing. Light the candle.

— Light it yourself! This time it's real.

He got up, groping for the candle in its place among the pots and pans. Having managed to find it, he lit it and set it on the table. Umayma appeared by its feeble light, lying propped up on her elbows, moaning and raising her head to breathe with obvious difficulty. He said anxiously:

— That's what you say every time you feel pains.

Her face crumpled up.

— No, no! I'm sure it's the real thing this time.

He helped her to lean her back against the wall and said:

— It'll be soon anyway. Try to bear it while I go to Gemalia for the midwife.

— Mind how you go! What time is it now?

Adham went out of the hut and looked at the sky:

— It'll soon be daybreak. I'll be straight back.

He hurried off towards Gemalia. When he made his way back through the darkness he was leading the old midwife by the hand. As they drew near to the shack, Umayma's cries reached him, shattering the stillness. His heart pounded and he strode faster till the midwife complained. They rushed into the hut together and the woman took off her cloak and said to Umayma, laughing:

— The worst is over. Your patience will soon be rewarded.

Adham asked her:

— How are you?

She groaned:

— The pain's almost killing me. My body's bursting. My bones are breaking. Don't go!

But the midwife said:

— He must wait quietly outside.

Adham left the hut for the open air and caught sight of a figure standing nearby. He knew him even before he could make him out clearly, and his chest tightened, but Idrees put on a polite tone and said:

— She's in labor? Poor girl! My wife went through this not long ago, as you know; but it's a misleading pain and soon goes. Then you'll meet what the Knower of the Unseen has allotted you, just as I met Hind — a charming baby, but she's always piddling or crying. Courage!

Adham was suffering. He said:

— God is Master of all things.

Idrees let out a harsh laugh and asked:

— Did you fetch the midwife from Gemalia to her?

— Yes.

— Dirty, greedy old woman! I fetched her too. She asked for too much, so I chased her off, and she still curses me whenever she sees me go past her house.

Adham hesitated, then said:

— You shouldn't treat people like that.

— You fine fellow! Your father taught me to be rude and tough with people.

Umayma's voice went up in a pitiful cry that seemed to echo the rending inside her. Adham clenched his teeth on what he was about to say and went anxiously towards the hut, calling out in a weak voice:

— Courage!

Idrees repeated his words loudly:

— Courage, sister-in-law!

Adham was worried about his wife hearing this voice, but he hid his annoyance, saying:

— We'd better get further away from the hut.

— Let's go to my place; I'll give you some tea and you can see Hind snoring.

But Adham moved away from his hut without going towards Idrees's, cursing him silently and hiding his anger. Idrees followed him saying:

— You'll be a father before sunrise. It's an important change in your life. One good thing is that you'll know the bond your father breaks so easily and so stupidly.

Adham gave vent to his feelings:

— This talk is annoying me.

— Maybe, but there's nothing else to occupy us.

Adham hesitated, then said:

— Idrees, why do you follow me about, when you know there's no love between us?

Idrees guffawed loudly.

— What a shameless child you are! Your wife's cries woke me from a delicious sleep, but I didn't let it annoy me. On the contrary, I've come to help you if you need any help. Your father must have heard her cries as clearly as I did, but he just went back to sleep as if he had no heart.

Adham said curtly:

— The fate he's decreed for us is bad enough; can't you ignore me as I ignore you?

— You hate me, Adham, not because I was the cause of your being thrown out, but because I remind you of your weakness. You hate your own rotten self in me. Now I no longer have any reason to hate you. On the contrary, today you're my comfort and consolation. Don't forget we're neighbors, the first people to live in this desert. Our children will crawl here side by side.

— You enjoy tormenting me.

Idrees said nothing for a while, so that Adham hoped for release, but then he went on, asking in a serious voice:

— Why can't we agree?

Adham said with a sigh:

— Because I'm a street trader, as my circumstances require,

and you're a man whose pleasure is in attacking people.

Umayma's cries became louder again, and Adham looked up at the sky imploringly. He noticed at once that the darkness was less intense and that day was breaking over the Jebel. He shouted:

— Pain is a curse.

Idrees said laughing:

— Such softness is charming. You were made for managing the Trust and playing your flute.

— Make fun of me as much as you like; I'm suffering.

— Why? I thought it was your wife who was suffering.

Adham shouted:

— Leave me alone!

Idrees asked with aggravating calmness:

— Are you hoping to become a father without paying for it?

Adham kept quiet, breathing heavily, and Idrees spoke enticingly:

— You're a sensible man. I've come to propose a job by which you could bring happiness to your future children. The event you can hear being announced is the first but not the last. Our desires will be satisfied only by building a mountain of screaming children. What do you think?

— It's almost day. Go back to bed!

The cries came again, continuously, till Adham could no longer bear to stay where he was and returned to the hut from which the darkness was lifting. He reached it as Umayma let out a deep sigh like the dying away of a sad song. He came to the door, asking:

— How are things with you?

He heard the voice of the midwife telling him to wait. He prepared to relax, for the voice seemed to him to be triumphant. Very soon the woman appeared at the door, saying:

— You've been blessed with two sons.

— Twins?!

— May God provide for them!

From behind him came Idrees's ear-splitting laugh, and he heard him saying:

— Now Idrees is father to a girl and uncle to two boys...  
And he went off to his hut singing:

Where is luck, where's fate?  
Tell me where, of late!

The midwife spoke again:

— Their mother wants to call them Qadri and Humaam.

Buoyant with happiness, Adham murmured:

— Qadri and Humaam! Qadri... and Humaam...

1 3 \* \* \* \* \*

Qadri said as he wiped his face on the corner of his jellaba:

— Let's sit down and eat.

Humaam stood looking towards the sun, which was starting to sink.

— Yes, time's been flying.

They sat down cross-legged in the sand at the foot of Jebel Muqattam. Humaam undid the knot in the striped red handkerchief, revealing bread, falafel and leeks. They fell to, glancing from time to time at their sheep, some of which wandered about while others stood chewing peacefully. There was nothing in the twins' features or build to distinguish them, except that Qadri had a definite hunter's look in his eye, which gave him a distinctive sharpness of expression. Qadri spoke again, chewing a huge mouthful:

— If only this whole desert belonged to us alone, we could graze our sheep without any worries.

Humaam said with a smile:

— But this is where shepherds come from Otouf and Kafr el-

Zaghari and Husseinia. It's best to be friendly with them and avoid trouble.

Qadri laughed scornfully, spitting out a shower of crumbs, and said:

— Those places have only one answer for anybody who tries to be friendly: punches!

— But...

— There's no but. I only know one way; I grab the man by his jellaba and bang his head till he falls on his face — or his back for that matter.

— And that's why we can hardly count our enemies.

— Who asked you to count them?

Humaam was serious and seemed very far away. He whistled to himself, then stopped and fell back into a reflective silence. He picked out a leek, stroked it with his fingers, put it in his mouth with relish, smacked his lips and said:

— That's why we're alone and have to go a long time without anybody to talk to.

— What need is there for you to talk when you're always singing?

Humaam looked at him trustingly and said:

— It seems to me that this loneliness gets you down sometimes.

— I'll always find a reason to be gloomy, whether it's loneliness or something else.

Silence fell, broken by the smacking of lips. Far away appeared a group going back from the Jebel towards Otouf, singing a song, one leading and the others chanting the responses. Humaam said:

— This part of the desert is in our district. If we went off to the north or south, the chances are we'd never return.

Qadri roared with laughter and said:

— You'd find plenty of people to the north and south who'd love to kill me, but you wouldn't find one who dared take me on.

Humaam spoke, looking at the sheep:

— Nobody can say you're not brave; but don't forget that we're protected by our grandfather's name and our uncle's frightful reputation, in spite of our quarrel with him.

Qadri frowned his disagreement, but did not contradict this. His eye settled on the Great House visible far off to the west as a huge shape, its features indistinct.

— That house! I've never seen anything like it, with the desert on all sides, near to streets and alleys famous for quarrelling and bullying, owned by a man you can't deny is a tyrant, this grandfather who's never seen his grandchildren though they live a stone's throw from him.

Humaam looked towards the house and said:

— Our father never mentions him without respect and admiration.

— And our uncle never mentions him without cursing him.

Humaam said uneasily:

— He is our grandfather, anyway.

— And what's the use of that, you baby? Our father strains along behind his barrow, and our mother slaves all day and half the night, and we go out with the sheep, barefoot and half naked. But him! He hides away behind those walls, completely heartless, enjoying such luxury as you can't imagine.

They finished their food. Humaam shook out the napkin, folded it and put it in his pocket, then lay down on his back, pillowing his head on his arms, gazing up at the clear sky which distilled the afternoon peace, while the kites wheeled in the distance. Qadri stood up and turned away to urinate, saying:

— Our father says the old man used to go out a lot in the past, and used to pass them as he left or came back. But now nobody sees him; it's as if he was afraid.

Humaam said dreamily:

— How I'd love to see him!

— Don't imagine you'd see anything exciting. You'd find him like our father or our uncle, or like both of them. I'm



amazed at the way my father always mentions him respectfully, in spite of what he's suffered at his hands.

— It's obvious that he was very much attached to him, or that he believes his punishment was justified.

— Or that he still hopes to be forgiven.

— You don't understand our father; he's a loving man with a sweet nature.

Qadri sat down again, saying:

— Well, he doesn't impress me and nor do you. I tell you, our grandfather is a queer old man and deserves no honor. If he had a shred of goodness, he wouldn't have treated his own flesh and blood in this crazy way. I look on him the way our uncle does, as one of Fate's curses.

Humaam said with a smile:

— Perhaps his worst qualities are the very things you pride yourself on: strength and daring.

— He got this land as a gift without any trouble, and then he became proud and tyrannical.

— You can't deny what I realized not long ago: that even the Governor himself didn't have it in him to live alone in such a desert.

— Do you think the story we're told justifies his anger with our parents?

— You find much smaller things to justify your attacks on people.

Qadri took the jug and drank his fill, belched and said:

— And what have his grandsons done wrong? He doesn't know what it is to be a shepherd, damn him! I wish I knew what's in his will and what he's prepared for us.

Humaam sighed and said dreamily:

— Riches to rescue us from hardship. Then we'll be able to have our hearts' desire — a life of ease and pleasure.

— You're talking like our father. Here we are stuck in dirt and mud, and you dream of playing the flute in a luxuriant garden. Really, I admire my uncle more than my father.

Humaam sat and yawned, then stood up and stretched, saying:

— Anyway, we do have somewhere; we have a big enough house, and enough food to keep us alive, and sheep and goats to graze. We sell their milk, and fatten them up to sell them too, and our mother makes clothes from their wool.

— And the flute and the garden?

He did not answer, but went towards the flock after picking up his stick from the ground at his feet. Qadri stood and shouted, addressing himself mockingly to the Great House:

— Do you allow us to be your heirs, or will you punish us in death as you punish us during your life? Answer, Gebelaawi!

The echo came back: 'Answer, Gebelaawi!'

1 4 \* \* \* \* \*

Far away they saw a figure coming towards them, its features as yet indistinct. It approached slowly till they could make it out, and Qadri straightened up automatically, his handsome eyes shining with joy. Humaam smiled at his brother, glanced at the sheep and warned quietly:

— Dusk is not far off.

Qadri said scornfully:

— Let dawn come for all I care!

He took a few steps forward, waving his arms to welcome the girl. She drew near to them, tired by the walk, partly because of the distance, and partly because the sand dragged at her slippers. Boldness sparkled in her enticing green eyes as she gazed at them. She wore a drape, leaving her head and neck bare, and the wind played with her plaits. Qadri greeted her with a joy that wiped the fierce look from his face:

— Hello, Hind!

She replied in her gentle voice:

— Hello! (Then, to Humaam:) Good evening, cousin!

Humaam smiled.

— Good evening, cousin, how are you?

Qadri took her hand and went with her towards the big rock, which stood a few yards from where they were. They went round it to the side facing the Jebel, shielded from the desert and its occupants. He drew her to him, enfolded her in his arms and gave her a long kiss on the lips till their teeth touched. For a moment the girl was carried away. Then she managed to free herself from his arms and stood breathing hard and straightening her drape, meeting his eager look with a smile; but the smile faded as if she had thought of something, and she pursed her lips in displeasure and said:

— I had a struggle to come. Oh dear, what an unbearable life!

Qadri understood what she meant and scowled.

— Don't take any notice. We are the children of idiots. My good father is a fool, and your wicked father is just as foolish. All they want is for us to inherit their hatred for each other. What stupidity! But tell me how you managed to come.

She puffed, and said:

— The day went like every day, with a non-stop quarrel between my father and mother. He hit her once or twice and she screamed curses at him and worked off her anger by breaking a jug, but her temper didn't get any worse than that today; she often grabs 'him by the collar and curses him, bearing his blows as best she can. But when wine's got into him, then you're only safe right out of his sight. So I often want to run away, and I feel I hate life, and I comfort myself by crying till my eyes are sore. Anyway, I waited till he'd dressed and gone out, then I put on my chador, and my mother came at me and tried to stop me as usual, but I dodged her and escaped.

Qadri took her hand in his and said:

— Doesn't she guess where you're going?

— I don't think so, but it doesn't worry me; she'd never dare tell my father.

Qadri laughed.

— What do you think he'd do if he knew?

At a loss, she echoed his laugh.

— I'm not afraid of him in spite of his harshness, in fact I tell you I love him and he loves me in a simple way that's quite out of keeping with his harsh nature. But he doesn't bother to tell me I'm the most precious thing in his world, and perhaps that's the root of my troubles.

Qadri sat down on the ground at the foot of the rock, and invited her to do so too by smoothing the ground at his side. She sat down, throwing off the heavy chador. He leaned over and kissed her cheek and said:

— It seems to be easier to get the better of my father than of yours, but he turns very violent when yours is mentioned. He refuses to admit that he has any good qualities.

She laughed.

— Men! My father speaks just as badly about yours. Your father looks down on mine for his roughness, and mine on yours for his gentleness. The main point is that they'll never agree about anything.

Qadri's head jerked up as if he were butting the air, and he said defiantly:

— But we'll do what we like.

Hind looked at him with tender affection as she said:

— My father is like that — able to do whatever he likes.

— I'm able to do many things. What does this drunken old uncle have in mind for you?

She laughed in spite of herself and said half seriously, half playfully:

— Speak politely about my father! (She tweaked his ear.) I've often wondered what he has in mind for me. It sometimes seems to me that he doesn't want me to marry anybody.

He stared at her, refusing to take her seriously. She went on:

— I once saw him looking furiously at the Great House and saying: 'If he's pleased to do down his sons and grandsons, is he going to do down his granddaughter as well? No place is fit for Hind except this barred and bolted house.' Another time he told my mother the strongman of Kafr el-Zaghari wanted to marry me. My mother was delighted, and he shouted at her in a rage: 'You wretched, small-minded creature! Who is this strongman of Kafr el-Zaghari? The lowest servant in the Great House is better than him.' My mother asked him: 'Who do you think is worthy of her?' He shouted: 'The answer to that is with that monster hidden away behind the walls of his house. She's his granddaughter, and nobody in the world is good enough for her. I want a husband who is like me for her.' My mother said in spite of herself: 'Do you want her to be as unhappy as her mother?' He sprang at her like a wild animal and kicked her till she ran out of the hut.

— That's pure madness.

— He hates our grandfather, and curses him whenever he mentions him. But deep down he's proud to be his son.

Qadri clenched his fist and started pounding it on his thigh saying:

— We'd have been a lot happier if we'd never had that man for a grandfather.

She said bitterly:

— We would have been...

He drew her to him with a force that matched the heat of his words and hugged her powerfully, keeping her tight in his arms while their minds turned from troubling questions to the promised passion. He said:

— Your lips...

At that Humaam retreated from his position by the rock and tiptoed back to the flock, smiling sheepishly and sadly. The very air seemed to him to be drunk with love, and love seemed to mean disaster, but he said to himself: 'His face was pure and

gentle. He only looks like that behind the rock. There's no power like love to take away our cares.'

Meanwhile the sky was fading in surrender, sleepy sunset breezes blew about, and dusk crept on like the halting strains of a song of farewell. A billy goat mounted a nanny goat. Humaam began talking to himself again: 'My mother will be happy when this goat gives birth to its kids; but the birth of a human being can spell tragedy. There's a curse on our heads before we're born. The most amazing thing is this enmity that only exists because it is between brothers. How long must we bear this hatred? If the past were forgotten, how happy the present would be! But we shall go on gazing at this house which is the source of all our strength and all our misery.' His eyes rested on the billy goat and he smiled and set off round the flock, whistling and waving his stick. He happened to look at the great rock, which stood in seeming indifference to all that existed.

1 5 \* \* \* \* \*

Umayma woke early as usual, when only one star still shone in the sky. She wakened Adham, who moaned, got up and left the room, heavy with sleep, to wake Qadri and Humaam in the adjoining outer room where they slept. In its new, extended form the hut seemed like a small house. A wall surrounded it and enclosed a space at the rear as a sheep pen. A tangle of creepers covered the wall and softened its rough look, showing that Umayma had not given up her old dream of improving her home and making it as much like the Great House as she could.

The men gathered round a tub of water in the yard and washed their faces, then put on their work clothes. From inside

the hut came the smell of a wood fire and the cries of the younger children. At last they sat down round the table in front of the doorway, eating stewed beans from a big dish.

The autumn air was moist and slightly chilly at this early hour, but they had tough bodies well able to withstand its attacks. In the distance could be seen Idrees's hut which had also been extended. As for the Great House, it stood silent and turned in on itself, as though no ties held it to the outside world.

Umayma carried a jug of fresh milk, put it on the table and sat down. Qadri mocked her with a question:

— Why don't you sell the milk to the house of our respected grandfather?

Adham, now grey at the temples, rounded on him.

— Shut up and eat! Silence is the best we can ever hope for from you.

Umayma spoke as she chewed a mouthful:

— The time's come for pickling lemons and olives and green peppers. Qadri, you used to enjoy it when we made pickles and you helped with the lemons.

Qadri said bitterly:

— We used to love it when we were small, for no good reason.

Adham returned the jug to its place and asked:

— What's the matter with you today? Who do you think you are — the hero Abu Zayd?

Qadri laughed and made no answer, but Humaam said:

— Market day is near; we must sort out the sheep.

His mother nodded in agreement, but his father spoke to Qadri again:

— Qadri, you mustn't be such a ruffian. Whenever I meet anybody who knows you, he complains to me about you. I'm afraid you may end up living like your uncle.

— Or like my grandfather!

Adham's eyes blazed with anger.

— Don't say anything bad about your grandfather. Have you ever heard me talk that way? Besides, he's never done you any wrong.

Qadri protested vigorously.

— As long as he wrongs you he's wronging us.

— Shut up! Do us a favor and keep quiet.

— Because of him we're fated to live like this, and so is our uncle's daughter.

— What's she to us? Her father was the cause of the disaster.

Qadri bellowed:

— I mean it's not right for a woman of our blood to grow up out in this desert. Tell me; who is this girl going to marry?

— Let her marry the Devil himself. She's no business of ours. She must be a beast of prey like her father.

He looked at his wife for support. Umayma echoed him.

— Yes, like her father.

Adham spat.

— Damn her and her father!

Humaam said:

— Isn't this talk going to spoil our breakfast?

Umayma spoke gently:

— It's not that bad. The best times are when we're all together.

At that moment they heard Idrees roaring curses and insults at the top of his voice. Adham said in disgust:

— The dawn prayer has begun.

He took a last mouthful and left the table. He went to his barrow and set off with it, calling out: 'Look after yourselves.' They said goodbye, and off he went to Gemalia. Humaam stood up and went down the path to the goat pen. Soon the sheep and goats were bleating, and their hooves pattered as they filled the path on their outward journey. Qadri got up too and picked up his stick. He waved goodbye to his mother and caught up with his brother. When they neared Idrees's hut he stood in their path and asked sarcastically:



— How much a head, young man?

Qadri studied him with curiosity while Humaam avoided looking at him. Idrees asked:

— Will neither of you sons of the cucumber merchant be good enough to answer me?

Qadri answered sharply:

— If you want to buy, go to the market.

Idrees guffawed.

— And if I decided to take one by force?

Hind's voice came from inside the hut:

— Father, we don't want any scenes.

He answered her playfully:

— You mind your own business and leave the slave's sons to me.

Humaam said:

— We don't get in your way; don't get in ours.

— Oh! The voice of Adham! You should be in with the sheep, not behind them.

Humaam said defiantly:

— My father ordered us not to answer your mockery.

Idrees laughed loudly.

— God bless him! But for these orders of his you'd surely be lost. (Then, putting on a harsh tone:) But it's only thanks to my name that anybody respects you two. God damn you all! Get out of my sight!

They went on their way, twirling their sticks from time to time. Humaam remained pale with emotion. He said to Qadri:

— That man is despicable. Even at this time of day his breath reeks of wine.

They were following their flock into the desert. Qadri said:

— He talks a lot, but he hasn't lifted a finger to harm us.

Humaam denied this hotly:

— On the contrary, he has stolen sheep from us more than once.

— He's a drunkard, but unfortunately he is our uncle; we just have to accept that.

They were silent for a while as they made for the big rock. A few clouds floated in the sky and sunshine drenched the endless sands. Humaam could no longer bear to hide what he wanted to say:

— You'll be making a big mistake if you join his family.

Qadri's eyes flashed with anger. He shouted:

— Don't you try to tell me what to do; your father is bad enough.

Humaam was still smarting from Idrees's insults.

— Our life is full of troubles; don't make them worse.

Qadri yelled:

— I hope they'll destroy you — these troubles you create for yourselves. As for me, I shall do what I like.

They had by now reached grazing ground. Humaam turned to his brother and said:

— Don't you think you're running away from the consequences of what you're doing.

Qadri seized him by the shoulder and shouted:

— You're just jealous, that's all.

Humaam was amazed. His brother's words had taken him by surprise, though he was used to his sudden outbursts. He freed his shoulder from Qadri's grip, exclaiming:

— God help us!

Qadri folded his arms and shook his head scornfully. Humaam went on:

— The best thing I can do is leave you alone till you're sorry; you won't own to your mistake — not till it's too late.

He turned away and headed for the shady side of the rock. Qadri stood scowling under the hot rays of the sun.

1 6 \*

Adham and his family were sitting in front of the hut, eating supper by the faint light of the stars, when there came an event such as had not been seen in the desert since the expulsion of Adham. The gates of the Great House opened, and out came a figure bearing a lamp. All eyes were raised in astonishment and, tongue-tied, they followed the lamp as it moved through the darkness like a will o' the wisp. When it was half way to the hut, their gaze fixed on the bearer, examining it by the light of the lamp, till Adham whispered: 'It's Kareem, the gatekeeper.' Their amazement grew when they saw for certain that he was heading for them. They all stopped dead, some with food in their hands and some with unchewed mouthfuls. The man reached them and stood with hand raised, saying:

— Good evening, Mr. Adham!

Adham trembled at the sound he had not heard for twenty years. It brought back from the far reaches of his memory his father's deep voice, the scent of jasmine and henna, longings and sorrows. The earth seemed to tremble with him. He fought back his tears as he said:

— Dear old Kareem! Good evening!

The gatekeeper spoke with undisguised emotion:

— I hope you and your family are well.

— Quite well, Kareem, thank God.

Kareem said kindly:

— I wish I could tell you all that's on my mind, but I have been charged only to inform you that my noble master summons your son Humaam to meet him at once.

There was silence. They exchanged glances, and confusion overcame them. A voice asked:

— Only Humaam?

They turned resentfully to see Idrees listening nearby. However, Kareem did not answer him, but raised his hand in salute and went back towards the Great House, leaving them

all in the dark. Idrees was enraged and shouted after him:

— Are you going to leave me without an answer, you son of a bitch?

Qadri recovered from the shock and asked furiously:

— Why only Humaam?

Idrees echoed him:

— Yes, why only Humaam?,

Adham spoke to him, perhaps finding an outlet for his emotion.

— Go home and leave us in peace.

— Peace? I'll stand where I please.

Humaam looked up at the Great House in silence, his heart beating so hard that he imagined it would echo back from Jebel Muqattam. His father said with resignation:

— Go to your grandfather, Humaam, go in peace.

Qadri turned to his father and asked defiantly:

— And me? Am I not your son just as much as he?

— Don't talk like Idrees, Qadri. Of course you're my son just as much as he. I'm not to blame; I didn't issue the invitation.

Idrees contradicted him:

— But it's in your power to refuse this discrimination between brothers.

— This is no business of yours. Humaam, you must go. Qadri's turn will come, I'm sure of that.

Idrees turned to go, saying:

— You're an unjust father, like your own father. Poor Qadri! Why should he be punished without having done wrong? But in our family, curses always fall on the best members first. God really has damned this crazy house.

He left, and the darkness swallowed him up. At that Qadri cried out:

— You're being unjust to me, Father!

— Don't repeat his words. Come here, Qadri; and you, Humaam, go.

Humaam spoke with anguish:

— I wish my brother was coming with me.

— He'll follow you soon enough.

Qadri shouted furiously:

— What's this injustice? Why has he preferred him to me?

He doesn't know him any more than he knows me, so why does he pick him for an invitation?

Adham gave Humaam a push saying: 'Go!' and Humaam left.

Umayma murmured:

— Take care of yourself.

Weeping, she took Qadri in her arms, but he broke away from her and set off in his brother's footsteps. Adham called after him:

— Come back, Qadri! Don't gamble with your future.

Qadri said angrily:

— No power on earth will bring me back.

Umayma's wails grew louder, and the younger children inside cried. Qadri strode out till he caught up with his brother. Nearby in the darkness he saw the figure of Idrees leading Hind along by the hand. When they reached the gate, Idrees pushed Qadri to the left of Humaam and Hind to his right and withdrew a few paces, shouting:

— Open up, Kareem! The grandchildren have come to meet their grandfather.

The gate opened and on the threshold appeared Kareem, lamp in hand. He said politely:

— Please come in, Mr Humaam.

Idrees yelled:

— And this is his brother Qadri, and this is Hind, the image of my mother who died of grief.

Kareem said politely:

— You know, Mr. Idrees, that nobody enters this house without permission.

He beckoned to Humaam, who entered. Qadri followed,

taking Hind by the hand, but a voice that Idrees knew boomed out sternly from the garden:

— Go in your shame, you two.

Their feet stayed as if nailed to the ground. The gate swung to. Idrees rushed at them, seized them by the shoulders and asked in a voice trembling with rage:

— What shame does he mean?

Hind screamed with pain, while Qadri twisted suddenly towards Idrees and freed himself and Hind from his grip. Hind turned and fled into the darkness. Idrees stepped quickly back, then aimed a blow at Qadri. The young man stood up to it in spite of its force and punched back even harder, and they let fly, exchanging punches and kicks with savage brutality at the foot of the wall of the Great House, Idrees yelled:

— I'll kill you, you son of a bitch.

Qadri shouted:

— I'll kill you before you can kill me.

They exchanged blows till the blood flowed from Qadri's mouth and nose. Adham came, running like a madman, and shouted at the top of his voice:

— Leave my son alone, Idrees!

Idrees yelled with hatred:

— I'll kill him for his crime.

— I shan't let you kill him. And if you do I shan't let you live.

Hind's mother came up wailing and shouted:

— Hind's run away, Idrees; catch her before she disappears.

Adham threw himself between Idrees and Qadri and yelled at his brother:

— Come to your senses; you're fighting for no reason. Your daughter is pure and untouched, but you've terrified her and she's fled; catch her before she disappears.

He grabbed Qadri and hurried back with him, saying:

— Be quick! Your mother had passed out when I left her.

As for Idrees, he went off into the darkness crying at the top of his voice: 'Hind! Hind!'

1 7 \*

Humaam followed Kareem up the path under its canopy of jasmine, heading for the veranda. In the garden, night seemed to be something new, soft, full of the scent of flowers and fragrant herbs. Its loveliness pierced him to the heart. He was overcome with feelings of wonder and longing and deep love for the place, and knew that he was enjoying the most precious moments of his life. There was light behind the shutters on some of the windows, and from the door of the great drawing room a rectangle of light was cast on the ground in the garden. His heart pounded as he imagined the life in the great rooms behind the windows—who lived there and how. His heart beat still harder as the wonderful garden impressed on him that he was descended from the children of this house, a drop of its life, coming to meet it face to face, in his plain blue jellaba and his faded cap and with his bare feet.

They climbed the steps to the veranda and went to a little door at the right-hand end, which opened on a staircase. They went up in deathly silence, till they reached a long corridor lit by a lamp hanging from the carved ceiling. They headed for a big closed door half way along the corridor and Humaam said to himself with emotion: 'Somewhere in this corridor, perhaps at this very spot at the top of the stairs, my mother stood twenty years ago to guard the way. What a pathetic thought!'

Kareem knocked on the big door for permission to enter, pushed it gently open, stood to one side and ushered Humaam in. The young man went in, deliberate, polite and apprehensive. He did not hear the door close behind him, nor was he more than dimly aware of the light that shone from the ceiling and from the corners of the room. His whole attention focussed on the place where a man sat cross-legged on a divan. He had never seen his grandfather before, but he could not doubt the identity of the person seated before him. Who could this giant be if not the forebear of whom he had heard such

amazing things? He approached, and in the old man's large eyes he met a gaze that read all that was in his mind, though at the same time it filled his heart with peace and calm. He bowed so low that his forehead almost touched the divan, and held out his hand. The old man gave him his hand, and he kissed it with deep devotion and said, with unexpected boldness:

— Good evening, Grandfather!

The answer came in a powerful voice not without kindness:

— Welcome, my son; sit down!

Humaam went over to a chair to the right of the divan and sat on the edge of it, Gebelaawi said:

— Sit back comfortably.

Humaam slid deep into the chair, his heart overflowing with joy. His lips moved in a whisper of thanks, then there was silence. For a long time he stared at the pattern in the carpet at his feet, feeling the force of the gaze that was fixed on him, just as one feels the force of the sun without looking at it. He suddenly became conscious of the private chamber to his right and he glanced at the door fearfully and sadly. The old man at once asked:

— What do you know about that door?

His limbs trembled and he marvelled at his observation. He said boldly:

— I know it was the gateway to our sufferings.

— And what did you think of your grandfather when you heard the story?

He opened his mouth to speak, but the old man added:

— Tell me the truth.

His tone had the effect of making Humaam say frankly:

— It seemed to me that my parents' behavior was quite wrong, but that their punishment was terribly harsh.

Gebelaawi smiled and said:

— That is more or less what you feel. I hate lying and deception, and that's why I've expelled from my house all those who have disgraced themselves.



The tears came to Humaam's eyes. His grandfather went on:  
— You seem a decent boy; that's why I've sent for you.

Humaam spoke through his tears:

— Thank you, sir!

His grandfather said quietly:

— I've decided to give you a chance that has not been offered to anybody else from outside. It is that you should live in this house and marry in it and begin a new life here.

Humaam's heart raced, drunk with joy, as he waited for the next phrase of this music. But the man spoke no more. After hesitating a little, Humaam said:

— Thank you for your kindness.

— You deserve it.

The boy looked from his grandfather to the carpet, then asked anxiously:

— And my family?

Gebelaawi said reproachfully:

— I've said quite clearly what I want.

Humaam implored him:

— They deserve your mercy and forgiveness.

Gebelaawi asked somewhat coldly:

— Didn't you hear what I said?

— Yes indeed, but they are my mother and father and brothers and sisters. My father is a man who...

— Didn't you hear what I said?

There was anger in his voice. Silence fell. Then the old man announced the end of the conversation by saying:

— Come back when you've said goodbye to them.

Humaam stood up and kissed his grandfather's hand and left. He found Kareem waiting to show him out, and he followed in silence. When they reached the veranda Humaam saw a girl in the patch of light at the near end of the garden, hurrying out of sight. He just saw the side of her face and her neck and her slender figure. His grandfather's voice echoed in his ears: "Live in this house and marry in it." 'Marry a girl like

this one..? The life my father knew..! How has fate been so cruel to him? Where has he found the courage to bear life after that, behind his barrow? This chance is like a dream — my father's dream for twenty years. But what a load on my mind!

1 8 \*

Humaam went back to the hut and found his family sitting and watching for his return. They swarmed round him full of questions. Adham asked anxiously:

— What happened, my son?

Humaam noticed Qadri's swollen eye. He bent forward for a closer look. Adham said sadly:

— There's been a pitched battle between your brother and that man.

He pointed towards Idrees's hut which seemed to be submerged in darkness and silence. Qadri said angrily:

— All because of the foul, lying accusation thrown at me from inside the house...

Humaam pointed at Idrees's hut and asked anxiously:

— What's going on over there?

Adham said sadly:

— That man and his wife are searching for their runaway daughter.

Qadri shouted:

— Who's to blame if not that damned old monster?

Umayma implored him:

— Don't talk so loud.

Qadri yelled furiously:

— What are you afraid about? Nothing, except your longing for a return that will never happen. Believe me, you aren't going to leave this hut till you die.

Adham was enraged:

— That's enough nonsense. You're mad. God! Didn't you want to marry that runaway girl?

— I shall marry her.

— Shut up! I'm sick of your stupidity.

Umayma said miserably:

— We can't go on living next to Idrees after today.

Adham turned to Humaam and said:

— I asked you what happened.

Humaam spoke in a voice that bore no trace of happiness:

— My grandfather has asked me to live in the Great House.

Adham waited for him to go on, but when his son said nothing, he asked in despair:

— And us? What did he say about us?

Humaam shook his head sadly and whispered:

— Nothing!

Qadri laughed a poisonous laugh and asked sarcastically:

— And what has brought you back?

'Yes indeed, what has brought me back? Only that happiness was not made for people like me.' Humaam said sadly:

— I made sure to remind him about you.

Qadri said resentfully:

— Thank you, but what made him prefer you to us?

— You know it's not my doing.

Adham said with a sigh:

— Without any doubt you're the best of us all, Humaam.

Qadri shouted bitterly:

— You're the one, Father, who never mentions that man without some praise he doesn't deserve.

Adham said:

— You don't understand anything.

— That man's worse than his son Idrees.

Umayma said beseechingly:

— You'll break my heart if you lock the door against yourself just when there's some hope.

Qadri said contemptuously:

— There's no hope except in this desert. Realize that and relax. Give up hope of that damned house. I'm not afraid of the desert; I'm not afraid even of Idrees. I can pay back his blows many times over. Spit on that house and relax.

Adham wondered to himself: 'Can life go on like this for ever? Why have you raised our hopes, Father, before you're ready to forgive us? What can soften your heart if all this time has not softened it? What's the use of hope if all this suffering has not made us fit to be forgiven by the one we love?' He asked in a hopeless voice:

— Tell me what you're thinking, Humaam.

Shamefaced, Humaam replied:

— He said: 'Come back when you've said goodbye to them.'

The darkness could not hide Umayma's attempts to smother her sobs. Qadri asked evilly:

— What's keeping you?

Adham said firmly:

— Go in peace, Humaam, with our blessing.

Qadri said with mock seriousness:

— Go, you fine man, and don't take any notice of anybody.

Adham shouted:

— Don't insult your good brother.

Qadri said laughing.

— He's the worst of us all.

Humaam shouted angrily:

— If I decide to stay it won't be for *your* sake.

Adham said firmly:

— No; go without any hesitation.

Umayma spoke through her tears:

— Yes, go in peace!

— No, Mother, I'm not going.

Adham cried out:

— Are you mad, Humaam?

— Not at all, Father. The matter needs thinking over and discussing.

— It doesn't need any such thing. Don't make me bear another offense.

Humaam said with determination, pointing to Idrees's hut:

— I think things are going to happen...

Qadri said scornfully:

— You're too weak to defend even yourself from harm, let alone anybody else.

— I'd better just ignore what you say.

Adham spoke again hopefully:

— Go, Humaam.

Humaam moved towards the hut, saying:

— I'm staying with you.

1 9 \* \* \* \* \*

Only the afterglow of the sun remained. People were no longer about, and Qadri and Humaam were alone with their flock in the desert. In that whole day they had exchanged only such words as their work made necessary. Qadri had been away much of the time, and Humaam had guessed that he was sniffing out news of Hind. He had stayed alone near the sheep and goats in the shadow of the big rock.

Suddenly Qadri asked Humaam provocatively:

— Tell me what you mean to do; are you going to your grandfather, or aren't you?

Humaam was annoyed.

— That's my business.

Anger flared up in Qadri's heart, marking his face like the shadows lengthening on Muqattam. He asked:

— Why have you stayed? When will you leave? When will you

have the courage to say what you mean to do?

— I've stayed to take my share of the trouble you've caused with your goings-on.

Qadri laughed cruelly:

— You say that to hide your jealousy.

Humaam shook his head in amazement and said:

— You deserve pity, not jealousy.

Qadri came closer to him, shaking with fury, and said in a voice choking with rage:

— How I hate you when you pretend to be wise.

Humaam stared contemptuously at him but said nothing.

Qadri went on:

— People like you are an insult to life.

Humaam did not flinch under the stare that burned into him, but said firmly:

— You know, I'm not afraid of you.

— Has the arch-villain promised to protect you?

— Anger makes you utterly despicable.

Suddenly Qadri hit him in the face. The blow did not catch him off his guard and he hit back even harder, shouting:

— Don't get any crazier!

Qadri bent down swiftly, picked up a stone and hurled it with all his force at his brother. Humaam jumped to dodge it, but it hit him on the forehead. He let out a cry and stood rooted to the spot, anger still blazing in his eyes till suddenly it was gone like a flame snuffed out, and they went quite blank, as though turned inward. He swayed, then fell on his face. Qadri's mood changed at once. His rage evaporated, leaving him like cold steel after the smelting, and fear gripped him. He wished desperately that the prostrate man would get up or move, but he did not. He bent over him and stretched out his hand to shake him gently, but he did not respond. He turned him on his back to lift his nose and mouth out of the sand, but he lay there motionless, his eyes in a fixed stare. Qadri knelt beside him and began shaking him and rubbing his chest and

hands, looking in panic at all the blood flowing from the wound. He called his name hopefully, but there was no answer. His silence was so heavy and deep that it seemed to be part of his being. This stillness was neither that of a living creature nor that of non-living matter; there was no feeling, no stirring, no concern with anything. It was as though it had landed from another world and had nothing to do with this world.

Qadri instinctively knew death. He began tearing at his hair in despair. He looked round fearfully, but nothing stirred save the sheep and the insects, which took no interest in him. Soon night would fall, and the darkness would deepen. He stood up resolutely, took his stick, and went to a place between the rock and the Jebel. He began digging, scooping the sand up with his hands, working obstinately, with the sweat dripping from him and his limbs trembling. Then he hurried back to his brother, shook him and called him for the last time, without hoping for any response, seized him by the ankles and dragged him off to the grave. He stared at him, groaning, hesitated a while, then heaped the sand over him. He stood wiping the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his jellaba, then covered the patches of blood with sand.

He threw himself down exhausted, feeling all strength had gone out of him. He wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. He thought: 'Death has defeated me.' Uninvited, unintended, it comes as it pleases. If only he could turn into a goat and disappear in the flock, or into a grain of sand and be buried in the ground! 'As long as I can't give back life, I can't claim to have any power. That sight will never leave my memory. What I buried was neither living nor lifeless, but something else that my hand has made.'

Qadri came home driving the sheep and goats. Adham's barrow was not in its place. His mother's voice called from indoors:

— Why are you two late?

He shoed the flock into the path leading to their pen saying:

— I fell asleep. Is Humaam not back yet?

Umayma raised her voice above the noise of the two smallest children:

— No! Wasn't he with you?

He swallowed though his mouth was dry and said:

— He left me at midday without telling me where he was going. I thought he'd come back here.

Adham had just arrived and was pushing the barrow into the yard. He asked:

— Did you quarrel?

— Never.

— I think it must be you who made him leave, but where can he be?

Umayma had come out into the yard, while Qadri had shut the gate of the pen and was washing his hands and face in a basin under the barrel. He had to face up to the situation. The world had changed, but despair is a powerful force. He joined his parents in the darkness, drying his face on a corner of his jellaba. Umayma asked:

— Which way did Humaam go? He's never been off like this before.

Adham agreed with her:

— Yes; tell us how he went, and why.

Qadri's heart pounded at the picture that sprang to his memory, but he said:

— I was sitting in the shade of the rock. I happened to turn



and saw him setting off this way. I thought of calling him back but didn't.

Umayma was distraught.

— If only you'd called him instead of letting your anger get the better of you.

Adham looked anxiously into the surrounding darkness. He saw a feeble light in the window of Idrees's hut, which showed that life was stirring there again, but he paid no attention to it. His gaze fastened on the Great House, and he asked:

— Do you think he's gone to his grandfather?

Umayma rejected the idea.

— He wouldn't do that without telling us.

Qadri said in a faint voice:

— Perhaps shame prevented him.

Adham gave him a questioning look, alarmed by the lack of scorn or enmity in his voice.

— We told him to go but he refused.

Qadri said weakly:

— He was embarrassed to accept in front of us.

— That wouldn't be like him. What's the matter? You look sick.

Qadri protested.

— I had to do all the work by myself.

Adham cried out wretchedly:

— I'm really worried.

Umayma said in a hoarse voice:

— I'll go to the Great House and ask about him.

Adham shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and said:

— Nobody will answer you, Little Mother. But I assure you he didn't go there.

Umayma sighed heavily and said:

— O God! I've never been so upset before. Do something!

Adham sighed loudly and said:

— Well then, let's look everywhere for him.

Qadri said:

— Perhaps he's on his way here.

Umayma exclaimed:

— We mustn't wait. (Then, overcome by anxiety, looking at Idrees's hut:) Can Idrees have waylaid him?

Adham said gruffly:

— Idrees's enemy is Qadri, not Humaam.

— He wouldn't hesitate to kill any of us. I'm going to see him.

Adham prevented her from going, saying:

— Don't make things any worse. I promise you, if we don't find him I'll go to Idrees and to the Great House.

He peered anxiously at the shape of Qadri in the dark. 'What's he keeping so quiet about? Doesn't he know more than he's said? Where can Humaam be?' Umayma made to leave the yard and Adham hurried to her and caught her by the shoulder. Just then the gate of the Great House opened. They watched and in a few moments Kareem's form appeared, heading towards them. Adham went out to greet him.

— My dear Kareem! Welcome!

The man saluted him and said:

— My noble master asks what is keeping Humaam.

Umayma said wretchedly:

— We don't know where he is. We even thought he might be with you.

— My master asks what's keeping him.

Umayma cried out:

— God forbid what I suspect!

Kareem went away. Umayma's head started jerking about as if she were going to have a fit. Adham led her to their room, where the two little ones were crying. He shouted savagely:

— Don't leave this room. I'll come back with him, but mind you don't leave this room.

He returned to the yard and stumbled over Qadri, who was sitting on the ground. He bent over him and hissed:

— Tell me what you know about your brother.

He raised his head quickly, but something prevented him from speaking. His father asked again:

— Qadri, tell me what you have done to your brother.

The young man spoke almost inaudibly:

— Nothing!

Adham went back inside and returned with a lamp which he lit and stood on his barrow. Its light fell on Qadri's face, and he examined him fearfully, then said:

— I can see trouble in your face.

Umayma's voice came from inside but could scarcely be heard above the noise of the two little ones. Adham shouted:

— Keep quiet woman! Die if you must, but die quietly!

He examined his son again. Suddenly his limbs trembled. He took hold of the hem of Qadri's sleeve and said in panic:

— Blood? What's this? Your brother's blood?

Qadri stared at his sleeve and could not help shuddering, then hung his head in despair. By this movement he acknowledged the truth. Adham pulled him to his feet and forced him out with a violence he had never known before. A darkness blacker than that of the night covered his eyes.

2 1 \* \* \* \* \*

Adham swept Qadri along saying:

— We must go by Derrasa Desert, so as not to pass Idrees's hut.

Deeper and deeper into the darkness they plunged, Qadri staggering slightly under his father's grip on his shoulder. As they hurried along, Adham asked in an old man's voice:

— Tell me, did you hit him? What did you hit him with? What state did you leave him in?

Qadri did not answer. Though his father's grip was tight, he hardly felt it. His agony was too intense to express. He wished

the sun would never rise again. Adham went on:

— Have pity on me and speak. But you don't know the meaning of pity. I condemned myself to suffer the day I fathered you. Curses have followed me for twenty years, and here I am asking pity from somebody who doesn't know any.

Qadri burst into tears, and his shoulder shook in Adham's fierce grip. He sobbed so much that the contagion reached his father, but Adham said:

— Is that your answer? Why, Qadri, why? How could you? Confess now in the darkness, before you see yourself by the light of day.

Qadri shouted:

— May day never come!

— We are the children of darkness; day will never dawn for us. I used to think evil lived in Idrees's hut; but here it is in our own flesh and blood. Idrees mocks and drinks and brawls, but in our family one person kills another. O God! Have you killed your brother?

— Never!

— Then where is he?

— I didn't mean to kill him.

Adham roared:

— But he's dead.

Qadri burst into tears again and his father's grip tightened. 'So Humaam is dead — the flower of life — his grandfather's favorite — as though he had never been. But for this searing pain, I wouldn't have believed it.' They reached the big rock and Adham asked in a harsh voice:

— Where did you leave him, you criminal?

Qadri went to the place where he had dug his brother's grave and stood beside it, between the rock and the Jebel. Adham asked:

— Where's your brother? I see nothing.

Qadri said almost inaudibly:

— Here's where I buried him.

Adham shouted:

— You buried him?

He took a box of matches from his pocket, lit one and examined the ground by its light, till he saw a patch that had been disturbed, with the trail left by the corpse leading up to it. He groaned with pain and began scraping the sand away with trembling hands. He worked on, in despair, till his fingers touched Humaam's head. He fumbled his way to the sides of the corpse and lifted it gently. He fell on his knees beside it, placing his hands on its head, his eyes closed in hopeless misery, moaning from the depth of his being. He murmured:

— My forty years of life seem like a long illness as I kneel beside your body, my son.

Qadri was standing on the other side of the corpse. Suddenly Adham stood up, looking at him with blind hatred, and said in a savage voice:

— Humaam will go home on your shoulders.

Qadri was horrified and began to retreat, but Adham rushed round the corpse, caught him by the shoulder and yelled:

— Carry your brother!

Qadri groaned:

— I can't.

— You were able to kill him...

— I can't, Father.

— Don't call me 'father'; a man who kills his brother has no father, no mother, no brothers.

— I can't.

He tightened his grip on him and said:

— A murderer must carry his victim.

Qadri tried to twist out of his grip, but Adham would not let him. In a frenzy, Adham rained blows on his face, but he neither dodged them nor gave voice to the pain. Adham stopped, then said:

— Don't lose any time; your mother is waiting.

Qadri shuddered at the mention of his mother and said:  
— Let me disappear.

Adham pulled him towards the corpse saying:

— Come, let's carry him together.

Adham turned to the corpse and placed his hands under Humaam's armpits while Qadri bent down and took his legs. They lifted the body together and went slowly into Derrasa Desert. Adham was so deep in painful thoughts that he lost all sensation, but Qadri went on suffering from a palpitating heart and trembling limbs. His nose was filled by a pungent, earthy smell, while the feel of the corpse crept up through his arms and into his heart. The darkness around them was thick, while on the horizon glimmered the lights of the unsleeping town. Qadri felt that his despair was taking his breath away. He stopped and said:

— I'll carry the body alone.

He put one arm under its back and one under its thighs, and walked on with Adham following.

2 2 \* \* \* \* \*

When they neared the hut they heard Umayma's voice asking anxiously:

— Have you found him?

Adham ordered her:

— Go inside ahead of me.

He went before Qadri to the hut to make sure she was out of sight. At the door Qadri stopped dead. His father motioned him to go in but he refused, saying in a whisper:

— I can't face her.

His father whispered angrily:

— You were able to do something much worse.

But Qadri stayed where he was.

— No, this is worse.

Adham pushed him firmly in front of him, forcing him to move into the outer room. Then Adham sprang on Umayma and with his hand stifled the scream that was about to break from her lips. He said harshly:

— Don't scream, woman. We mustn't attract any attention till we've sorted things out. Let's bear our fate patiently and suffer in silence. The evil was born of your womb and my loins. The curse lies on us all.

He held her mouth tight. She tried in vain to free herself from his hand. She attempted to bite him, but could not. Her breathing became irregular, her strength left her and she fainted. Qadri stood holding the body, silent and ashamed, staring at the lamp to avoid looking at her. Adham turned to him and helped him to lay the body on the bed, then covered it tenderly. Qadri looked at his brother's corpse lying under its sheet on the bed they had shared all their lives, and he knew that there was no longer any place for him in this house. Umayma moved her head and opened her eyes. Adham hurried over to her, saying firmly:

— Mind you don't scream.

She made to get up and he helped her, warning her not to make any noise. She tried to throw herself on the bed, but he prevented her. She stood, defeated. Then she began relieving her feelings by tearing out her hair, handful after handful. Adham did not care what she did, but said roughly:

— Do what you like, but do it silently.

She said hoarsely:

— My son! My son!

Adham said quietly:

— This is his body; it is no longer your son nor my son. And this is his murderer; kill him if you like.

Umayma beat her cheeks and said to Qadri savagely:

— The vilest animal doesn't do what you have done.

Qadri hung his head in silence, and Adham said:

— Is his life to be lost for nothing? In justice, you should not live.

Umayma cried out:

— Yesterday hope dawned. We told him to go but he refused. If only he'd gone! If he hadn't been kind and noble and generous he would have gone. Is this murder his reward? How could you do it, you stone-hearted brute? You aren't my son any more, and I'm not your mother.

Qadri uttered not a word, but he said to himself: 'I killed him once but he is killing me everysecond. I'm not alive. Who says I'm alive?'

Adham asked him roughly:

— What shall I do with you?

Qadri said calmly:

— You said I should not live.

Umayma cried:

— How could you bring yourself to kill him?

Qadri said hopelessly:

— It's no use being sorry. I'm ready to be punished. Death will be easier than what I'm suffering.

Adham said angrily:

— But you've made our life worse than death too.

Umayma beat her cheeks and exclaimed:

— I hate this life. Bury me with my son. Why don't you let me howl?

Adham said with scorn and bitterness:

— Its not your vocal chords I'm worried about; I'm afraid that devil might hear us.

Qadri said:

— Let him hear what he likes; I don't care for life any more.

At that moment Idrees's voice came from near the front door:

— Brother Adham! Come here you poor thing.



They all shuddered and Adham shouted:

— Go home, and mind you don't provoke me!

Idrees replied in a loud voice:

— What a dreadful business! Your trouble has saved you from my anger. But let's not talk like this. We're both afflicted. You've lost your dearest, most precious son, and I've seen my only daughter vanish. Our children were our comfort in our exile, and they've gone. Come, my poor brother, let's comfort one another.

So the secret was out! How? All at once Umayma was afraid for Qadri. Adham said:

— Your gloating doesn't bother me. It's nothing beside my agony.

Idrees protested:

— Gloating! Don't you know I cried when I saw you pull the body out of the grave Qadri had dug for it?

Adham shouted furiously:

— Lousy spy!

— I didn't only cry for the victim but for the murderer too, and I said to myself: 'Poor, poor Adham; you've lost two sons in one night'.

Umayma began to howl, taking no notice of anyone, and Qadri rushed suddenly out of the hut. Adham ran after him, and Umayma wailed:

— I don't want to lose both.

Qadri tried to attack Idrees, but Adham pushed him away, then faced his brother defiantly and said:

— Don't provoke us!

Idrees said calmly:

— You're a fool, Adham; you can't tell a friend from an enemy. You attack your brother to defend your son's murderer.

— Get away from me!

Idrees laughed.

— As you wish. Accept my condolences; and goodbye!

Idrees disappeared into the night. Adham turned to find Qadri, and there was Umayma asking where he was. Adham was alarmed and started peering into the darkness and calling at the top of his voice:

— Qadri! Qadri! Where are you?

He heard Idrees echoing loudly:

— Qadri! Qadri! Where are you?

2 3 \*

Humaam was buried in a tomb belonging to the Trust at Bab el-Nasr. His funeral was attended by many acquaintances of Adham, most of them fellow traders, a few of them customers who liked his gentle character and straight dealing. Idrees took it upon himself to attend the funeral; more than that: he stood receiving condolences as uncle of the deceased. Adham disapproved in silence. The funeral procession included many strongmen, procurers, thugs, thieves and bandits. At the burial, Idrees stood over the tomb, encouraging Adham with words of comfort which he endured patiently, making no answer, the tears rolling down his cheeks. Umayma gave vent to her grief by wailing and beating herself and rolling in the dust.

When the people had gone, Adham turned to Idrees and said angrily:

— Is there no limit to your cruelty?

Idrees pretended to be taken aback and asked:

— What are you talking about, my poor brother?

Adham said sharply:

— I never imagined you could be as cruel as this, however badly I thought of you. Death is the end for each of us; how can you gloat over it?

Idrees struck his hands together in a gesture of disbelief.

— Grief has made you forget your manners, but I'll forgive you.

— When will you realize that we're no longer joined by any tie?

— Merciful heavens! Aren't you my brother? That's a tie that can't be broken.

— Idrees! You've tormented me enough.

— Grief is ugly, but we're both afflicted. You've lost Humaam and Qadri, and I've lost Hind. The great Gebelaawi's got a fornicating granddaughter and a killer grandson. Anyway, you're better off than me; you have other children to make up for what's happened.

Adham asked miserably:

— Are you still jealous of me?

— Idrees jealous of Adham?!

Adham roared:

— If your punishment is not as bad as your deeds, the world is done for.

— Done for... done for...

Painful days passed, full of sorrows. Grief overcame Umayma and her health worsened and she wasted away. In a few years Adham had aged more than most men do in a long life. The couple constantly suffered from frailty and sickness. One day they both felt very ill and retired to bed, Umayma in the inner room with her two youngest children, and Adham in the outer room that had belonged to Humaam and Qadri. The day passed and night fell, but they lit no lamp. Adham was content with the moonlight coming in from the yard. He dozed for short spells, half waking between them. He heard the voice of Idrees outside asking sarcastically:

— Do you need any help?

He was upset and did not answer. He used to dread the hour

when Idrees left his hut for his nights out. He heard the voice again saying:

— Let every one witness my devotion and his obstinacy!  
Idrees went off singing:

Three of us hunt in the Jebel above;  
Longing kills one and the next falls to love.

Adham's eyes filled with tears. 'This evil that never stops taunting, fighting, killing, tossing aside all respect, acting harshly and tyrannically, mocking at the consequences, and laughing till the horizons echo! It torments the weak, enjoys funerals, sings over tombstones. I am near to death and still he mocks me with his laughter. The murderer has vanished and his victim lies in the dust, and in my hut we cry for them both. Time has turned the laughter of childhood in the garden to frowns and tears. What's left of my body is filled with pain. Why all this suffering? Where oh where is the happiness of our dreams?'

Adham imagined he heard footsteps, slow and heavy. Submerged memories flooded back like a wonderful but elusive fragrance. He turned his head towards the door of the hut and saw it open. Then the doorway seemed to be filled by a huge person. He gazed in astonishment and with a mixture of hope and despair. He sighed deeply and murmured:

— Father?!

It seemed that he heard the old voice saying:

— Good evening, Adham!

His eyes swam with tears and he tried to stand up but could not. He felt a joy he had not known for over twenty years. He said in a quavering voice:

— Let me believe...

— You cry, but you are the one who did wrong.

Adham said in a tearful voice:

— It was a terrible wrong but a terrible punishment. Still,

even insects don't lose hope of finding shelter.

— And so you teach me wisdom?!

— Forgive me! Forgive me! I'm crushed by sorrow and illness. Even my sheep are threatened with destruction.

— How good of you to be afraid for your sheep.

Adham asked hopefully:

— Have you forgiven me?

He answered after a pause:

— Yes.

Adham's whole body trembled as he exclaimed:

— Thank God! A little while ago I was touching the pit of hell.

— And now you've found the way out?

— Yes, like a clear sky after a nightmare.

— Because of that you're a good son.

Adham sighed and said:

— I'm the father of a murderer and his victim.

— The dead can't come back. What do you want?

Adham groaned and said:

— I used to long for the music in the garden, but today nothing would seem good to me.

— The Trust will be for your descendants.

— Thank God!

— Don't tire yourself; try to sleep.

Within a short time of one another Adham and Umayma and then Idrees passed away. The children grew up, and after a long absence Qadri returned with Hind and their children. They grew up side by side, inter-married and increased their numbers. The settlement expanded, thanks to money from the Trust, and our Alley came into existence. From these ancestors are descended its people.



# GEBEL

2 4 \*

The Trust's houses were built in the two rows that form our Alley. They start in front of the Great House and run westward towards Gemalia. As for the Great House, it stands isolated on all sides where the Alley meets the desert. Gebelaawi Alley is the longest in the district. It consists mostly of tenement-houses like those of Hamdaan's sector, but there are plenty of hovels in the half nearer Gemalia. To complete the picture Trustee's House must be mentioned, standing at the top of the right-hand row, and Strongman's House facing it on the left.

The gates of the Great House were closed on its master and his trusted servants. Gebelaawi's sons had died young, and the only surviving descendant of those who had lived and died in the Great House was the then Trustee, known as 'the Effendi'. As for the people of the Alley in general, some of them were street traders, and there were also shopkeepers and cafe owners, but a great many were beggars. There was a general trade in drugs, especially hashish, opium and aphrodisiacs, in which anyone who was able took part.

The Alley was — as it still is — full of crowds and noise. In every corner urchins played barefoot and almost naked, filling

the air with their squeals and covering the ground with their filth. In every doorway women clustered, one chopping jute leaves, another peeling onions, another lighting a brazier, all gossiping and joking — and, when need be, cursing and swearing. There was an unending din of singing and crying, the insistent beat of the exorcist's drum, the rumble of barrows, the cries as people fought with words or with fists, the miaowing of cats and the growling of dogs, often scrapping over heaps of garbage. In every yard and along every wall scurried rats and mice, and it was not uncommon for people to band together to kill a snake or scorpion. As for the flies they were rivalled in numbers only by the lice, and they ate from everyone's plate and drank from everyone's mug, played round every eye and buzzed into every mouth, as if they were people's closest friends.

If a young man happened to be bold or muscular, in no time he was attacking decent people and bullying peaceful citizens, making himself the strongman of one of the sectors of the Alley, extorting protection money from the hard-working, living for trouble. Such men were Qidra and 'Lionheart', Barakaat, Hamooda and 'Quicksilver'. One of them, 'Thudclub', fought with one after another, till he had beaten them all and become Strongman of the Alley, making all the others pay him protection money. The Effendi — the Trustee — saw that he needed a man like this to carry out his orders and to ward off any threatened danger. He took him into his confidence and gave him a large salary out of the revenues of the Trust. Thudclub set up house opposite the Trustee and consolidated his power. The battles between strongmen became rare because the Chief Strongman could not abide contests that might lead to one of them gaining strength and thus threatening his own position; and so they could find no outlet for their bottled-up aggression other than the poor, peaceable people.

How had our Alley come to this pass? Gebelaawi had



promised Adham that the Trust would be used for the benefit of his descendants. The tenement-houses were built, the revenues were shared out, and the people enjoyed a period of happiness. When the old man finally closed his doors and cut himself off from the world, the Trustee followed his good example for a while. Then greed took hold of him, and soon he was keeping the income of the Trust for himself. He began by fiddling the accounts and paring down the allowances, and ended up by grabbing everything, confident in the protection of the Chief Strongman whose allegiance he had bought.

After that the people could not avoid the vilest kinds of work. Their numbers grew and their poverty increased and they were plunged in misery and filth. The stronger took to bullying, the weaker to begging and all of them to drugs. A man would slave and suffer to earn a few morsels which he then had to share with a strongman, in return not for thanks but for cuffs and insults and curses. The strongmen alone lived in ease and plenty, with their Strongman over them and the Trustee over everybody, while the ordinary people were trodden underfoot. If some poor man could not pay his protection money, a strongman would take his revenge on the whole sector, and if the victim complained to the Chief Strongman then the Chief would beat him up and hand him back to his local strongman for a repeat of the lesson. If he took it into his head to complain to the Trustee, then he would get a beating from the Trustee and all the strongmen.

I myself have seen this wretched state of affairs in our own day — a faithful image of what people tell us about the past. As for the bards in the cafes up and down the Alley, they tell only of the heroic times, avoiding anything that could offend the powerful, singing the praises of the Trustee and the strongmen, and celebrating a justice we never enjoy, a mercy we never find, a nobility we never meet with, a restraint we never see and a fairness we never hear of.

I ask myself what kept our forefathers, what keeps us, in this

accursed Alley. The answer is simple: in any other we would find only a worse life than we endure here—if their strongmen did not destroy us in revenge for the treatment they have had from ours. The worst of it is that we are envied. The people of the neighborhood say: ‘What a fortunate alley! They have a unique Trust and strongmen whose very name is enough to make your flesh creep!’ But we get from our Trust nothing but trouble, and from our strongmen nothing but pain and humiliation. Yet we stay, in spite of all that, and bear the sorrow, looking towards a future that will come no one knows when. We point to the Great House, saying: ‘There is our venerable Ancestor.’, and we point to the strongmen saying: ‘And these are our men. All things are in the hand of God.’

2 5 \*

The patience of Hamdaan’s people gave out and waves of revolt swept through their sector. They lived at the top of the Alley, next to the houses of the Effendi and Thudclub, around the place where Adham had built his hut. Their head was Hamdaan, the owner of a cafe, the best in the whole Alley, which stood in the middle of the sector.

Hamdaan was sitting to the right of the entrance of his cafe, wearing a grey cloak and with an embroidered turban round his head. He kept an eye on Abdoon, the serving boy, who scurried to and fro, and he exchanged news with some of the customers. The cafe was narrow but ran back a long way to the bard’s bench, which stood at the far end under an idealized painting of Adham on his deathbed looking at Gebelaawi in the doorway of the hut. Hamdaan signalled to the bard, who took up his rebec and prepared to chant. To the drone of his strings he began with a salute to the Effendi, ‘the man dearest

to Gebelaawi', and Thudclub, 'the finest of men', then related an episode of Gebelaawi's life a little before the birth of Adham. There were sounds of the slurping of coffee and tea and cinnamon, and smoke rose from the hookahs and collected round the lamp in wispy clouds. All eyes were on the bard, and the listeners nodded their approval of the beauty of the telling or the soundness of the moral. Passions were roused as the time of romance flowed towards its conclusion. Then the listeners showered the bard with compliments. At that, the groundswell of revolt welled up and swept over Hamdaan's people. Blear-eyed 'Mulehead' spoke from his seat in the middle of the cafe, following on from the story about Gebelaawi that they had heard.

— There was some good in the world; even Adham was never hungry, not even for a day.

Old Henna appeared at the door, lowering the basket of oranges from her head. She said:

— Bless you, Mulehead! Your words are as sweet as my oranges.

Hamdaan scolded her:

— Go away, woman, and spare us your blabber.

But Henna sat down on the floor in the doorway of the cafe.

— How nice it is to sit beside you! I've been tramping around calling my wares all day and half the night, and all for a few piasters.

Hamdaan was about to answer her when he saw 'Dumpling' arriving with a scowl on his dust-covered face. He watched him coming till he stood in the doorway of the cafe and shouted:

— Damn that tyrant, Qidra! Qidra's the worst tyrant of all. I asked him to let me put off payment for a day, so that God could provide, and he threw me down and knelt on my chest till I couldn't breathe.

From the back of the cafe came the voice of 'Digger':

— Come and sit beside me, Dumpling. God almighty damn the bastards! We're the rightful masters of this Alley, yet we're

beaten like dogs. Dumpling can't find the money for Qidra, and Henna goes about selling oranges, though she can't see an arm's length in front of her. Where's your courage, Hamdaan, son of Adham?

Dumpling looked towards the doorway, and Henna echoed:

— Where's your courage, son of Adham?

Hamdaan shouted:

— Be off with you, Henna! You're fifty years too old for marriage; why are you so keen on talking to us men?

She jeered:

— What men?

Hamdaan frowned, but Henna spoke again before he could, and seemed apologetic:

— Let me hear the bard, sir.

Digger said bitterly to the bard:

— Tell her how Hamdaan's people have been trampled on in this Alley.

The bard smiled and said:

— Careful, Digger; careful, master!

Digger protested:

— Who's the master round here? The master beats people, bullies people, murders people; you know who the master is!

The bard said anxiously:

— And what if we suddenly find Qidra or another of those devils standing in the middle of us?

Digger said sharply:

— They're all children of Idrees.

The bard said in a hushed voice:

— Careful, Digger, or we'll find the cafe tumbling about our ears.

Digger rose from his seat, strode up the cafe and sat down to the right of Hamdaan on his bench. He tried to speak but his voice was drowned by the shouts of some urchins who had descended like locusts outside, swearing at one another. Digger yelled at them:

— You little devils! Don't you have any holes to bolt to at night?

But they did not care what he yelled, and he leapt up as if stung by a scorpion and hurled himself at them. They ran off down the Alley squealing. Women's voices shouted from windows opposite the cafe: 'For God's sake, Digger!' 'You've frightened the children.' He shook his fist furiously and went back to his seat, saying:

— It's enough to drive you to distraction; no peace from the brats, no peace from the strongmen, no peace from the Trustee!

Everyone agreed with this. Hamdaan's people had lost their rightful share of the Trust. They were dragged ever deeper in filth and misery. They were in the power of a strongman who was not even one of them but came from the lowliest sector: Qidra, who stalked about proudly among them, beating up whomever he wished and getting protection money as he pleased. And so the patience of Hamdaan's people had snapped and waves of revolt raged round them.

Digger turned to Hamdaan and said:

— We all agree, Hamdaan. We're your people, and there are lots of us; our origin is well known, and our right to the Trust is as good as that of the Trustee himself.

The bard moaned:

— O God, let this night pass safely!

Hamdaan drew the cloak round himself and his peaked eyebrows bristled.

— We've said again and again, something must happen; I smell it in the air now.

'Lamplighter' Ali called out his greetings as he entered the cafe, gathering up the skirts of his jellaba, and with his grey cap tilted over his forehead. In a moment he was saying:

— Everybody's ready, and if it needs money everybody will pay, even the beggars.

He squeezed in between Digger and Hamdaan, calling for

tea without sugar. The bard called his attention with a cough. Lamplighter Ali smiled, slipped his hand into the breast of his jellaba, pulled out a purse, opened it, and took out a small package which he threw to the bard. Then he placed an enquiring hand on Hamdaan's thigh, and Hamdaan said:

— We're heading for a trial.

Henna said:

— We're doing the best thing.

But the bard said as he unwrapped the package:

— Think of the consequences.

Lamplighter Ali said sharply:

— Nothing could be worse than our present state, and there are plenty of us, which should count. The Effendi can't pretend not to know where we come from and how closely related we are to him and to the Founder of the Trust.

The bard gave Hamdaan a meaningful look.

— There's no shortage of solutions.

Hamdaan said, as if to answer him:

— I have a daring idea.

All eyes were on him as he said:

— We should appeal to the Trustee.

Abdoon said as he brought Lamplighter's tea:

— A great move! And after that there will be graves to dig.

Henna laughed and said:

— Listen! Out of the mouths of babes..!

But Hamdaan insisted:

— We must go; let's all go together.

2 6 \* \* \* \* \*

A great crowd of Hamdaan's people, both men and women, collected in front of Trustee's House, headed by Hamdaan,

Digger, Mulehead, Dumpling, Lamplighter Ali and Radwaan the bard. Radwaan thought Hamdaan should go alone, to avoid any appearance of rebellion and to guard against its consequences; but Hamdaan said to him simply: 'To kill me would be easy, but to kill all my people is something they cannot do.'

The whole Alley turned out to see the crowd, especially their closest neighbors. Women poked their heads out of windows, eyes peered from under baskets and over barrows, and young and old crowded round, asking each other what Hamdaan's people were after.

Hamdaan seized the brass knocker and banged on the gate. After a little while it was opened by the gatekeeper with his gloomy face, and the scent of jasmine wafted out. The gatekeeper looked uneasily at the crowd and asked what they wanted. Hamdaan felt stronger for having his people behind him. He said:

— We want an audience with his Honor the Trustee.

— All of you?

— None of us is better fitted to meet him than the others.

— Wait while I ask if you may come in.

He tried to close the gate, but Digger forced his way in, saying:

— It will be more dignified if we wait inside.

The rest trooped in after him, and Hamdaan was carried along with them in spite of his annoyance at Digger's initiative. The demonstrators moved along the trellised path through the garden to the veranda. The gatekeeper shouted:

— You must get out!

Hamdaan said:

— Guests can't be turned out. Go and tell your master.

The man glared and his lips moved in silent protest, then he turned and hurried to the veranda. They followed him with their eyes till he disappeared behind the curtain over the doorway. Then some kept their eyes fixed on the curtain while

others let their gaze wander round the garden, taking in the fountain ringed with palms, the trellised vines, the jasmine climbing up the walls. They looked around, but with uneasy feelings, and their eyes soon returned to the curtain over the doorway of the drawing room.

The curtain was thrown back, and out stalked the Effendi himself, scowling horribly. He came with short angry steps till he stood at the top of the steps. All that could be seen of him outside his bulky cloak was his furious face, his camel-hide slippers and the long string of prayer-beads in his right hand. He cast a contemptuous look at the demonstrators, then fixed his eye on Hamdaan, who said very politely:

— A very good morning to you, your Honor.

He acknowledged the greeting with a wave of his hand and asked:

— Who are these people?

— Hamdaan's people, your Honor.

— Who gave them leave to enter my house?

Hamdaan said cunningly:

— Its their Trustee's house, so it's their house as they're under his protection.

The Effendi's expression did not soften, and he said:

— Are you trying to make excuses for your bad manners?

Digger was annoyed by Hamdaan's politeness and said:

— We're one family, we're all children of Adham and Umayma.

The Effendi said angrily.

— That's ancient history. Thank God some people know their place.

Hamdaan said:

— We suffer from poverty and ill treatment and we've agreed that we should appeal to you to put an end to our sufferings.

At this Henna said:



— Upon my word, what we live on would disgust a cockroach.

Digger added, his voice rising:

— Most of us are beggars. Our children are hungry. Our faces smart from the strongmen's blows. Is that any way to treat the children of Gebelaawi, who have a right to his Trust?

The Effendi's hand tightened on his prayer-beads and he shouted:

— What Trust is this?

Hamdaan tried to prevent Digger from speaking, but the words poured out as if he were drunk:

— The great Trust! Don't get angry your Honor! The great Trust that belongs to everybody in our Alley from the highest to the lowest, that includes every holding in the desert round about: Gebelaawi's Trust, your Honor!

Anger burned in the Effendi's eyes, and he shouted:

— This is my father's Trust and my grandfather's; you have no claim on it. You pass round your fairy stories and believe them, but you have no proof — no evidence.

Several voices, including those of Digger and Henna, spoke up clearly:

— But everybody knows.

— Everybody? What does that mean? If you all told each other that my house belonged to one of you, would that be enough to take my house from me, you fools? A real alley of dope-heads! Tell me when one of you ever had a piaster of the Trust's revenue.

Silence reigned for a while, then Hamdaan said:

— Our fathers used to receive...

— Can you prove it?

— They told us, and we believe them.

The Effendi shouted:

— Lies upon lies! Kindly leave, before I throw you out.

Digger said firmly:

— Tell us about the Ten Clauses.

The Effendi shouted:

— And why should I tell you about them? Who are you? What have they to do with you?

— We should be beneficiaries of the Trust.

At this point the voice of Lady Hudaa, the Trustee's wife, came from behind the door:

— Leave them and come in; don't make yourself hoarse arguing with them.

Henna said:

— Use your good influence, madam.

Hudaa spoke in a voice that trembled with rage:

— You aren't going to get away with daylight robbery.

Henna said angrily:

— God forgive you, madam! The truth is with our Ancestor who has locked the gates on himself.

Digger threw his head back and shouted thunderously:

— Gebelaawi, come and see the state we're in; you've left us at the mercy of the merciless.

His voice echoed powerfully, so that some of them thought it must have reached the old man in his house, but the Effendi cried in a voice choking with fury:

— Get out! Get out at once!

Hamdaan said sadly:

— Come on then.

He turned and went towards the door and they followed him silently, even Digger; but he raised his head and shouted again with all his force:

— Gebelaawi!

2 7 \* \* \* \* \*

Livid with rage, the Effendi went back into the drawing

room, where he found his wife standing, a scowl on her face. She said:

— A strange business, with worse to come! It'll be the talk of the whole Alley. If we don't take it seriously it'll be goodbye to us.

The Effendi said with disgust:

— Scum and children of scum! And they want the Trust! Who can know his origin in an Alley like a beehive?

— Have a showdown. Call Thudclub and arrange things. He takes a share of the revenue of the Trust without doing anything in exchange; let him earn the money he's stolen.

The Effendi gave her a long look, then asked:

— And Gebel?

She said confidently:

— Gebel! He's our foster child — my son. He knows no home but ours. As for Hamdaan's people, he doesn't know them, and they don't know him. And if they counted him as one of them, that would only attach him still more to us. I'm sure of him. He'll be back from his round of the tenants in time for a meeting.

Thudclub came at the Trustee's request. He was of middle height, stocky and strongly built, with coarse, ugly features and scars on his neck and chin. They sat down conspiratorially and Thudclub said:

— I've heard bad news.

Hudaa said angrily:

— Bad news travels fast.

The Effendi looked craftily at Thudclub.

— We're as worried as you are.

Thudclub bellowed:

— Some time has passed since we used our cudgels or shed any blood.

Hudaa smiled and said:

— What an arrogant lot, these people of Hamdaan! They

haven't produced a single strongman and yet the lowest of them thinks he's lord of the Alley.

Thudclub said with disgust:

— Peddlers and beggars! A spineless people will never produce a strongman.

The Effendi asked:

— And what's to be done, Thudclub?

— I'll crush them like cockroaches.

Gebel heard Thudclub's words as he entered the hall. He was red in the face after his tour in the desert. Youthful energy pulsed in his tall, powerful body and in his face with its strongly marked features, especially his straight nose and his big, intelligent eyes. He greeted the company politely and began saying something about the tenancies that he had been dealing with, but Hudaa cut him short, saying:

— Sit down, Gebel. We've been waiting for you because of something terribly important.

Gebel sat down, his eyes reflecting the anguish in hers. She said:

— I think you can guess what's worrying us.

He said quietly:

— Everybody outside is talking about it.

She looked at her husband.

— You hear that? Everybody is waiting for our answer.

Thudclub's face grew still uglier.

— A fire that can be put out with a handful of sand! I want to get on with the job.

Hudaa turned to Gebel.

— Have you anything to say, Gebel?

He looked at the floor to hide his distress.

— It's your problem and your solution.

— I need to know what you think.

He thought for a long time, conscious of the Effendi's hard stare and Thudclub's angry gaze, then he said:

— I have the good fortune to be your foster son, but I don't

know what to say. Its just that I'm one of Hamdaan's people.

Hudaa said sharply:

— Why do you mention Hamdaan when you have neither a father nor a mother nor any relations among them?

The Effendi let out a grunt of scorn like a stifled laugh, but said nothing. Gebel's face showed that he was suffering real pain, but he answered:

— My father and mother belonged to them; you can't deny it.

Hudaa said:

— What vain hopes I had of my son!

— God forbid! Muqattam itself couldn't change my devotion to you. But denying the truth doesn't change it.

The Effendi stood up, his patience exhausted, and said to Thudclub:

— Don't waste your time listening to this rubbish!

Thudclub stood up, grinning, but Hudaa said to him, glancing secretly at Gebel:

— Don't be unreasonable, Thudclub, my dear sir; we want them disciplined, not destroyed.

Thudclub left the hall, and the Effendi gave Gebel a reproachful look and asked sarcastically:

— So you're one of Hamdaan's people, Gebel?

Gebel was silent, and Hudaa had pity on him and said:

— In his heart he's with us, but it was too hard for him to deny his origins in front of Thudclub.

Gebel said with feeling:

— They are wretched, although they have the noblest origin of anybody in the Alley.

The Effendi yelled:

— An alley without any origins!

Gebel said earnestly:

— We are the children of Adham, and our Ancestor — God preserve him — is still alive.

The Effendi asked:

— Who can be sure that he's the son of his father? There's no harm in a man saying he is from time to time, but it's no excuse to rob others of their wealth.

Hudaa said:

— We mean them no harm as long as they don't have designs on our property.

The Effendi wanted to end the conversation, and said to Gebel:

— Get back to work, and don't bother your head with anything else.

Gebel left the drawing room and went to the Trust office in the garden house. He had to record in the ledgers the number of tenancies and to check the totals for the month. But his grief distracted him. It was strange that Hamdaan's people did not like him. He knew this, and remembered how coldly he had been received in Hamdaan's cafe the few times he had gone there. In spite of that, he was upset by the trouble that was being prepared for them; he would have loved to protect them, if he had not been afraid of displeasing the home that had adopted him, sheltered him and brought him up. What would have become of him if Lady Hudaa had not given him her love? Twenty years ago she had seen a naked child splashing about in a pool of rainwater and had been charmed by the sight. Being childless, she had been strongly attracted to him and had sent someone to bring him to her, and he had come, crying and afraid. She had inquired about him and learnt that he was an orphan looked after by a woman who sold chickens. Hudaa had sent for her and asked to be allowed to have the child — an opportunity that the woman had been only too happy to seize.

Thus Gebel had grown up in the home of the Trustee, under whose protection he had enjoyed more motherly love than any other child in the Alley. He had gone to school and learnt to read and write, and when he had reached manhood, the Effendi had put him in charge of the Trust. Wherever

there was Trust property they called him 'your Honor', and looks of respect and admiration followed him wherever he went. Life had seemed friendly and full of the promise of happiness till Hamdaan's people rebelled. Now Gebel found he was not one person, as he had always supposed, but two, one loyal to his mother, the other asking in dismay: 'And what about Hamdaan's people?'

2 8 \*

The rebec tuned up for the story of Humaam's death at the hand of Qadri. All eyes turned to Radwaan the bard with a mixture of interest and anxiety. Tonight was not like other nights; it concluded a day of revolt, and Hamdaan's people were asking themselves whether it would end peacefully. Darkness enfolded the Alley. Even the stars were hidden behind autumn clouds, and no light showed except the glow from shuttered windows and from a few barrows, round whose lanterns noisy urchins clustered like moths. Henna spread a sack on the ground in front of one of the tenement-houses in Hamdaan's sector and sang: 'At the gate of our Alley stands Hassan's cafe.'

There was caterwauling from tomcats as they scrapped over food or females. The bard's voice grew louder as he told how Adham shouted in Qadri's face: 'What have you done to your brother?' Just at that moment Thudclub appeared in the circle of light cast by the lamp of the cafe, as suddenly as if the darkness had been torn open to reveal him. He looked sinister and threatening, ready to hate and be hated. His eyes sparkled with malice and he gripped his terrible cudgel. He glared down at the people sitting in the cafe as if they were insects.

The words died in the throat of the bard, and Dumpling and Mulehead were roused from their stupor. Digger and Lamplighter Ali stopped whispering and Abdoon ceased running to and fro. As for Hamdaan, his fist tightened on the tube of the narghile. There was a deathly hush.

There followed a flurry of movement. The clients who were not Hamdaan's people left hastily. The strongmen of the various sectors arrived — Qidra, Lionheart, Quicksilver, Barakaat and Hamooda — and lined up behind Thudclub. The news spread quickly, as if a house had collapsed. Windows were flung open, urchins came running, and people were torn between anxiety and sadistic pleasure. Hamdaan was the first to break the silence. He stood up to receive them.

— Welcome Thudclub, my dear sir, Strongman of our Alley! Please sit down!

Thudclub ignored him as though he neither heard nor saw him, but went on glancing cruelly around; then he asked roughly:

— Who's the strongman of this sector?

Hamdaan answered, though the question was not addressed to him:

— Our strongman is Qidra.

Thudclub turned to Qidra and asked sarcastically:

— Are you the protector of Hamdaan's people?

Qidra stepped forward — a short, squat man with a quarrelsome face.

— I protect them against everybody except you, chief.

Thudclub smiled grimly.

— Couldn't you find anything better than the women's sector to protect?

He shouted into the cafe:

— You women, you bastards; don't you realize that the Alley has a Strongman?

Hamdaan spoke, his face drained of color:



— Thudclub, my dear sir, there's nothing but goodwill between us and you.

Thudclub yelled:

— Shut up, you scabby old fool! You lick my boots now? After the way you attacked your masters!

Hamdaan spoke in an agonized voice:

— There was no attack at all; it was a complaint that we brought to his Honor the Trustee.

Thudclub shouted:

— You hear what the bastard says? Hamdaan, you stink. Have you forgotten what your mother used to do? By God, not one of you will walk safely in this Alley till he has shouted at the top of his voice: 'I'm a woman'.

He lifted his cudgel quickly and brought it down hard on the counter, scattering cups, mugs and spoons, tins of coffee, tea, sugar, cinnamon and ginger, teapots and coffee jugs... Abdoon sprang back, bumped into a table and fell over with it. Thudclub aimed a sudden blow at Hamdaan's face; the man lost his balance and fell sideways on to the narghile, smashing it. Thudclub lifted his cudgel again, shouting:

— There's no crime without punishment, you bastards!

Digger took a chair and hurled it at the big lamp, which smashed, plunging the cafe into darkness just before the cudgel crashed down on the large mirror behind the counter. Henna screamed and the women of Hamdaan echoed her cry from their windows and doorways. It was as if a gigantic dog was howling in pain. Thudclub went berserk and let fly in every direction, hitting people, walls, chairs. Screams, groans, shouts for help followed, wave upon wave. Ghostly figures fled in all directions, falling over one another. Thudclub thundered:

— Everybody is under house arrest!

They all hurried to carry out the order, whether they were Hamdaan's people or not. There was a stampede. Lionheart brought a lamp, and its light revealed Thudclub surrounded by the other strongmen in the deserted Alley, where all that

could be heard was the wailing of women. Barakaat spoke, laying on the flattery:

— Save yourself for more important things, chief; we'll deal with these cockroaches.

Quicksilver said:

— If you wanted, we'd make Hamdaan's people into dust for your horse to trample on.

Qidra, strongman of Hamdaan's sector, said:

— If you ask me to teach them a lesson it will be an honor to serve you, chief.

Henna's voice came from behind a door:

— Damn the tyrant!

Thudclub yelled at her:

— Henna, I challenge any man of Hamdaan to count the number of men you've slept with.

Henna shouted:

— God is our witness: Hamdaan's people are lords of the...

Her last words were stifled by a hand over her mouth.

Thudclub spoke to the strongmen in a voice that was meant for Hamdaan's people:

— If any man of Hamdaan leaves his tenement-house he's to be beaten up.

Qidra shouted:

— If anybody calls himself a man, let him come out!

Hamooda asked:

— And the women, chief?

— Thudclub deals with men, not women.

Day dawned but not one of Hamdaan's men left his tenement-house. Each of the strongmen sat in front of the cafe in his own sector watching the road. Thudclub patrolled the Alley every few hours and people vied with one another in greeting him and praising and flattering him: 'By God, the Strongman of our Alley is a lion.', 'Well done; you're a great man, you've made Hamdaan wear a yashmak.', 'Thank God

you've brought down the stuck-up people of Hamdaan, Thudclub.', and no one was upset at all.

2 9 \* \* \* \* \*

'Do you like this tyranny, Gebelaawi?' asked Gebel, lying on the ground at the foot of the rock where the stories say Qadri lay with Hind and where Humaam was killed. He looked at the sunset, but with eyes that saw only imperfection everywhere. He was not one of those who seek solitude because of their many worries, but lately he had been feeling an overwhelming desire to be alone, for the fate of Hamdaan's people had shaken him to the core. Perhaps in the desert the voices that tormented and reproached him would be silent, voices that shouted from the windows as he passed: 'Filthy traitor to Hamdaan!' and voices that cried from the depths of his own being: 'Life at the expense of others cannot be happy.' Hamdaan's people were his people; his father and mother had been born among them and buried in their tomb. They were oppressed, horribly oppressed, and cheated of their property; and by whom? By his generous patron, the man whose wife had picked him up from the mud and raised him to the level of the people in the Great House.

'Everything in the Alley is run on a basis of terror, so it is not surprising that its lords are prisoners in their houses. Our Alley has never known a day of justice or peace; its fate was sealed when Adham and Umayma were driven out of the Great House. Don't you know that, Gebelaawi? It is plain that the longer you are silent the deeper the darkness. How long will you say nothing, Gebelaawi? The men are under house arrest, and the women risk every insult when they go out; and I swallow the humiliation without a word. How strange that the

people of our Alley should laugh! What are they laughing at? They think the world of whoever wins victory and rejoice in whoever is powerful, and they worship cudgels; and so they hide the terror that is in their hearts. We eat degradation with every mouthful in this Alley. Nobody knows when his turn will come for the cudgel to crack down on his skull.'

He lifted his head to the sky and found it still, peaceful and soothing, embellished by distant clouds, the last kites flying away. There were no more people going about, and the hour had come when insects settle. Suddenly Gebel heard a rough voice shouting nearby: 'Stop, you bastard!'. He was roused from his thoughts and stood up, trying to remember where he had heard that voice before. He went round Hind's rock to the south side and saw one man fleeing frantically and another about to catch up with him. He looked hard and recognized the man in flight as Digger and his pursuer as Qidra, strongman of Hamdaan's sector. He understood at once, and watched anxiously as the chase drew nearer to him. In a moment or two Qidra overtook Digger and grabbed him by the shoulder. They stopped running, panting hard, and Qidra snarled with what breath was left:

— How dare you leave your hole, you viper? You're not going back in one piece.

Digger protected his head with both arms, yelling:

— Leave me alone, Qidra. You're our strongman and you're supposed to defend us.

Qidra shook him till the turban fell from his head and shouted:

— You know, you son of a bitch, that I'll defend you against anybody except Thudclub.

Digger caught sight of Gebel and recognized him. He called out:

— Help me, Gebel, help me; you're one of us more than one of them.

Qidra rasped out defiantly:

— Nobody can help you against me.

Gebel found himself walking over to them. He said calmly:

— Go easy on the man, Qidra.

Qidra stared at him coldly.

— I know what I have to do.

— Maybe it was necessary for him to leave his house.

— It was his fate that made him leave it.

He squeezed Digger's shoulder till he moaned loudly, and Gebel said sharply:

— Go easy on him; can't you see he's older and weaker than you?

Qidra let go of Digger's shoulder and punched him so hard on the back of the head that he doubled up, then kneed him in the back so that he fell on his face. In a moment he was kneeling on him, raining blows on him and hissing in a voice full of hatred:

— Didn't you hear what Thudclub said?

Gebel's anger blazed up and he shouted:

— Damn you! And Thudclub! Let him go you shameless monster!

Qidra stopped hitting Digger and raised an astonished face to Gebel.

— Do you say that, Gebel? Didn't you hear his Honor the Trustee order Thudclub to teach Hamdaan a lesson?

Gebel shouted still more furiously:

— Let him go, you shameless monster!

Qidra's voice quivered with rage.

— Don't get the idea your work in Trustee's House will protect you against me if you want your reckoning.

Gebel sprang at him as if he were out of his mind, and kicked him over sideways, shouting:

— Get back to your mother while she still has you.

Qidra leapt up, seizing his cudgel from the ground, then raised it quickly, but Gebel was too quick for him and punched him hard in the stomach. He staggered about in agony, and

Gebel seized this chance to snatch the cudgel from his hand and stood watching him carefully. Qidra drew back two paces, then bent down swiftly and grabbed a stone; but before he could throw it, the cudgel cracked down on his head. He screamed and spun round, then fell on his face, the blood gushing from his forehead. Night was falling, and Gebel looked round and saw nobody except Digger, who stood brushing his jellaba and feeling his bruises. Then he came over to Gebel and said gratefully:

— I've been saved by a real brother, Gebel.

Gebel did not answer him, but bent over Qidra and turned him on his back. He murmured:

— He's out cold.

Digger bent over him too, then spat on his face. Gebel dragged him right away, then bent over Qidra again and began shaking him gently, but he showed no signs of reviving.

— What's wrong with him?

Digger bent over him again and put his ear to his chest, then peered into his face and lit a match. Then he stood up and whispered:

— He's dead.

Gebel's flesh crept and he said:

— You're lying.

— Dead as dead. I swear it on your head.

— How dreadful!

Digger made light of the matter:

— Think of all the people he's beaten up or killed! Let him go to Hell!

Gebel said sorrowfully, as though talking to himself:

— But I've never beaten or killed anybody.

— It was in self defence.

— But I didn't mean to kill him; I didn't want to.

Digger said seriously:

— You're tough, Gebel, you needn't be afraid of them; why, you could be a strongman if you wanted.

Gebel struck his forehead with his hand and cried out:

— Good grief! Have I become a murderer with the first blow I struck?

— Come to your senses. Let's bury him now, otherwise there will be trouble.

— There will be trouble whether we bury him or not.

— I don't care. It'll be the others next. Help me to bury this brute.

Digger took the cudgel and began digging in the ground not far from the spot where Qadri had once dug. Soon Gebel joined him with a heavy heart. The work went on without a word till Digger said, to lighten the load of Gebel's feelings:

— Don't be sad; killing in our Alley is as easy as eating palm nuts.

Gebel sighed:

— I never wanted to become a murderer. O God! I didn't think I had such a temper.

When they had finished digging, Digger stood wiping his forehead with the sleeve of his jellaba and blowing his nose to get rid of the earthy smell that filled it. He said:

— This grave is big enough for that bastard and the other strongmen too.

Gebel said resentfully:

— Respect the dead man; we all die.

— When they respect us alive we'll respect them dead.

They lifted the corpse into the grave and Gebel put the cudgel by its side. Then they heaped the earth over it. When Gebel looked up he found that night had covered the world and all that stood on it, and he sighed deeply, holding back his tears.

'Where's Qidra?' wondered Thudclub and the other strongmen. Their colleague was no more to be seen in the Alley than were the men of Hamdaan. Qidra had lived in the sector next to that of Hamdaan. He was a bachelor and used to spend nights out, not coming home till dawn or later. He was often away for a night or two, but he had never been missing for a whole week without anyone knowing where he was. It was specially strange during this blockade which needed his special watchfulness. Suspicion hung over Hamdaan's people and a search of their homes was decided. The strongmen, led by Thudclub, burst into their tenement-houses and searched them thoroughly from top to bottom, digging up the yards from end to end. The men of Hamdaan met with every kind of humiliation, and not one escaped being kicked or punched or spat on. But the searchers found nothing suspicious. They went all along the fringe of the desert asking for information, but no one could tell them anything of any value.

Qidra remained the topic of conversation as the hookah went round at Thudclub's hashish den under its vine trellis in his garden. Darkness was all around, but a small lamp stood on the ground a couple of feet from the brazier, and by its faint light Barakaat cut up and pressed the hashish and crumbled the charcoal for the pipe. The lamplight dancing in the breeze flickered over the scowling faces of Thudclub, Hamooda, Lionheart and Quicksilver, revealing the crafty looks behind their puffy eyelids. The croaking of the frogs sounded like muffled cries for help in the stillness of the night. Lionheart asked as he took the pipe from Barakaat and passed it to Thudclub:

— Where's the man gone? The earth seems to have swallowed him up.

Thudclub inhaled deeply, tapping the stem of the pipe,



then breathed out a thick cloud of smoke and said:

— The earth *has* swallowed Qidra, and he's slept in its bowels for a week.

They all looked up anxiously at him, except Barakaat who was absorbed in his work. Thudclub went on:

— A strongman doesn't disappear without a reason; and I know the smell of death.

After a fit of coughing that bent his back as a strong wind bends a reed, Quicksilver asked:

— And who killed him?

— Amazing! Who else if not one of Hamdaan's men?

— But they haven't left their houses. And we've searched them.

Thudclub struck the side of his cushion with his fist and said:

— What do the other people in the Alley say?

Hamooda said:

— The people in my sector say that Hamdaan had a hand in Qidra's disappearance.

— Listen, you dope-heads: if they're saying one of Hamdaan's lot killed Qidra, it's up to us to act as if he did.

— Even if the killer was from Otouf?

— Even if he was from Kafr el-Zaghari! It's less important to punish the right man than to deter others.

Quicksilver exclaimed admiringly:

— Great God!

Lionheart shook the ash out in the brazier and passed the pipe back to Barakaat, saying:

— God help you, Hamdaan!

Their harsh laughter blended with the croaking of the frogs and they wagged their heads threateningly. A gust of wind rattled the dry leaves. Hamooda clapped his hands together and said:

— The matter is no longer a dispute between Hamdaan and the Trustee; it's a question of the honor of the strongmen.

Thudclub thumped his cushion again and said:

— No strongman has ever been killed by his alley before.

His face grew so fierce with anger that his companions became afraid of him and avoided any word or movement that might draw his fury on them. Silence fell, disturbed only by the gurgle of the pipe and an occasional cough. Then Barakaat asked:

— And if Qidra comes back in spite of our suspicions?

Thudclub said angrily:

— I'll shave my moustache off, you son of a dope-head.

Barakaat was the first to laugh; then they were silent again. They pictured to themselves the carnage — sticks cracking down on skulls, blood staining the ground, screams from windows and roofs, dozens of men dying. A tigerish blood-lust burned in them, and they exchanged cruel looks. They did not care about Qidra himself, indeed they had not even liked him. In fact none of them had any liking for the others. They were united only by a common interest in terrorizing people and defending their own position. Lionheart asked Thudclub:

— And now?

— I'll have to go back to the Trustee as agreed.

3 1 \* \* \* \* \*

Thudclub announced:

— Your Honor, Hamdaan's people have killed their strongman, Qidra.

He fixed his eye on the Trustee, and at the same time he could see Lady Hudaa on his right and Gebel on her right. The news did not seem to surprise the Effendi for he said:

— I've heard reports of his disappearance, but have you really given up hope of finding him?

The afternoon light through the door of the drawing room

threw Thudclub's ugliness into relief.

— He won't be seen again if I know anything about such tricks.

Hudaa said nervously, looking at the face of Gebel who was staring at the far wall:

— If it's true that he's been killed, that's dangerous.

Thudclub clasped his hands tightly together.

— And it calls for a terrible punishment, or it's goodbye to us all.

The Effendi toyed with his prayer-beads.

— It's a question of our prestige.

Thudclub said:

— It's a question of the whole Trust.

Gebel broke his silence:

— Perhaps it's only an allegation.

Thudclub was furious at this, and he said:

— There's no need for us to waste time talking.

— Prove that he's been murdered.

The Effendi tried to sound forceful to hide his doubts:

— Nobody in our Alley would disappear this way unless he'd been killed.

The gentle autumn breeze could not sweeten this atmosphere of ugly scheming. Thudclub bellowed:

— The crime cries out for action, and its voice will be heard in the neighboring alleys. Talking is just a waste of time.

But Gebel persisted:

— The men of Hamdaan are under house arrest!

Thudclub laughed, but only with his voice, and said scornfully:

— A pretty puzzle!

Then he settled back in his chair and challenged him with a piercing look.

— All you care about is clearing your people.

Gebel made an effort to control his temper, but his voice was angry as he said:

— I care for the truth. You attack people for the slightest reason, often for no reason at all. All you want now is permission to plunge peaceful people into a blood bath.

Thudclub's eyes blazed with fury:

Your people are criminals. They killed Qidra when he was defending the Trust.

Gebel turned to the Effendi and said:

— Sir, don't let this man slake his thirst for blood.

The Effendi said:

— If we lose our prestige we shall lose our lives.

Hudaa asked Gebel:

— Do you want us to be buried alive in our own Alley?

Thudclub said in disgust:

— You forget the people who have been so good to you and remember the criminals instead.

Gebel's anger mounted till he could no longer control it. He shouted at the top of his voice:

— They're not criminals, although our Alley is crammed with criminals!

Hudaa gripped the end of her blue shawl. The Effendi's nostrils opened wide and his face went white. Thudclub took courage from these signs and said with hatred and scorn:

— Your excuse for defending the criminals is that you're one of them.

— Your attack on the 'criminals' is unbelievable when you're the chief criminal in our Alley.

Thudclub leapt to his feet, his face terrible to see.

— If it wasn't for your place in this household, I'd tear you to pieces where you sit!

Gebelspoke with a dreadful calm that betrayed the emotion within:

— You're raving, Thudclub!

The Effendi shouted:

— How dare you both in front of me!

Thudclub said wickedly:

— I'm only defending your prestige.

The Effendi's fingers almost burst his string of prayer-beads.

He said to Gebel:

— I will not allow you to defend Hamdaan.

— This man is telling lies about them for his own ends.

— Leave me to judge that.

There was a brief pause. From the garden came the carefree sound of bird-song, but in the Alley there was a wave of cheers and jeers. Thudclub smiled and said:

— Do I have your Honor's permission to punish the culprits?

Gebel was sure the fateful hour had come, and he turned to Hudaa and said despairingly:

— I find myself forced to join my people in their imprisonment and to share their fate.

Hudaa cried out:

— Oh, how my hopes are disappointed!

Gebel hung his head in confusion, then felt an urge to look at Thudclub and saw him smiling a hateful smile. His lips tightened in anger and he said:

— I have no choice, but I'll never forget your kindness to me.

The Effendi eyed him coldly and said:

— I must know whether you are for us or against us.

Gebel spoke sadly, well aware that he was making the final break with his present life:

— I owe everything to your generosity, and it's impossible for me to be against you. But it'd be shameful if I left my people to be destroyed while I lived comfortably under your protection.

Hudaa was tortured by this crisis that threatened her as a mother. She said:

— Thudclub, my dear sir, let's put off this discussion till another time.

Thudclub scowled horribly. His eyes roved to and fro between the Effendi and Huda, then he muttered:

— Anything could happen tomorrow in the Alley.

The Effendi gave Huda a sidelong glance and asked:

— Answer me, Gebel, are you for us or against us? (Then, in a burst of fury, without waiting for an answer:) Either you stay with us as one of us or you go to your people.

Gebel's fury boiled over, especially when he saw the effect of these words on Thudclub's expression. He said with determination:

— Sir, you're driving me out. I'm going.

Huda cried out in agony:

— Gebel!

Thudclub shouted:

— Before you stands the man as his mother gave birth to him.

Gebel could stand no more. He jumped to his feet and strode to the door of the drawing room. Huda leapt up, but the Effendi held her back. In a moment Gebel was gone. Outside, the wind had risen, making curtains flap and shutters bang. The atmosphere in the room was tense and oppressive. Thudclub said quietly:

— We must get to work.

But Huda protested with nervous insistence:

— No! No! The blockade is enough for now. Don't you dare let anything happen to Gebel!

Thudclub was not annoyed, for nothing could upset him after the victory he had just won. He gave the Trustee an enquiring glance. The Effendi looked as though he were chewing a lemon as he said:

— We'll talk about it another time.

3 2 \*

Gebel gave a parting look at the garden and the Trust office and remembered the tragedy of Adham that was recited to the drone of the rebec every evening. He went to the gate, and the gatekeeper stood up for him:

— Are you going out again, sir?

— Dear old Hassanayn! I'm going away for good.

The man gaped at him, then mumbled:

— Because of Hamdaan's people?

Gebel hung his head in silence; the gatekeeper went on:

— Would you believe it! How can her Ladyship allow it? God in Heaven! How will you live, son?

Gebel crossed the threshold, looking towards the Alley crowded with people and animals and garbage, and said:

— Like the people of our Alley.

— You weren't made for that.

Gebel smiled faintly.

— It was sheer chance that I was taken away from it.

He left the house, pursued by the gatekeeper's gloomy warnings not to expose himself to the anger of the strongmen. The Alley stretched before his eyes with its bare earth, its donkeys and cats, its urchins and its hovels. He realized how great was the change in his life, what hardships awaited him and what comfort he had lost. But anger masked his suffering, and he seemed not to care about the flowers and the birds and the mother-love.

He passed a strongman, Hamooda, who said sarcastically:

— If only you'd lend us a hand to teach Hamdaan's people a lesson!

He paid no attention, but made for a tenement-house in Hamdaan's sector and knocked on the door. Hamooda joined him and said:

— What do you want?

— I am going back to my people.

Amazement filled Hamooda's narrow eyes and he seemed not to believe his ears. Thudclub saw them as he was leaving Trustee's House for his own, and he shouted to Hamooda:

— Let him go in; and if he comes out again, bury him alive!

Hamooda's astonishment vanished as the truth sank in, and he smiled with stupid satisfaction. Gebel went on knocking till windows opened in that tenement-house and in the ones next door, and out poked the heads of Hamdaan, Mulehead, Dumpling, Lamplighter Ali, Abdoon, Radwaan the bard and Henna. Dumpling asked sarcastically:

— What does the noble gentleman desire?

Hamdaan enquired:

— Are you for us or against us?

Hamooda shouted:

— They've thrown him out and he's sinking back to where he came from.

Hamdaan asked eagerly:

— Have they really thrown you out?

— Open the door, my dear Hamdaan!

Henna shrieked with joy and shouted:

— Your father was a good man, and your mother was a fine woman.

Hamooda laughed and said:

— Congratulations on the old tart's evidence!

Henna shouted angrily:

— What about your mother and her merry nights at Hammaam el-Sultan?

She hurriedly closed the shutters and the stone that flew from Hamooda's hand struck them with a noise that brought cheers from nearby urchins. The door opened and Gebel went into the steamy atmosphere with its strange smell. The people welcomed him with embraces and there was a confusion of kind words. But the welcome was cut short by the noise of quarrelling from the back of the yard. Gebel saw Digger arguing heatedly with a man nicknamed 'Triptoe'. He went



over and pushed himself between them, saying sternly:

— Can you two quarrel while they imprison us in our homes?

Digger pointed accusingly.

— He stole a sweet potato from a basin by my window.

Triptoe bellowed:

— Did you catch me stealing? Shame on you, Digger.

Gebel shouted angrily:

— Let's have pity on each other so that God in Heaven will have pity on us.

But Digger said:

— My potato is in his stomach, and I'm going to get it out.

Triptoe spoke as he put his cap back on his head:

— God! I haven't tasted sweet potatoes for a week.

— You're the only thief in this house.

Gebel said:

— Don't condemn without proof, as Thudclub does.

Digger shouted:

— This son of a pickpocket must be punished.

Triptoe yelled:

— Digger, you son of a radish-merchant!

Digger leapt at Triptoe and punched him. Triptoe staggered, and the blood ran from his forehead, but Digger went on hitting him, ignoring the reproaches of the bystanders, till Gebel was enraged and jumped in to grab him by scruff of the neck. Try as he would, Digger could not free himself from Gebel's grip, and he said in a choked voice:

— Do you want to kill me as you killed Qidra?

Gebel pushed him away hard, so that he was thrown against the wall, and stared at him furiously. The others looked from one to the other, wondering whether it was really Gebel who had killed Qidra. Dumpling embraced him and Mulehead shouted:

— Bless you! You're the best of Hamdaan's people.

Gebel said to Digger resentfully:

— I only killed him to defend you.

Digger said quietly:

— But you enjoyed killing.

Dumpling shouted:

— What ingratitude, Digger; you ought to be ashamed of yourself. (Then, taking Gebel by the arm:) You can be my guest. Come, leader of Hamdaan's people.

Gebel allowed Dumpling to lead him, but he felt that the abyss that had opened before him that day was bottomless. He whispered a question in his ear as they went along together:

— Is there any way to escape?

— Are you afraid somebody will betray you to our enemies?

— Digger is a fool.

— Yes, but he's not a traitor.

— I'm afraid they may suspect you more because of me.

Dumpling said:

— I'll show you the way to escape if you want, but where will you make for?

— The desert is wider than you think!

3 3 \*

Gebel's escape was possible only towards the end of the night. He crossed from roof to roof in the stillness as everyone slept, till he found himself in Gemalia. He walked through the pitch darkness towards Derrasa, then into the desert, making for the rock of Hind and Qadri. When he found it by the feeble starlight he could no longer fight off sleep, for he had been awake all night and was very tired. He threw himself down on the sand, wrapped in his cloak, and fell asleep.

He opened his eyes as the first rays of dawn struck the top of the rock. He got up at once, so as to reach the Jebel before

anyone started moving about in the desert. But before he set off his eyes were drawn to the spot where he had buried Qidra. His limbs trembled and he gazed at it till his mouth was dry; then he fled, feeling miserable. He had only killed a criminal, but he was like a hunted man as he fled from the grave. He said to himself: 'We were not made for killing, even if they kill more of us than we can count.' He was amazed that the place he had chosen to sleep in was the very spot where he had buried his victim. He felt that his desire to escape had redoubled and that he must part for ever both from those he loved and from those he hated — his mother, Hamdaan, the strongmen...

He reached the foot of Jebel Muqattam, overcome with grief and loneliness. Nevertheless he went on southward till he reached Muqattam Bazaar at mid-morning. He took a long look at the desert behind him and said with relief: 'Now I'm far away from them!' He turned to examine the marketplace in front of him, hemmed in by narrow Alleys, filled with a tumult of chattering men and braying donkeys.

By all the signs a saint's day was being celebrated. The market place was crowded with sightseers, vendors, seers, dervishes and performers, although the real commotion of the festival would not begin before sunset. His eye wandered over the sea of jostling people, and at the edge of the desert he noticed a hut built of flattened cans, round which were placed wooden chairs. It seemed in spite of its poverty to be the best cafe in the place and to have the most customers, and he made for an empty chair and sat down, badly needing rest. The owner came over to him, taking a great interest in his appearance, which marked him off from the other customers — his fine cloak, his large turban and his expensive red pumps. Gebel ordered tea and settled down to enjoy watching people.

It was not long before his ear was caught by the row that was raging round a public pump. He saw people crowding round it to fill their water jars. The turmoil was like a battle, with much violence and many victims. The noise grew louder and curses

flew, and there were piercing shrieks from two girls hemmed in by the crowd. They retreated to save themselves, and escaped from the battlefield with empty cans. They wore brightly colored dresses that hung down to their ankles so that only their youthful faces could be seen.

His gaze passed quickly over the shorter of the two then fixed on the other, who had dark eyes. They came over to an empty space near to where he sat and he detected a family likeness between them, though the one who attracted him had a greater share of beauty. Gebel said to himself excitedly: 'What wonderful beauty; I never saw anyone like her in our Alley.' They stood tidying their hair, which had been disarranged, and putting their head-scarves on again. Then they up-ended their cans and sat on them. The short girl said plaintively:

— How can we fill our cans with this crowd?

The beauty said:

— This festival is terrible. Now our father will be getting impatient.

Gebel joined quite naturally in their conversation.

— Why didn't he come himself to fill the cans?

They turned towards him resentfully, but his distinguished appearance had a reassuring effect, and the beauty contented herself with saying:

— What's that to do with you? Did we complain to you?

Gebel was very happy to be spoken to by her and said apologetically:

— I meant, a man would be more able to push through the crowds.

— This is our work; he has a hard enough job of his own. He smiled.

— What does your father do?

— It's none of your business.

Gebel rose, not caring about the eyes that stared at him. He stood in front of them and said politely:

— I'll fill the cans for you.

The one who attracted him turned her face away as she said:

— We don't need any help from you.

But the short one said:

— Thank you very much, please do!

She stood up, pulling the other girl to her feet, and Gebel took the cans, one in each hand, and used his great strength to force his way through the crowd, elbowing people aside and meeting a lot of resistance, till he reached the pump, behind which the water-seller sat in his wooden kiosk. He paid him a couple of milliemes, filled the cans and brought them back to where the girls stood. He was upset to find them involved in a slanging match with some youths who had been pestering them. He put down the cans on the ground and rounded defiantly on the youths. One of them came at him, but Gebel butted him in the chest, knocking him down. They banded together to hit back, cursing and swearing, but an unfamiliar voice shouted:

— Get away, you wretches!

All eyes turned to see an elderly man, short and stocky, with flashing eyes and a belt round his jellaba. The youths shouted in confusion 'Balqeti!' and scattered fast, giving Gebel angry looks. The girls turned to the man, and the shorter one said:

— It's difficult today because of the festival and these louts.

Balqeti answered, studying Gebel:

— I remembered the festival because you were late, so I came — and just in time! (Then, to Gebel:) And you are a gentleman. There aren't many these days.

— It was just a small service. It doesn't deserve any thanks.

Meanwhile the girls had picked up their cans and set off silently. Gebel longed to feast his eyes on the beauty, but he did not dare look away from Balqeti's sharp eyes. He imagined this man could see deep inside him, and he was afraid he would read his secret desires, but the man said:

— You defended them against those villains. What a good

fellow! Those youths! How dare they pester Balqeeti's daughters! It's the ale! Did you notice they were drunk?

Gebel shook his head, and the other man went on:

— I have a nose like a genie. Never mind! Do you know me?

— No, sir; I have not had the honor.

— So you're not from this neighborhood?

— Far from it!

— I am Balqeeti, the conjurer.

Gebel's face lit up with sudden recollection.

— I'm honored. Many people in our Alley know you.

— Which alley is that?

— Gebelaawi Alley.

Balqeeti raised his thin white eyebrows and said in a musical voice:

— I'm pleased and honored. Who hasn't heard of Gebelaawi, Founder of the Trust, or of your Strongman, Thudclub? Have you come for the festival, Mr...?

— Gebel. (Then, shrewdly:) I've come to look for a new home.

— You've left your Alley?

— Yes!

Balqeeti studied him still more closely, then said:

— As long as there are strongmen there will be outcasts! But tell me, was it a man or a woman you killed?

Gebel's heart pounded, and he said firmly:

— That's a bad joke to come from a good man!

Balqeeti laughed a toothless laugh and said:

— You aren't one of the rabble the strongmen play with, and you aren't a thief. A man like you only leaves his alley because of murder.

— I told you...

— My dear sir, it doesn't worry me specially that you're a murderer, now that you've proved you're a gentleman. There isn't a man here who hasn't stolen or plundered or killed. So

that you'll believe me, I invite you to have a cup of coffee and a puff or two in my house.

Gebel's hopes revived and he said:

— With the greatest of pleasure.

They went along side by side, making their way through the bazaar towards an alley at the top. When they had left the crowds behind, Balqeeti said:

— Was there anybody in particular you were aiming to see around here?

— I don't know anybody.

— And you have nowhere to go?

— Nowhere.

— Be my guest, if you like, till you find somewhere.

Gebel's heart danced with joy and he said:

— How kind you are, Mr. Balqeeti!

The man laughed and said:

— Don't be too impressed; my house has room for plenty of snakes, how could it not have room for a man? Are you alarmed by what I say? I'm a snake-charmer. You'll learn from me how to get on with snakes.

They went up the alley and out towards the desert, on the edge of which Gebel saw a little house, a considerable way from the rest. Its walls were of bare stone, but it looked new compared with the houses of the dilapidated alley. Balqeeti pointed to it and said proudly:

— The house of Balqeeti the conjurer!

3 4 \* \* \* \* \*

When they reached the house, Balqeeti said:

— I chose this isolated place for my house because people think a conjurer is just a great big snake.

They went together into a fairly long corridor with a door at the end and one on each side, all closed. Balqeeti went on, pointing to the end door:

— In that room are the tools of my trade, both living and non-living. Don't be afraid! The door is securely locked. I assure you snakes are safer to mix with than many people, the ones you've run away from for example! (He laughed a long, toothless laugh and went on:) People are afraid of snakes; even the strongmen are afraid of them, but I owe them my living and thanks to them I built this house. (He pointed to the room on the right.) My daughters sleep here. Their mother died a while back, leaving me too old to marry again. (He pointed to the left.) We'll be sleeping in here.

The shorter girl's voice came from some steps at the side, which led up to the roof:

— Shafeeqa, help me with the washing and don't stand there like a block of stone.

Balqeeti shouted:

— Sayida, you'll wake the snakes; and you, Shafeeqa, don't stand there like a block of stone.

So her name was Shafeeqa! What a lovely girl! Her rebuff had not been meant hurtfully, unspoken thanks had been in her dark eyes. How would she know that he had only accepted this dangerous hospitality for the sake of her eyes?

Balqeeti opened the left-hand door and stepped aside for Gebel to enter, then followed him in and closed the door. He led Gebel to the sofa which stretched the whole length of the right-hand wall of the little room, and they sat down together. Gebel took in the whole room with one glance. He saw a bed with a grey bedspread on the far side, and, on the floor between bed and sofa, decorated rush matting, in the middle of which lay a brass tray stained by long use. On it stood a brazier with a pyramid of ash, a hookah resting on its side, a spatula, tongs, and a handful of honeyed tobacco. There was one window, which stood open, and through it he could see



only the desert and the pale sky and one of the sheer, black cliffs of Jebel Muqattam in the distance. Through it came the cry of a shepherd girl in the terrible silence, and a breeze laden with the heat of the sun.

Balqeeti was examining him to an annoying degree, and he thought of distracting him with conversation. But the ceiling shook under the feet that walked on the roof, and Gebel at once pictured her feet, and his heart was full of a longing that happiness might come to this house, even if the snakes were let loose. He said to himself: 'Perhaps this man will murder me and bury me in the desert as I buried Qidra, without my beloved knowing that I am her victim...' Balqeeti's voice roused him from his daydream:

— Do you have a job?

He answered, remembering the last of his money in his pocket:

— I shall find a job, any job.

— Are you perhaps in no great hurry?

The question alarmed him and he said:

— Oh yes; I'd better look for a job today rather than tomorrow.

— You have the body of a strongman.

— But I hate fighting.

Balqeeti laughed and said:

— What work did you do in your alley?

He hesitated a little, then said:

— I worked in the Trust office.

— Bad news! Why did you leave such a good position?

— Fate!

— Did you fix your eyes on some fine lady?

— God forbid!

— You're very cagey, but you'll soon get used to me and tell me all your secrets.

— Perhaps so.

— Have you any money?

He was alarmed again but did not show it.

— I have a little, but it won't save me from having to work.

Balqeeti said with a wink:

— You're a clever devil; don't you think you'd make a good conjurer? Perhaps we could work together. Don't be surprised! I'm an old man and I need an assistant.

Gebel didn't take him seriously, but he had a deep desire to strengthen the bond between them and he was about to speak when Balqeeti got in first:

— We can be thinking about that. And now...

The old man stood up, bent over the brazier and carried it out to light it.

Early in the afternoon the two men set out together, and Balqeeti went on his rounds while Gebel made for the bazaar to look round and do some shopping. In the evening he returned to the desert and found his way to the lonely house by following the glimmer of light that came from a window. When he reached the house he heard voices raised in argument and could not help listening. He heard Sayida's voice.

— If what you say is true, Father, he has committed some crime, and there's no way we could resist the Alley's strongmen.

Shafeeqa said:

— He doesn't seem like a criminal.

Balqeeti said sarcastically:

— Do you already know him that well, you little snake?

Sayida asked:

— Why should he run away from a comfortable life?

Shafeeqa protested:

— There's nothing strange about a man running away from an alley that's famous for the number of its strongmen.

Sayida asked spitefully:

— Where did you get this power of knowing what is hidden?

Balqeeti sighed.

— Keeping the company of snakes has made me father two vipers.

— Are you going to put him up without knowing anything about him, Father?

— I know several things about him, and I shall soon know everything. I have a pair of eyes that can be relied on when need be. And I've invited him to stay because I'm impressed by his character. I'm not going back on my opinion. He'd have thought twice about running away in any other circumstances. Hasn't he left his comfortable home without hesitation? But he'll obey the power that's brought him to this house.

Gebel was overjoyed to hear this voice defending him, this kind voice that dispelled the loneliness of night in the desert and made the pale new moon over the Jebel look like a smile in the darkness. He stayed a while peering into the night, then coughed, went up to the door and knocked. The door opened to show Balqecti's face lit by the lamp he held in his hand. The two men went to their room. Gebel sat down after putting a package on the brass table. Balqecti gave it an enquiring glance, and Gebel said:

— Dates and cheese and sesame cakes and hot falafel.

Balqecti smiled and, pointing at the package and the pipe, said:

— The best evenings are spent with these things.

He patted Gebel's shoulder and added:

— Aren't they, son of Gebelaawi?

His heart contracted in spite of himself, and a procession of images passed through his mind — the lady who had adopted him — the luxuriant garden with its trellises of jasmine, its songbirds and its running streams — peace and stillness and pleasant dreams — the comfortable world that had vanished — until life was on the point of losing its savor. But suddenly, a wave of feeling picked up the memories that had been drowning in an ocean of misery and swept them ashore to the thought of this lovely girl, and of the magical power that had

brought him to a house with a snake-pit. Unexpected enthusiasm leapt up in him like a flame fanned by a puff of wind, as he said:

— Life is good here with you.

3 5 \* \* \* \* \*

He could not get to sleep till a little before dawn, for he was full of fears. Her image haunted him in visions of decay, like jasmine petals falling on dead grass crawling with insects. He suffered the terrors that bred in the darkness of the unfamiliar house. He said to himself: 'You are just a stranger in this house of snakes, pursued by a crime and tormented by love.' Left to himself, all he wanted was peace and quiet. He did not fear the snakes as much as he feared treachery from the man now snoring in bed. How could he tell that the snores were genuine? Nothing and no one seemed genuine any longer. Digger himself, who owed him his life, would give away the secret in his stupidity, Thudclub would be enraged, his mother would be miserable, and trouble would blaze up in the wretched Alley. As for the love that had brought him to this house and to the conjurer's bedroom, how could he know he would live to reveal his secret feelings? So it was that he did not sleep till a little before dawn, after a night of worry.

He opened his tired eyes when the light of day filtered through the shutters. He saw Balqeti sitting up in bed, bending forward to rub his legs under the sheet with his wrinkled hands. Gebel smiled with relief although his head ached from lack of sleep. He cursed the fantasies that had teemed in the dark and had fled like bats in the light. Yet were they not fantasies fit for a murderer's bad conscience? Yes, crime had been in the blood of his 'glorious' family for a long

time. He heard Balqecti let out a long yawn that rose and fell like a dancing snake, then cough so long and so hard that Gebel imagined his eyes would drop out. When he had finished he heaved a deep sigh and Gebel said:

— Good morning!

He sat up on the sofa, and Balqecti turned towards him, his face still red from coughing.

— Good morning, Mr Gebel! So you hardly slept all night!

— Does my face show it?

— No; I remember how you tossed about in the dark, and kept turning your head towards me as if you were afraid.

The old snake! Let him be a harmless snake for the sake of her dark eyes.

— The fact is it was just being in a strange place that kept me awake.

Balqecti laughed and said:

— You lay awake for one reason: you were afraid of me. You thought: 'He'll kill me and steal my money and bury me in the desert just as I did with the man I killed.'

— You...

— Listen, Gebel, fear does great harm, and a snake bites only where there is fear.

Gebel felt deflated.

— You read in people's hearts things that are not there.

— You know I haven't strayed from the truth, you who managed the Trust.

A voice inside the house called 'Get up, Sayida!' filling him with unexpected joy. This dove in a nest of adders, who had judged him innocent and given him hope! Balqecti took his cue from Shafeeqa's call.

— We get busy early in this house. The girls go off to fetch water and stewed beans to feed their old father. Then they send him off with his bag of snakes to earn a living for himself and for them.

His mind was set at rest, and he felt he was a member of this

family. Affection filled him, and he opened up and surrendered to his fate spontaneously:

— I'm going to tell you my true story.

Balqeeti smiled and started rubbing his legs again. Gebel went on:

— I am a murderer as you say, but there is a story behind it...

And he told him the story. When he had finished Balqeeti said:

— What tyrants! And you're a fine man, I was not wrong about you. (Then sitting more comfortably:) It's only right now for me to answer frankness with frankness. Well, I come from Gebelaawi Alley myself originally.

— You!

— Yes! I ran away from it in my early youth because I couldn't bear the strongmen.

Gebel was still recovering from his surprise.

— They are the curse of our Alley.

— Yes! But we can't forget the place in spite of them. And that's why I took to you when I knew where you came from.

— Which sector are you from?

— From Hamdaan's, like you.

— How amazing!

— You shouldn't be amazed at anything in this world. But that is all ancient history, and nobody there knows me now, not even Henna who is my relative.

— I know that brave old woman. But which strongman were you up against — Thudclub?

— In those days he was only the petty strongman of one sector.

— They really are the scourge of our Alley.

— I spit on the past and everything in it. (His tone became tempting.) From now on concern yourself with your future. I tell you, you have what it takes to be a good conjurer. We have a good district to work in, south of here, far away from our

Alley. Anyway your strongmen and their hangers-on aren't going to show up round here.

Naturally Gebel knew nothing about conjuring, but he welcomed this offer, as a means of becoming attached to the family. He spoke in a voice that betrayed his eagerness:

— Do you really think I have what it takes?

Balqeeti jumped acrobatically to the floor and stood before him, short and broad, the neck of his jellaba open to show thick white hair. He said:

— You'll do fine, and I've never been wrong about that sort of thing.

They shook hands, then Balqeeti said:

— I must confess, I like you better than any of my snakes.

Gebel laughed, as excited as a child, and seized his hand to prevent him from going, so that he stood there wondering what was coming next. Then Gebel said, with an impetuosity he could not control:

— Gebel wants to be your son-in-law, sir.

Balqeeti's bloodshot eyes smiled, and he asked:

— Really?

— Yes, by God in Heaven!

Balqeeti laughed for a moment and said:

— I was wondering when you would be ready to bring up that subject. Yes, Gebel, I'm no fool. But you're the man I'll gladly give my daughter to. It's fortunate that Sayida is an exceptional girl, as her mother was.

Gebel's smile of delight wilted visibly; he was afraid his dream would be snatched from him before he could take hold of it.

— But...

Balqeeti guffawed and said:

— But you want Shafeeqa. I know that, young man. I learnt that from your eyes and the girl's talk and my knowledge of snakes. Don't blame me, this is the way we conjurers make agreements.

Gebel sighed from the bottom of his heart. He felt peaceful and contented, and full of youth, energy and freedom. He no longer cared even about his former luxurious home nor the prestige he had lost, and he was no longer afraid of the toil and hardship that awaited him. Let a curtain of darkness hang over the past and let forgetfulness swallow up its pains and sorrows and his yearning for lost mother-love!

That morning Sayida whooped with joy, and the happy news ran round the neighboring alleys.

Then Muqattam Bazaar witnessed the bridegroom's procession of Gebel.

3 6 \* \* \* \* \*

Balqeeti said scornfully:

— It's not good for a man to live like a backyard cock or rabbit, but look at you; you haven't learnt a thing and your money's almost all gone.

They were sitting on a skin in front of the door and Gebel had his legs stretched out on the sun-scorched sand, his eyes full of calm bliss. He turned to his father-in-law and said with a smile:

— Our forefather Adham lived and died longing for the innocent life of the garden.

Balqeeti laughed heartily, then called at the top of his voice:

— Shafeeqa! Get hold of your husband before he dies of laziness.

Shafeeqa appeared at the door, cleaning a plateful of lentils. She was wearing a purple head-scarf, which brought out the innocence of her face. She said, without looking up from the plate:

— What's wrong with him, Father?

— He only enjoys two things; pleasing you and lazing about.



She laughed.

— How can he please me and starve me to death at the same time?

Gebel said:

— That's a conjuror's secret.

Balqeeti punched him playfully in the ribs and said:

— Don't make fun of the hardest of jobs. How do you hide an egg in the pocket of one of your audience and take it out of the pocket of another on the opposite side of the crowd? How do you turn a marble into a chicken? How do you make a snake dance?

Shafeeqa was delighted.

— Teach him, Father. The only life he knows is sitting on a comfortable chair in the Trust office.

Balqeeti stood up.

— It's time to work.

Then he went into the house. Gebel gazed at his wife admiringly and said:

— Thudclub's wife is a thousand times less beautiful than you, yet she spends her days on a comfortable couch and her evenings in the garden, breathing the scent of jasmine and playing with the streams.

Shafeeqa said, half scornful, half bitter:

— That's the life of those who rob the people of their living.

Gebel scratched his head thoughtfully and said:

— But there is a way to perfect happiness.

— Don't dream. You weren't dreaming when you came to my rescue in the market-place. You weren't dreaming when you chased away those human flies from me. And that's how you found your way into my heart.

He felt like kissing her. He was sure he knew better than she did, but that did not make him value her words any the less. He said:

— As for me, I loved you without any reason.

— Round here only madmen dream.

— What do you want from me, my darling?

— I want you to be like my father.

He said playfully:

— Where does your sweetness come from?

Her lips parted in a smile, and her fingers moved faster amongst the lentils. He went on:

— When I ran away from my Alley I was the unhappiest of men; yet if I hadn't run away I wouldn't have married you.

She laughed.

— We owe our happiness to the strongmen of your Alley, just as my father owes his livelihood to snakes.

Gebel sighed.

— Yet the best man the Alley has known believed there was a way to give people a living while they sat in gardens and sang.

— There we go again! Look, here comes Father with his bag. Up you get! Goodbye!

Balqeeti came with his bag and Gebel stood up, and the two went off by their usual path. Balqeeti told him:

— Learn with your eyes as you learn with your brain. Watch what I do and don't ask questions in front of anybody. Be patient till I can explain what you don't understand.

Gebel found the job really difficult, but from the first he took it seriously and he gradually taught himself to do it well, though it cost him much effort. The fact was that no other job was open to him, unless he were content to be a peddler, a strongman, a thief or a bandit. Nothing about the alleys of his new district marked them off from his own, except that they did not have the Trust nor the stories that had grown up around it. As for any remaining nostalgia for his past dreams, any thoughts of his former prestige, any of the hopes for which Hamdaan, like Adham, had been punished — all this had settled in the recesses of his mind. He was determined to forget the past by throwing himself into his new life and seeking comfort from his beloved and loving wife whenever he was afflicted by sadness or homesickness. He learnt so well that

even Balqeeti was surprised, practicing constantly in the desert and working day and night. Days, weeks, months passed, and he did not tire or lose his determination.

By now he knew his way round the alleys and was familiar with the ways of snakes. He performed for thousands of children and tasted the sweetness of success and of earning. He heard the good news that he was to be a father. When he was free he would lie on his back looking at the stars or spend his evenings sharing the pipe with Balqeeti and telling the stories that were recited to the accompaniment of the rebec in Hamdaan's cafe. From time to time he wondered where Gebelaawi was, and he often called out his name. When Shafeeqa worried in case the past should spoil the present, he would exclaim that his heart ached for Hamdaan's people — his people — and that the Effendi was the head thief and Thudclub the head bully; how could life be good as long as such men lived?

One day he was performing his tricks in Zaynhum, surrounded by a crowd of children. He happened to turn, and there he saw Digger, who had made his way to the front row and was staring at him in astonishment. Gebel was confused and looked away but was unable to go on with the show and brought it to an end in spite of the children's protests. He picked up his bag and left. Digger soon caught up with him, calling:

— Gebel! Is it really you, Gebel?!

He stopped, turned and said:

— Yes! And what brings you here, Digger?

Digger could not get over his surprise and kept saying:

— Gebel a conjurer?! When did you learn? And where?

— It's not the strangest thing that's happened in this world.

Gebel walked to the foot of the Jebel with Digger following, and there they sat down in the shade of a hillock. The place was empty but for some sheep and goats grazing and a shepherd

sitting naked, picking the lice out of his jellaba. Digger studied his companion's face and said:

— Why did you run away, Gebel? How could you think so badly of me — that I'd give you away? God! I'd never give away any of Hamdaan's people, not even Triptoe. For whose sake would I do that? The Effendi's? Thudclub's? Damn them all! They've asked about you so often. I was soaked in sweat whenever I heard them.

— Don't you risk trouble by breaking out of house-arrest? Digger waved the question aside.

— The ban was lifted long ago. Nobody asks any more questions about Qidra or who killed him. People say it was Lady Hudaa who saved us from being starved to death. But they've condemned us to permanent disgrace; we have no cafe, no honor. We go about our business far away from the Alley, and when we get back we hide indoors, and if a strongman happens to see one of us he amuses himself by punching him or spitting on him. They think we're worse than dirt, Gebel. You're just so lucky in exile.

Gebel said impatiently:

— Never mind about how lucky I am. Tell me, has anybody been hurt?

Digger picked up a stone and pounded the ground.

— Ten of us were killed during the blockade.

— God in Heaven!

— They were taken as hostages for Qidra — the bastard, the son of a bitch! But they weren't friends of ours.

Gebel said angrily:

— Weren't they Hamdaan's people, Digger?

Digger blinked with shame and his lips moved in an inaudible excuse. Gebel spoke again:

— The others got off lightly with being punched and spat on.

He felt responsible for the poor wretches who had died, and sorrow gripped him. He regretted bitterly every moment of

peace he had enjoyed since he ran away. Digger shocked him by saying:

— You're probably the only happy man today among all Hamdaan's people.

He bellowed:

— I haven't gone a day without thinking about you.

— But you're far away from trouble and sorrow.

— I haven't escaped from the past at all.

— Don't spoil your peace of mind for nothing. We've lost all hope.

Gebel repeated these last words, but in a mysterious tone:

— We've lost all hope.

Digger looked at him with anxious curiosity but said nothing, out of respect for the look of grief on his face. He looked at the ground and saw a dung-beetle scuttling under a pile of stone. The goatherd was shaking out his jellaba ready to cover his sun-scorched body. Gebel spoke again:

— Really, I only *seemed* to be happy.

Digger said comfortingly:

— You deserve to be happy.

— I've married and taken a new job, as you see, but there's always been a voice inside me disturbing my sleep.

— Bless you! Where do you live?,

He did not answer. He seemed to be talking to himself. Then he said:

— Life won't be good as long as such scoundrels live.

— You're right; but how do we get rid of them?

The goatherd lifted up his voice, calling the flock and setting off towards them, his long staff under his arm. Then they heard him singing. Digger asked:

— How can I find you?

— Ask for the house of Balqeti the conjurer at Muqattam Bazaar. But keep quiet about me till then.

Digger stood up, clasped his hand and left. Gebel followed him with sad eyes.

It was nearly midnight; Gebelaawi Alley was plunged in darkness but for the faint light escaping from the doors of the cafes, which were half closed to keep out the cold. Not a star was to be seen in the winter sky. The urchins were indoors, and even the cats and dogs had taken refuge in the courtyards. The calm was disturbed only by the drone of the rebec accompanying the old stories. As for Hamdaan's sector, it was wrapped in silent darkness.

Two figures emerged from the desert. They sidled along at the foot of the walls of the Great House, then passed in front of the Effendi's house, making for Hamdaan's sector. They stopped in front of the middle tenement-house and one of them knocked, making a sound that boomed in the silence like a drum-roll. Hamdaan himself opened the door, his face ghostly white by the light of the lamp he was holding. He raised the light, the better to see who had knocked, then cried out in amazement: 'Gebel!' He stepped aside and Gebel entered, carrying a big bundle and a sack. His wife followed, carrying another bundle. The two men embraced, and Hamdaan glanced at the woman and saw she was pregnant.

— Your wife?! Welcome to you both! Follow me, and no need to hurry!

They filed along the long covered passage to the wide courtyard, which was open to the sky, then crossed to the narrow stairs and climbed to Hamdaan's lodgings. Shafeeqa was shown into the women's quarters, and Hamdaan took Gebel to a big room with a balcony overlooking the courtyard. The news of Gebel's return spread in no time, and many of the men of Hamdaan came along, led by Digger and Mulehead, Dumpling and Lamplighter, Radwaan the bard and Abdoon. They shook hands warmly with Gebel and sat down on the cushions, gazing up at the home-comer with curiosity. The questions came pouring out, and Gebel told them something

of his recent life. They looked at one another sadly. Gebel saw that their spirit had weakened in their wasted bodies, and that they were pining away. They told him of the humiliations they had suffered, and Digger said:

— I told you all this when we met a month ago. I wonder what can have brought you here. Perhaps you've come to invite us to move to your new place!

Gebel said sharply:

— Our only place is here.

A certain note of authority in his voice forced their attention. Curiosity shone in Hamdaan's eyes and he said:

— If they were snakes, it could not be harder for you to control them.

Henna came in with cups of tea and greeted Gebel warmly. She praised his wife and announced that he would have a son, but added:

— Still, there's no longer any difference between our men and our women.

Hamdaan cursed her as she left the room, but the men's eyes reflected a feeble acquiescence in what she said. The cloud of gloom over the gathering thickened, and no one even tasted the tea. Radwaan the bard asked:

— Why have you come back, Gebel, when you're not used to being pushed around?

Hamdaan said triumphantly:

— I've told you so many times that it's better to bear our troubles than to wander among strangers who would hate us.

Gebel said forcefully:

— Things are not as you think they are.

Hamdaan shook his head but said nothing, and a heavy silence fell. Then Digger said:

— Let's all leave him to rest.

But he made a sign for them to stay and said:

— I didn't come to rest but to talk to you about an important matter, more important than you imagine.

They looked at him in surprise, and Radwaan muttered that he hoped he was about to hear something good. Gebel moved his steady eyes from face to face for a while, then said:

— I could have stayed my whole life with my new family and never thought of coming back here. (Then, after a pause:) But some days ago I felt the urge to go walking alone, in spite of the cold and the dark. I went out into the desert and found my steps leading me to the place that overlooks our Alley. I hadn't been near it since I fled.

Their eyes shone with interest. He continued:

— I went on wandering in the pitch darkness. Even the stars were hidden. Before I knew what was happening, I had almost bumped into a huge figure. At first I thought it was one of the strongmen, but he didn't seem like anybody from our Alley — or any human being at all — tall and broad like a jebel. I was terrified and tried to retreat, but a strange voice said 'Stop, Gebel.' I stood rooted to the spot and broke out in a cold sweat and asked: 'Who... who are you?'

Gebel paused in his story, and they leaned forward, fascinated. Dumpling said:

— From our Alley?

But Mulehead quickly corrected him:

— He said nobody in our Alley was like him, nor any human being.

But Gebel said:

— Yes, he was from our Alley.

They all demanded to know who it was, and Gebel said:

— He told me in his strange voice: 'Don't be afraid; I am your Ancestor, Gebelaawi.'

They all exclaimed and looked at him in disbelief. Hamdaan said:

— You're joking of course.

— No, I'm telling you the truth, no more, no less.

Lamplighter asked:

— Weren't you high on some stuff?



Gebel protested:

— Being high never took away my reason.

Mulehead said:

— It sometimes has more effect than you realize, especially the best stuff.

Anger clouded Gebel's face, and he bellowed:

— I heard him with my own ears saying 'Don't be afraid; I am your Ancestor Gebelaawi'.

Hamdaan said soothingly:

— But he hasn't left his house for many years, and nobody has seen him.

— Perhaps he goes out every night without anybody knowing.

Hamdaan went on cautiously:

— But nobody else has ever met him.

— I met him.

— Don't be angry, Gebel; I don't mean to doubt your truthfulness. But imagination plays tricks. Tell me, by God, if the man is capable of going out, why ever did he hand over the Trusteeship to others? And why does he let them play with the rights of his children?

Gebel frowned.

— That's his secret; he knows best.

— It's easier to believe what's said about him retiring because of his age and feebleness.

Digger said:

— We're getting lost in words. Let's hear the rest of the story, if it goes on.

Gebel said:

— I said to him: 'I never dreamt of meeting you in this life,' and he said: 'Here you are meeting me.' I peered up into the darkness to see his face, but he said to me: 'You will not be able to see me as long as the darkness lasts.' I was amazed that he had seen me trying to look at him and I said: 'But you can see me in the dark.' He said: 'I've been able to see in the dark since

it became my custom to walk in it before the Alley existed.' I said in admiration: 'Thank God in Heaven you still enjoy good health.' He said: 'You, Gebel, are a man who can be relied on, as shown by the way you've left your comfortable life in protest over your oppressed people. But your people are my people. They have rights in my Trust that they must obtain. They have honor that must be defended, and a life that must be improved.' My enthusiasm seemed to light up the darkness, and I asked: 'What is the way to do this?' He said: 'By force you will destroy injustice, reclaim your rights and live a good life.' I let out a great cry: 'We shall be forceful!' And he said: 'Success will go with you.'

Gebel's voice gave way to a dreamy stillness, in which they all seemed to be under a spell. They pondered and exchanged glances, then looked at Hamdaan till he broke his silence, saying:

— Let us turn this story over in our minds and our hearts.

Digger said:

— It doesn't sound like a hallucination, and everything in it is right.

Dumpling said with conviction:

— It would only be a hallucination if our rights were one.

Hamdaan asked hesitantly:

— Didn't you ask him why he hasn't restored justice himself, or why he gave the trusteeship to men who don't respect people's rights?

Gebel was annoyed:

— I didn't ask him. I couldn't have asked him. You haven't met him in the desert in the dark or felt the fear of his presence. If you did, it wouldn't cross your mind to question his judgement or doubt his authority.

Hamdaan nodded, seeming to give in.

— These words were certainly worthy of Gebelaawi, but how much more worthy of him to see to the matter himself!

Digger shouted:

— Wait till you die in your degradation!

Radwaan cleared his throat, studying their faces carefully.

— Fine words! But think what it will lead to. Hamdaan said sadly:

— We went to ask for our rights and look what happened.

Abdoon the serving boy exclaimed:

— What are we afraid of? Nothing could be worse than the state we're in now.

Hamdaan tried to make excuses:

— I'm not afraid for myself but for you.

Gebel said contemptuously:

— I'll go to the Trustee alone.

Digger moved over to him to say:

— We'll go with you. Don't forget, you people, that Gebelaawi promised him success.

Gebel said:

— I'll go alone when I decide to go; but I'll want to be sure that you are behind me, united, solid and ready to face hardship and withstand it.

Abdoon jumped up enthusiastically exclaiming:

— Behind you to the death!

The boy's enthusiasm spread to Digger, Mulehead, Dumping and Lamplighter. Radwaan the bard asked rather cunningly whether Gebel's wife knew why he had come. Gebel told them how he had told his secret to Balqeeti and how Balqeeti had advised him to weigh the consequences, and how he had decided to return to the Alley, and how his wife had chosen to go with him to the end. At this Hamdaan said in a voice that showed he was with the others:

— And when will you go to the Trustee?

— When my plans are ready.

Hamdaan stood up.

— I'll get a room ready for you at my place. You're the dearest of sons, and tonight is the beginning of great things; the rebec will perhaps tell of it tomorrow, along with the story

of Adham. Come, let's swear a covenant for better, for worse.

At that moment the voice of Hamooda reached them, singing in a shaky, drunken voice:

Drink, sweet lad, and let us gaily  
Stagger home along the alley!  
Show how over me you fawn,  
Taste with me the saucy prawn!

They were distracted by his voice for only a moment, then stretched out their hands to swear the covenant with fervent hope.

3 8 \* \* \* \* \*

The Alley learnt of Gebel's return. They saw him setting out with his bag, and his wife going off to Gemalia to do her shopping. They talked about his new job, which no one in the Alley had ever taken up before, though he put on his conjuring show only in the neighboring alleys and not in his own. He did not use the snakes in his performances, and nobody guessed that he knew how to handle them. He passed Trustee's House several times as if he had never been there in his life, but he suffered a deep longing for his mother. The strongmen — Hamooda, Lionheart, Barakaat and Quicksilver — saw him but did not beat him up as they did the rest of Hamdaan's people, only getting in his way and making fun of his bag.

One time Thudclub met him. He stared at Gebel coldly, barred his way and asked:

— Where have you been hiding?

— In the wide world.

Thudclub spoke aggressively:

— I'm your strongman and I've a right to ask you anything. You have to answer.

— I answered you as best I could.

— And what's brought you back?

— Whatever it is that brings a man back to his own alley.

— I wouldn't have come back if I'd been you.

He lunged suddenly at Gebel, who would have been caught if he had not jumped aside, controlling his temper. At that moment the gatekeeper of Trustee's House called to him. Gebel turned towards him in surprise, then walked over to him. They met in front of the house and shook hands warmly. The man asked how things were with him, then told him that her Ladyship wanted to see him. Gebel had been expecting this invitation ever since he first showed himself in the Alley; his heart had told him it was sure to come. It would have been impossible for him just to call at the house, because of the way in which he had left it. Quite apart from that, he had decided not to seek a meeting, so that neither the Trustee nor the strongmen could suspect what was coming.

Scarcely had he entered the gate than the news was all over the Alley. As he walked to the veranda he glanced quickly around the garden with its tall mulberry and fig trees, its rose bushes and flowering shrubs in every corner. The familiar scents had disappeared with winter. A soft, still light like that of evening shone as if distilled from the spread of white cloud. He walked up the steps, fighting back a swarm of memories. He went into the drawing room and saw seated at the far end Lady Huda and her husband, waiting for him. He looked at his mother and their eyes met. She stood up for an emotional greeting. He bent over her hands and kissed them, and she kissed him tenderly on the forehead, bringing pangs to his heart. He turned his face to the Trustee and saw him sitting there in his cloak, eyeing them both coldly. He offered him his hand and the Effendi half stood up to shake it, then hastily sat down again.

Hudaa ran her eyes over Gebel with mixed surprise and concern at his appearance, his lean body clothed in a shoddy jellaba with a coarse belt, his worn-out shoes, the dirty cap over his tousled hair. Her eyes spoke her grief at his state and at the life he had contented himself with. Her high hopes seemed to have come to nothing. She motioned him to sit down, and he took a seat beside her. She herself sank into her chair as if exhausted. He understood what she felt and told her in a confident voice about his life in Muqattam Bazaar, his work and his marriage. He spoke with satisfaction of that life, in spite of its harshness. His words upset her.

— Live as you please! But why didn't you make my house the first you came to when you returned to the Alley?

He was tempted to tell her that his real goal in returning was her house, but he put off saying so because the moment was not suitable and because he had not yet recovered from the emotion of the meeting. He answered:

— I wanted to come to your house, but I didn't have the courage to enter it after what had happened.

The Effendi asked him coldly:

— Why did you come back if life elsewhere was so good?

Hudaa gave her husband a reproachful look, which he ignored. Gebel said with a smile:

— Perhaps I came back, sir, because I wanted to see you.

Hudaa reproached him:

— But you didn't come and see us till we sent for you, you ungrateful creature.

Gebel looked down.

— Believe me, whenever I remembered the circumstances that drove me to leave this house, I cursed them from the bottom of my heart.

The Effendi looked at him suspiciously and was about to ask him what he meant, but Hudaa got in first:

— You heard, of course, that we had pardoned Hamdaan's people for your sake?

Gebel realized that it was time for these well-bred pleasantries to end, as had been fated from the beginning, and for the struggle to begin. He said:

— The truth is that they're suffering a degradation worse than death, and several of them have been killed.

The Effendi gripped his prayer beads tightly and shouted:

— They're criminals and they got what they deserved.

Hudaa waved her hand hopefully and said:

— Let's forget all about the past.

The Effendi persisted:

— Qidra's blood couldn't be shed with impunity.

Gebel said stubbornly:

— The real criminals are the strongmen.

The Effendi stood up nervously and addressed his wife:

— You see what happens when I give way to you about asking him into our house?

Gebel said with determination:

— It was my intention to come to you in any case, sir; perhaps it's because I realize how much I owe this house that I waited till I was invited.

The Trustee looked at him with fear and suspicion.

— What do you want out of coming?

Gebel faced the Effendi boldly, knowing full well that he was opening the door through which a furious storm would burst, but his experience in the desert had given him unshakable courage.

— I've come to demand the rights of Hamdaan's people to the Trust and to a secure life.

The Effendi's face darkened with rage, and Hudaa's mouth hung open in despair. The Trustee glared as he said:

— Do you really dare to talk like that again? Have you forgotten how the disasters fell on your people one after the other after your stupid old head-man dared to come with these idiotic demands? I swear you're mad, and I don't waste my time on madmen.

Hudaa said tearfully:

— Gebel, I was going to ask you and your wife to come and live with us.

Gebel said firmly:

— I've simply passed on to you the wishes of one whose wishes can't be refused, your Ancestor and ours, Gebelaawi.

The Effendi studied Gebel carefully, bewildered. Hudaa stood up anxiously and put her hand on Gebel's shoulder, saying:

— Gebel, what's come over you?

Gebel said with a smile:

— I'm well, thank you!

The Effendi protested:

— Well? You're well? What's happened to your intelligence?

Gebel said calmly:

— Listen to my story and judge for yourself.

And he told them what he had told Hamdaan's people. When he had finished, the Effendi said, peering suspiciously into his face:

— The Founder hasn't left his house since he withdrew from the world.

— But I met him in the desert.

He asked ironically:

— And why didn't he tell *me* of his wishes?

— That's his secret; he knows best.

The Effendi laughed scornfully.

— Conjuring is the right job for you; but you're not content with simple tricks; you want to juggle with the whole Trust.

Gebel remained calm.

— God knows I've spoken nothing but the truth. Let's consult Gebelaawi himself, if you can, or the Ten Clauses.

The Effendi's rage burst forth. He scowled, and his limbs trembled as he shouted:

— You cunning thief, you shan't escape your horrible fate, not even if you flee to the top of the Jebel.



Hudaa wailed:

— Oh misery! I never imagined you'd bring me all this sorrow, Gebel.

Gebel asked in amazement:

— All this just because I've demanded my people's lawful rights?!

The Effendi screamed at the top of his voice:

— Quiet! Cunning devil! Dope-head! Alley of dope-heads! Sons of bitches! Get out of my house! Come back with your drivel, and you and your people will be slaughtered like lambs.

Gebel scowled furiously and shouted:

— Mind the anger of Gebelaawi doesn't catch up with you!

The Effendi sprang at Gebel and punched him in his broad chest with all his might, but Gebel stood the blow stoutly, then turned to Hudaa and said:

— I only respect him out of respect for you.

He turned his back on them and left.

3 9 \* \* \* \* \*

Hamdaan's people expected the very worst. Henna disagreed with the general view and thought that, as long as Gebel was head of Hamdaan's people, Lady Hudaa would not allow them to be destroyed. However, Gebel himself did not share Henna's view. He maintained that when the Trust was threatened, no one counted, neither Gebel nor anyone else, however close to the Effendi. He reminded them of their Ancestor's wish that they should be strong and ready to face disasters. Digger told people how Gebel had been rolling in luxury and had thrown it aside of his own free will for their sakes; it would not be right for anyone to let him down. If they used force and

it did not succeed, it could not make things any worse for them than they already were.

The fact was that Hamdaan's people were afraid and their nerves were on edge, but in their despair they found strength and purpose. They kept repeating the proverb: 'May as well hang for a wolf as a sheep.' Radwaan the bard alone kept saying sadly: 'If the Founder wished, he'd proclaim the truth and decide in our favor and save us from certain destruction.' When Gebel heard about this he was furious and stormed round to see him. He seized him by the shoulders and shook him till he almost fell from his seat. He roared: 'Is this what the bards are like, Radwaan? You recite the stories of the heroes and sing to the music of the rebec, but when things get nasty you bolt to your holes and spread doubt and despair. Damned cowards! (Then, turning towards those seated around:) Gebelaawi has not honored any other sector as he has honored yours. If he hadn't thought of you as being his family in a special way, he wouldn't have met me and spoken to me. He shines his light on our path, and he's promised to help us. I'm going to fight, by God, even if I have to fight alone!'

But it seemed he was not alone; every man and every woman supported him. They all expected an ordeal and seemed not to care about the consequences. Gebel had taken over the leadership of his sector spontaneously, as the result of events that he had neither intended nor arranged. Hamdaan himself had not tried to prevent this but had been happy to give up a position that would become the target for an unrestrained attack.

Gebel did not stay in but went about as usual, against Hamdaan's advice. He expected trouble at every step, but not one of the strongmen molested him. He was amazed at this. The only explanation he could think of was that the Effendi had kept quiet about their meeting in the hope that Gebel in return would say no more about his demands, so that it would be as though nothing had happened. Behind this policy he saw

Hudaa's sad face and her faithful mother-love. He was afraid that if her love lasted it would hurt him more than her husband's harshness. He thought for a long time about what must be done to poke the fire back into life.

Strange things began to happen in the Alley. One day a woman's cries for help were heard from a cellar. It turned out that a snake had slithered between her feet and she had rushed out into the road. Some men volunteered to search for it and went into her home with their sticks. They hunted it down and killed it with a hail of blows. They threw it into the road and urchins snatched it up and played with it noisily. This was not an unusual event in the Alley, but hardly an hour had passed before another scream for help was heard from a house at the end nearest to Gemalia. No sooner had night fallen than there was uproar in a tenement-house in Hamdaan's sector when somebody saw a snake; but it disappeared before anyone could catch it, and all efforts to find it came to nothing. Then Gebel himself offered to fetch it out, using what he had learnt from Balqeeti. Hamdaan's people talked of how Gebel had stood naked in the courtyard and spoken to the snake in a secret language till it came obediently.

These events might have been forgotten by next morning if they had not been repeated in the homes of some important people. Everyone soon heard how a snake had bitten Hamooda as he was crossing the entrance passage of the tenement-house where he lived. He had screamed in spite of himself till his friends came and helped him. At this point the situation became the subject of wild rumor. People spoke of nothing but snakes, and the strange events continued. One of the men in Barakaat's hashish den saw a snake appear between the rafters for a few seconds and then vanish. They jumped up in a panic and fled.

News of the snakes eclipsed the tales of the bards in the cafes. Things seemed to have gone beyond the bounds of decency when a big snake appeared in the home of his Honor

the Trustee. The many servants of the house fanned out and searched in every corner for the vanished snake, but they could find no trace of it. Fear gripped the Trustee and Hudaa, and she seriously thought of leaving the house till she could be quite sure that it was rid of snakes. While the house was turned upside down, screams and commotion were heard from the house of Thudclub. The gatekeeper went to find out more and reported back to his master that a snake had bitten one of Thudclub's sons and then disappeared. Panic reigned. Screams for help came from one tenement-house after another. Hudaa decided finally to leave the Alley.

Then Hassanayn, the gatekeeper, said that Gebel was a conjurer, and that such people knew ways of catching snakes; Gebel had hunted out a snake from one of the tenement-houses of Hamdaan. The Effendi turned pale and said not a word, but Hudaa quickly told the gatekeeper to fetch Gebel. The man looked at his master for his assent, and the Effendi muttered a few angry words without making himself clear. Hudaa gave him the choice between sending for Gebel and leaving the house, and so, trembling with rage, he let the gatekeeper go.

A crowd had gathered between Trustee's House and Strongman's House. The important people had gone in as a deputation to the Trustee, led by the strongmen — Thudclub, Hamooda, Barakaat, Lionheart and Quicksilver. They could talk of nothing but the snakes. Quicksilver said:

— Something in the Jebel must have driven the snakes into our homes.

Thudclub, who seemed to be battling with himself as he could find no one else to fight, bellowed:

— All our lives we have been neighbors of the Jebel and it has done us no harm.

He was still furious over what had happened to his son, and Hamooda had not yet recovered from the bite on his foot. Fear gripped them all. They said their homes were not safe to live

in; the inhabitants had all gathered in the road.

Gebel came carrying his empty bag, and greeted everyone, then stood before the Trustee and Hudaa, polite and confident. The Effendi could not bring himself to look at him, but she said:

— They tell us, Gebel, that you would be able to drive the snakes out of our houses.

Gebel said calmly:

— That's one of the things I've learnt.

— I have sent for you to rid the house of snakes.

Gebel looked at the Effendi.

— Does your Honor permit?

Hiding his annoyance, the Trustee muttered:

— Yes!

At this point Lionheart came forward, prompted secretly by Thudclub.

— And our houses and everybody else's?

— My knowledge is at the service of everybody.

Voices were raised in thanks; and Gebel let his large eyes rove round their faces for a while, then said:

— But perhaps I don't need to remind you that everything has its price, as usual in our Alley.

The strongmen looked at him in surprise. He went on:

— Why be surprised? You guard the sectors in return for protection money, and his Honor the Trustee manages the Trust in return for control over its revenues.

The situation was obviously delicate, and people could not reveal with their eyes what they felt in their hearts, but Thudclub said:

— What do you want for your work?

He answered calmly:

— I'm not asking for money. I want your word of honor that you'll respect the dignity of Hamdaan's people and their rights in the Trust.

Silence fell. The very air seemed charged with hidden

anger. Huda'a's anxiety increased when the Trustee just stared at the ground. Gebel spoke again:

— Don't think I'm defying you. The fact is I'm simply reminding you of what justice demands for your downtrodden brothers. The fear that has driven you out of your homes is only a taste of the bitterness your brothers drink every day of their wretched lives.

Angry looks flashed in their eyes and were swiftly hidden, but Quicksilver shouted:

— I can send for a Sufi who knows how to handle snakes, even if it means staying out of our houses for two or three days till he comes from his village.

Huda'a protested:

— How can the people of a whole alley stay outside for two or three days?

The Effendi was thinking furiously, controlling his anger and hatred as best he could. Then he said to Gebel:

— I give you the word of honor you demand; begin your work.

The strongmen were horrified, but the situation did not allow them to express their feelings. Their hearts were filled with murderous thoughts. Gebel however told them to go right away to the bottom of the garden, so that he had the whole place to himself. Then he stripped off his clothes and stood naked as the day when Lady Huda'a had lifted him out of the pool of rainwater. He went from place to place and room to room, now whistling softly, now muttering obscure words. Thudclub came up to the Trustee and said:

— He's the one who sent the snakes into our houses.

The Effendi motioned him to be silent and murmured:

— Let him take his snakes away.

A snake hidden in a light shaft obeyed Gebel, and he coaxed another out from the Trust office. They twined round his arm, and he appeared with them on the veranda, where he slipped them into his bag. Then he put on his clothes and stood

waiting till everyone came. He said to them:

— Let's go to your houses so that I can clean them out.

He turned to Huda'a and said softly:

— But for my people's misery, I'd never make any conditions for serving you.

Then he went up to the Trustee and said boldly:

— The word of a free man is binding.

And he went out, everyone else following in silence.

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Gebel succeeded in ridding the Alley of snakes, in full view of all its people. Whenever one yielded to him shouts and cheers went up, and the whole Alley was buzzing, from the Great House to Gemalia. When he finished his work and went home, youths and urchins gathered round him singing to an accompaniment of clapping:

Gebel, savior of the paupers!

Gebel, victor over vipers!

The singing and clapping went on even after he had gone, which greatly annoyed the strongmen. Soon Hamooda, Lionheart, Barakaat and Quicksilver burst on the demonstrators and let fly with curses and insults, kicks and punches, till they fled for the shelter of their homes, leaving the road to cats, dogs and flies. People wondered about the reason for this attack: how could they reward Gebel's work with an assault on those who were celebrating it? Would the Effendi keep his promise to Gebel? Or was this attack the beginning of a savage campaign of revenge? These questions went round in Gebel's

head, and he summoned the men of Hamdaan to his place to plan things.

At the same time Thudclub was meeting the Trustee and his wife and was saying firmly:

— We shan't spare a single one of them.

The Effendi looked pleased, but Hudaa said:

— And the word of honor which the Trustee gave?

Thudclub scowled inhumanly and said:

— People are ruled by force, not honor.

She protested:

— They will say of us...

— Let them say what they like! When do they ever stop? They jabber away all night in the hashish dens, gossiping and joking about us; but when we go up the Alley they jump to their feet because they're afraid of the stick, not because they care about honor.

The Effendi looked at her angrily.

— It was Gebel who hatched this plot with the snakes so that he could dictate his terms to us; everybody knows that. Who expects me to keep the word I gave to a low, cunning fraud?

To quieten her conscience, Thudclub said, looking as ugly as ever:

— Remember, madam, if Gebel succeeds in winning the rights of Hamdaan's people in the Trust, nobody in the Alley will rest till he has obtained his rights too. So the Trust will be lost and us with it.

The Effendi squeezed the prayer beads in his hand till they crunched, and he yelled:

— Don't spare a single one of them!

The strongmen were summoned to Thudclub's house and were then joined by their most trusted men. The news spread that some dire fate was being prepared for Hamdaan's people. Women peered out of every window and men crowded in the Alley. Gebel had already laid his plans. The men of Hamdaan



had assembled in the courtyard of the middle tenement-house, armed with sticks and baskets of stones, while the women were dispersed round the tenements and on the roof. Each of them had a part to play, and any mistake or change of plan would mean their destruction, so they took up their positions round Gebel, all extremely tense and anxious. Gebel could not help seeing the state they were in and he reminded them of the Founder's support for him and of his promise of success for the strong. He found them ready to believe him, some out of faith, others out of despair. Radwaan the bard leaned over and whispered in Hamdaan's ear:

— I'm afraid our plan won't succeed. I think it'd be better to barricade the gate and to strike from the roof and the windows.

Hamdaan shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and said:

— Then we'd condemn ourselves to be blockaded till we starved to death.

Hamdaan went over to Gebel and asked him:

— Wouldn't it be better to leave the gate open?

Gebel said:

— Leave it as it is, otherwise they'll be uncertain what to do.

A cold, fierce wind was howling, driving the clouds across the sky. They wondered whether it would rain. The noise of the crowd outside grew louder, drowning the caterwauling of cats and the barking of dogs. Then Henna gave a warning cry: 'The devils have come!'

They had indeed come. Thudclub had sallied forth from his house flanked by the other strongmen and followed by their henchmen, all carrying cudgels. They walked slowly to the gates of the Great House, then down to Hamdaan's sector. The crowd greeted them with shouts and cheers. There were varied motives for this cheering: a few people were delighted at the prospect of a fight and wanted to see blood spilt; and some hated Hamdaan's people for priding themselves on a status that no one else recognized; but most loathed the strongmen

and their misdeeds, hiding their hatred and feigning support only out of fear and hypocrisy. Thudclub did not give a thought to any of them, but marched straight on till he stood in front of Hamdaan's tenement-house and shouted:

— If there's a man among you let him come out to me!

Henna's voice came from behind a window:

— Give us your word of honor that anybody who comes out will not be tricked.

Thudclub was furious at her alluding to the 'word of honor'. He yelled:

— Is this old tart your only spokesman?

Henna yelled:

— God forgive your mother, Thudclub!

Thudclub screamed his command to attack the gate. Some of the men hurled themselves at it while others flung stones at the shutters, so that no one would dare to open them for a counter-attack. The attackers clustered round the gate, thrusting against it with their shoulders. They kept on heaving till it began to tremble. They grew still more determined, rocking it till it worked loose. Then they drew back, ran at it and rammed it, bursting it right open. Through it, at the end of the long passage, could be seen the courtyard, and in it Gebel and the men of Hamdaan, all with cudgels poised. Thudclub made an obscene gesture with his hand and let out a jeering laugh, then charged down the passage with his men behind him.

They had scarcely gone half way when the ground gaped suddenly open beneath them and they tumbled to the bottom of a deep pit. Straight away the windows on either side of the passage were flung open, and from them water was poured out of jugs, pots, basins and water-skins. The men of Hamdaan at once rushed to the pit and flung in basket-loads of stones. For the very first time the Alley heard screams coming from its strongmen and saw blood spurting from Thudclub's head and sticks battering the heads of Hamooda, Barakaat, Lionheart and Quicksilver as they floundered in the muddy water. Their

henchmen saw what had happened to them and took to their heels, leaving the strongmen helpless before their fate. The hail of water and stones fell thicker and faster and the sticks cracked down without mercy. The people heard cries for help from throats which had only been used to uttering abuse and insults. Radwaan the bard was shouting at the top of his voice:

— Don't spare a single one of them!

Blood mingled with the muddy water. Hamooda was the first to die. Lionheart and Quicksilver screamed loudly, but Thudclub grasped the side of the pit with both hands, wanting to scramble out. His eyes were full of hatred and he was overcoming his feelings of weakness and impotence and was roaring like a bull. Blows rained down on him till he fell back, losing his grip on the side of the pit, and dropped into the water, clutching a lump of mud in each hand. Stillness descended on the pit, where nothing moved or made a sound, and the surface of the water was stained with blood and mud. The men of Hamdaan stood gazing down, panting. The crowd pressed round the entrance of the passage, staring in amazement into the pit. Radwaan shouted:

— This is the tyrants' punishment.

The news spread through the Alleylike wildfire. People said that Gebel had got rid of the strongmen as he had got rid of the snakes. Everyone cheered him thunderously. They burned with enthusiasm, not caring about the cold wind, and proclaimed him Strongman of Gebelaawi Alley. They asked for the strongmen's corpses, to mutilate them. There was much clapping, and some people began to dance. Gebel, however, did not for a moment lose sight of his plan, and he had everything clearly worked out in his head. He shouted to his people:

— Come now to Trustee's House.

In the few minutes that passed before Gebel and his people set out from the tenement-house, volcanoes of fury erupted. The women poured out to join their men, and they all fell upon the strongmen's homes, attacking their occupants with punches and kicks, so that they ran for their lives, shielding their heads with their hands and moaning and weeping. The houses were plundered of every piece of furniture, food and clothing, and everything else was smashed, leaving a trail of splintered wood and glass. The angry mob set off for Trustee's House and gathered outside the locked gate chanting thunderously after their leader: 'Bring the Trustee! And if he won't come...'

Their shouting turned to jeering. Some turned towards the Great House, calling on their Ancestor Gebelaawi to come out of his isolation and set right what had gone wrong in their affairs and those of the Alley. Others began thumping the Trustee's gate with their fists and heaving at it with their shoulders, urging those who hung back fearfully to help batter it down. At that tense moment Gebel arrived leading his people, both men and women, walking tall and proud because of the decisive victory they had won. The crowd made way for them and cheered and shrieked till Gebel signed to them to be quiet. Their voices trailed away and fell silent, so that they heard the howling of the wind again. Gebel looked at the faces gazing up at him and said:

— People of the Alley, my greetings and thanks!

They cheered again till he raised his hand for silence. Then he said:

— Our work won't be done till you have broken up peacefully.

From several throats came the cry:

— We want justice, master of the Alley.

He said in a voice that all could hear:

— Go now, quietly! The Founder's will shall indeed be done.

There were cheers for the Founder and his son Gebel. Gebel's steady gaze urged the crowd to be gone. They would have loved to stay where they were, but faced with his stare they could not avoid dispersing. One by one they left, till all had gone. Then Gebel went to the gate of Trustee's House and knocked, shouting:

— Open up, Hassanayn!

The man's trembling voice was heard:

— The people... The people...

— There is nobody here but us.

He opened the gate and Gebel went in, followed by his people. They walked up the trellised path to the veranda, and there they saw Hudaa standing submissively in front of the door of the drawing room, while the Effendi stood in the doorway, hanging his head, his face deathly pale. At the sight of him people began to snarl. Hudaa moaned:

— I'm in a dreadful state, Gebel.

Gebel pointed contemptuously at the Effendi and said:

— If the schemes of this shameless man had succeeded, we'd all be mangled corpses now.

Hudaa's answer was a heavy sigh. Gebel turned a cold stare on the wilting Trustee and said:

— Now you see yourself helpless with no power and no glory, no strongmen to protect you, no courage to support you, no manliness to plead for you. If I chose to leave you to the people of our Alley, they would tear you to pieces and trample you underfoot.

The Effendi quaked with fear, and he seemed bent and shrunken, but Hudaa took a step towards Gebel and said hopefully:

— I don't like to hear anything from you but the kind words I'm used to. We're in a dreadful state of nerves that deserves merciful treatment from a real man like you.

Gebel frowned to hide his emotion and said:

— If it wasn't for my regard for you, things would go quite differently.

— I don't doubt it, Gebel. You're a man who doesn't disappoint hopes.

Gebel said with regret:

— How much easier it would have been if justice had been done without a drop of blood being spilt!

The Effendi made an obscure gesture of helplessness, and he crumpled up still further. Hudaa said:

— What is past is past. You'll find us very ready to listen.

The Trustee seemed to want to break his silence at any cost and said in a weak voice:

— This is a chance to make up for the wrongs of the past.

They listened eagerly, anxious to know what state the tyrant was in now that his power had left him. They stared at him feeling at once a little appeased and very disapproving and curious. The Trustee grew bolder, now that he had broken his silence. He said:

— Today you are worthy to take the place of Thudclub.

Gebel's face was grim and he said contemptuously:

— Being Strongman is not my aim. Find somebody else to protect you; I only want the full rights of Hamdaan's people.

— They are all yours, and you can manage the Trust if you want.

Hudaa added hopefully:

— Like you used to, Gebel.

At this Digger called out from the crowd of Hamdaan's people:

— And why shouldn't the whole Trust belong to us?

There was a buzz of excitement, and the Trustee and his wife grew pale as death, but Gebel said angrily:

— The Founder told me to win back your rights, not to rob others of theirs.

Digger asked:

— And how do you know the others will get their rights?

Gebel shouted:

— That's not my business. You seem only to hate oppression if it's turned against you.

Hudaa said with emotion:

— Gebel, what a fine, honest man you are. I hope so very much that you will come back to my house.

Gebel said resolutely:

— I shall stay in Hamdaan's sector.

— It doesn't suit your position.

— When riches flow into our hands, we'll make our houses as good as the Great House. That is the wish of our Ancestor Gebelaawi.

The Trustee looked up hesitantly at Gebel's face and said:

— The way we saw the people of the Alley behave today threatens our security.

Gebel said scornfully:

— How you get on with them is nothing to do with me.

Digger said:

— If you respect your agreement with us, none of them will dare to defy you.

The Trustee said eagerly:

— Your rights shall be restored for all to see.

Hudaa said hopefully:

— You must have dinner with me tonight; that is a mother's wish.

Gebel understood this declaration of friendship between himself and the Trustee's family and could not refuse.

— Your wish is granted.

The days that followed were bright with the rejoicing of Hamdaan's people — Gebel's people, as they came to be called. Their cafe opened its doors again, and Radwaan the bard sat cross-legged on the bench, playing his rebec. Ale flowed freely for several days, the air grew thick with hashish-smoke and old Henna started belly-dancing. People were happy to reveal who had killed Qidra, and Gebelaawi's meeting with Gebel was described with a halo of imagined detail.

For Gebel and Shafeeqa this was a very good time. One day he said to her:

— It would be lovely to have Balqeeti to stay!

She was thinking of her imminent ordeal.

— Yes, so that he can greet his grandchild with a blessing.

— You are the source of my happiness, Shafeeqa. Sayida will find a good husband among Hamdaan's people.

— Say 'Gebel's people' as everybody else does. You're the best man this sector has ever known.

He smiled and said:

— No, Adham was the best of us all. How he longed for the happy life in which the only work would be music; his dream will yet come true.

Digger came into sight. He was drunk and was dancing with a group of Gebel's people. When he saw Gebel coming up he brandished his cudgel playfully and said:

— You don't want to be Strongman, so I'm going to be.

Gebel roared at him, so that everyone heard:

— There's to be no more strongman business among Hamdaan's people, but they must all be strong against anybody who means them harm.

Digger went into the cafe, and the rest followed him, staggering drunkenly. Gebel told them:

— Of all the people of the Alley you are the dearest to our Ancestor, and you are its masters now. Love and justice and



respect must rule among you. Let no crime ever be committed in your sector.

The sound of drums and singing rang out from the tenement-houses of Hamdaan's people, and the festive lights shone out, while the rest of the Alley was sunk in its usual darkness. The urchins gathered at the edge of Hamdaan's sector to watch from a distance. Then along came some men from down the Alley with gloomy faces. They went into the cafe and were received politely and invited to sit down, and tea was brought for them. Gebel guessed they had not come just for the pleasure. His guess proved right when Zanaati, the oldest of them, said:

— Gebel, we're all sons of one Alley and one Ancestor. Today you're the master of the Alley and its most powerful man. Justice should rule in all the sectors and not only in Hamdaan's.

Gebel said nothing, and his people looked indifferent, but the man went on doggedly:

— It's in your power to bring justice to the whole Alley.

From the very first, Gebel had not cared about the rest of the Alley, and none of his people cared. On the contrary, they had felt superior, even in their days of trial. Gebel said gently:

— Our Ancestor charged me with my own people.

— But he's everybody's Ancestor, Gebel.

Hamdaan said:

— That's an arguable point.

He studied their faces for the effect of his words and saw their gloom deepen. He went on:

— As for our close connection with him, he himself confirmed that in the desert meeting.

Zanaati looked for a moment as though he wanted to say 'That's an arguable point.' but his spirit was broken. He asked Gebel:

— Are you pleased at our poverty and wretchedness?

Gebel said without enthusiasm:

— Not at all! But it's no business of ours.

The man persisted:

— How can it not be your business?

Gebel wondered what right the man had to speak to him like this. Still he was not angry; he found part of himself sympathizing with him, but another part of him refused to go through fresh difficulties for the sake of the others. And who were these others? The answer came from the lips of Digger, who shouted:

— Have you forgotten how you treated us during our time of trial?

The man looked down for a while, then said:

— Who was able to speak his thoughts or show his true feelings in the days of the strongmen? Would they have forgiven anybody who treated people in ways they didn't like?

Digger's lips tightened in pride and contempt:

— You envied us our high position in the Alley, and you still do. Maybe you did so before the strongmen.

Zanaati hung his head in despair and said:

— God help you, Digger!

Digger went on pitilessly:

— Thank our leader for deciding not to take vengeance on you.

Gebel was filled with conflicting thoughts and retreated into silence. He was reluctant to offer a helping hand but he was not happy to reject them outright. The men found themselves faced with open hostility from Digger, cold looks from the others and a discouraging silence from Gebel. They stood up crestfallen, and went the way they had come. Digger contained himself till they had disappeared, then shook his fist in disgust and shouted:

— To hell with you, sons of pigs!

Gebel thundered:

— It's not for the lords of the Alley to enjoy others' suffering.

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It was a memorable day when Gebel collected his people's share of the Trust's revenues. He took his seat in the courtyard of 'Victory House' and summoned Hamdaan's people. He counted how many were in each family and shared out the money accordingly. He did not even single himself out for special treatment. Hamdaan was perhaps not altogether content with this fairness, but he expressed his feelings indirectly, saying to Gebel:

— It isn't right to stint yourself, Gebel.

Gebel frowned and said:

— I have taken the share of two people, myself and Shafeeqa.

— But you're the head of this sector.

Gebel said for all to hear:

— A leader must not rob his people.

Digger seemed to be waiting anxiously for the outcome of the dispute, then said:

— Gebel is not Hamdaan, and Hamdaan is not Digger, and Digger is not Triptoe.

Gebel protested angrily:

— Do you want to divide one family into masters and servants?

But Digger clung to his opinion and said:

— We have cafe owners and peddlers and beggars amongst us; how can you treat them as equals? I was the first to go out during the blockade, getting myself chased by Qidra. I was the first to meet you in your exile, and later I was the first to back you up when everybody else hung back.

Gebel grew still angrier and bellowed:

— A man who praises himself is a liar. God! Men like you deserve whatever trouble you get.

Digger would have liked to go on with the argument, but Gebel's eyes blazed with anger, so he backed down and left the gathering without another word.

That evening Digger went to Mulehead's hashish den and sat in the circle of smokers, nursing his grievances. He sought comfort by inviting Triptoe to gamble with him, and they played seega. Within half an hour Digger had lost his share of the Trust's revenue. Mulehead laughed as he changed the water in the pipe.

— Bad luck Digger! You're doomed to be poor, even against the wishes of the Founder.

The loss had cleared Digger's head and he growled:

— Riches are not lost so easily.

Mulehead tested the pipe to see how much water there was in it, then said:

— But you've lost yours.

Triptoe was arranging the notes carefully. Then he lifted his hand to put them in the breast of his jellaba, but Digger stopped him with one hand and held out the other for the money. Triptoe scowled and said:

— It isn't your money any more; you have no right to it.

— Let go of the money, you scum.

Mulehead looked at them anxiously, and said:

— Don't quarrel in my home.

Digger gripped Triptoe's hand, shouting:

— This bastard isn't going to rob me!

— Let go of my hand, Digger, I'm not robbing you.

— You mean you earned it?

— Why did you gamble?

Digger hit him hard, and screeched:

— My money! Before I break your bones!

Triptoe snatched his hand away and Digger went mad with rage and jabbed his finger in Triptoe's right eye. Triptoe screamed loudly and leapt up, then covered his eye with both hands, letting the money fall into Digger's lap. He staggered with pain then fell down groaning. The others gathered round him, while Digger collected up the money and put it back in

the breast of his jellaba. Mulehead came up to him and said, horrified:

— You've put his eye out.

Digger sat for a short time, shocked, then got up suddenly and left.

Gebel stood in the courtyard of his victory with the assembled men of Hamdaan. Anger was in his eyes and in the set of his jaw. Triptoe squatted in front of him, with a tight bandage over his eye, while Digger stood, facing Gebel's wrath silent and alone. Hamdaan tried to calm Gebel's temper and said gently:

— Digger will give back the money to Triptoe.

Gebel shouted at the top of his voice:

— Let him first give him back his eye.

Triptoe cried, and Radwaan the bard said with a sigh:

— If only that could be done!

Gebel's face was dark as a thundercloud. He said:

— But it is possible to take an eye for an eye.

Digger stared into Gebel's face fearfully. He gave the money to Hamdaan saying:

— I was out of my mind with rage; I didn't mean to injure him.

Gebel studied his face angrily for a long time, then said in a terrifying voice:

— An eye for an eye — and the one who acts first ends worst!

They looked at one another helplessly. They had never seen Gebel angrier than today, and events had already proved the violence of his temper when he had left his luxurious home and when he had killed Qidra. His rages were indeed terrible, and when he was carried away no one could come between him and his goal. Hamdaan tried to speak, but Gebel got in first:

— The Founder of the Trust did not prefer you so that some of you could attack others. Either you have a life based on order, or chaos that will spare none of you. For that reason,

Digger, I decree that your eye shall be put out.

Digger was panic-stricken and shouted:

— Not a hand shall be laid on me, not if I have to fight the lot of you.

Gebel sprang at him like a mad bull and punched him very hard in the face, knocking him out. He lifted up the unconscious man, holding him from behind in his arms, then turned to Triptoe and said in a commanding voice:

— Get up and take your due.

Triptoe stood up, but then hesitated, while screams came from Digger's home. Gebel looked grimly at Triptoe and shouted:

— Come, before I bury you alive.

Triptoe went up to Digger and put out his right eye in full view of everyone. The screams from Digger's tenement grew louder and his friends Mulehead and Lamplighter Ali wept. Gebel shouted at them:

— You vile cowards! My God! You only hated strongman methods when they were turned against you. No sooner does one of you find himself strong then he rushes to do wrong and attack his neighbor. The only thing for the devils hidden inside you is to beat them without pity, without mercy. Either order or destruction!

He went off leaving Digger in the hands of his friends.

This event had an immense effect on people's minds. Before it, Gebel had been a beloved leader and his people had thought him a strongman who did not wish to take the name or the outward signs of his position. After it, he was feared and dreaded. Some people whispered about his harshness and his tyranny, but they always found others to oppose them and mention the other side of his nature — his pity for the victim and his sincere wish to establish an order that would guarantee justice and brotherhood among Hamdaan's people. The latter view found support everyday in his words and deeds, so that those who disliked him warmed towards him, those who feared

him trusted him, and those who had shunned him inclined to him. Then everyone wanted the order he stood for and nobody disputed it. Uprightness and honesty reigned in his days. He remained among them as a symbol of justice and order till at last he died without having swerved an inch from his path.

That is the story of Gebel.

He was the first to rebel against injustice in our Alley and the first to have the honor of contact with Gebelaawi after he withdrew from the world. He obtained such power that no one disputed it with him, and yet he refrained from strongman methods and crookery and from getting rich by taking protection money and trading in drugs. He remained a byword for justice and strength and order amongst his people. True, he did not worry about the others in the Alley; perhaps in his heart of hearts he scorned or despised them, as did the rest of his people, but he never wronged nor harmed any of them, and he was an example to everyone.

If only forgetfulness did not plague our Alley, good examples would not be wasted. But our plague is forgetfulness.





# RIFAA

4 4 \*

Dawn was not far off. Every living thing in the Alley had gone to sleep, even the strongmen and the cats and dogs. Darkness had settled in every corner as if it would never leave. Under cover of the all-embracing stillness, the door of Victory House in Gebel's sector was opened with great caution, and out slipped two figures. They went silently towards the Great House and followed its high wall round to the desert. They tiptoed and kept looking round to be sure no one was following. They walked on far into the desert, guided by the light of the scatter of stars, till they could make out Hind's Rock like a patch of deeper darkness.

They were a middle-aged man and a pregnant young woman, and both carried bulging bundles. At the rock the woman sighed and said:

— My dear Shaafiy, I'm tired.

The man stopped and said gruffly:

— Take a rest then, and damn those who caused your tiredness!

The woman put down her bundle and sat on it, resting her belly between her thighs. The man stood for a moment, peering about, then he too sat down on his bundle. A moist

dawn breeze stirred around them, but the woman did not forget the question that absorbed her:

— Where do you think I'll have my baby?

Shaafiy said crossly:

— Anywhere's better than our damned Alley, Abda. (He looked up at the outline of the Jebel, which stretched to north and south as far as the eye could see, and continued:) We shall go to Muqattam Bazaar. Gebel went there in his time of trial. I'll open a carpentry shop and carry on with the work I did in the Alley. I have a golden touch, and a fair amount of money to make a start.

The woman drew her chador closer round her head and shoulders and said sadly:

— We'll live in exile as if we had no people, we who belong to Gebel's people, the lords of the Alley.

The man spat angrily:

— Lords of the Alley indeed! We are just miserable slaves, Abda; Gebel and his happy times have gone, and 'Snarler' has come, damn him, our strongman who is against us and not for us, who gobbles up our earnings and destroys anybody who complains.

Abda could not deny any of this, for she had always lived bitter days and sorrowful nights; but it seemed that the further she was from the hateful things in the Alley, the more her heart clung to good memories. She said:

— Our Alley would be the best of all if it wasn't for its wicked men. Where else is there a house like our Ancestor's, or neighbors like ours? Where else will you hear the stories of Adham and Gebel and Hind's Rock? Damn wicked men!

— The cudgels crack down for the slightest reason, and the mighty swagger about among us like fate itself.

He remembered the abominable Snarler who had taken him by the collar and shaken him till his ribs almost rattled, and had then dragged him in the dust in front of everyone, all

because he had once talked about the Trust. He stamped his foot on the ground and went on:

— That damned criminal snatched the little son of Sidhum, the head-meat man, and after that nothing was ever heard of him again. He had no mercy on a little one a month old, and you ask where you're to have your baby! You'll have it with people who don't kill babies.

Abda sighed and said gently:

— If only you could be content with the same as other people.

He frowned in the darkness.

— What did I do wrong, Abda? Nothing. I just asked what had become of Gebel and Gebel's covenant and of just force, and why Gebel's people are poor and wretched again. He smashed my shop up and beat me, and would have killed me but for the neighbors. If we'd stayed at home till you had your baby, he'd have pounced on it as he did with Sidhum's.

She shook her head sadly.

— Oh if only you were patient, my dear Shaafiy! Haven't you heard them say Gebelaawi will certainly come back one day to save his children from oppression and humiliation?

Shaafiy puffed:

— So they say! I've been hearing that ever since I was a boy. But the fact is our Ancestor has shut himself away in his house, and the Trustee has taken the Trust's money for himself, except what he gives to the strongmen to protect him; and Snarler, strongman of Gebel's people, takes their share and buries it in his stomach, as if Gebel had never been, as if he hadn't taken the eye of his friend Digger for the eye of poor Triptoe.

The woman was silent in the darkness. Morning would find her amongst strangers who would be her new neighbors, and her baby would be born into their hands. It would grow up on strange soil, like a cutting taken from a tree. She had been happy enough with Gebel's people, taking the food to her

husband's shop, sitting at night by the window to listen to the rebec of dear old Jawaad the blind bard. How sweet was its music, and how lovely was the story of Gebel, the night Gebelaawi met him in the darkness and told him not to be afraid, assuring him of his love and support till he succeeded. He had come back to his Alley with joy in his heart. How sweet it was to come back from exile!

Shaafiy was gazing up at the sky and at the unsleeping stars, and he glimpsed the first signs of light over the Jebel. He warned:

— We must be on our way so as to reach the Bazaar before sunrise.

— I still need rest.

— Damn those who caused your tiredness.

How beautiful life would be but for Snarler; it was full of good things: the pure air, the starry sky, pleasant sensations. But there were also the Trustee Ihaab and the strongmen: 'Bayoomi' and Jaabir, 'Handoosa' and Khaalid, and 'Snarler'. It would have been possible for every house to become like the Great House and for the groans to turn into songs; but the wretched people still yearned for the unattainable as Adham before them had yearned. And what were these poor people: necks red from beatings, backs bruised by kicks, eyes grazed by flies, heads infested by lice.

— Why has Gebelaawi forgotten us?

The woman murmured:

— God knows how he is!

Shaafiy shouted in grief and anger:

— Gebelaawi!

The echo threw back his voice. He stood up saying:

— Trust in God!

Abda stood up and put her hand in his, and they headed south for Muqattam Bazaar.

4 5 \*

Abda spoke with joy in her eyes and on her lips.

— There's our Alley! And here are we, back after our exile.

Praise be to God, Lord of all worlds!

Shaafiy smiled, wiping his forehead on the sleeve of his cloak, and said with composure:

— It's good to be back!

Rifaa listened to his parents with a mixture of surprise and sadness on his handsome, open face. He protested:

— Is Muqattam Bazaar going to be forgotten, and our neighbors?

His mother smiled, drawing the corner of her chador over her greying hair. She understood that the boy felt as strongly for his birthplace as she did for hers. With his gentle, affectionate nature he could not forget friendships. She answered:

— Good things are never forgotten. But this is where you really come from, and your people are here, the lords of the Alley. You'll love them and they'll love you. How lovely Gebel's sector will be now that Snarler's dead!

Shaafiy warned:

— 'Dungbeetle' will be no better than Snarler.

— But Dungbeetle doesn't hate you.

— Strongmen's hatreds spring up as quickly as mud follows rain.

Abda said hopefully:

— Don't think like that. We've come back to live in peace. You'll open a shop and make a living. And don't forget that you lived under a strongman at Muqattam Bazaar. Everywhere there's a strongman for people to bow down to.

The family continued on their way to the Alley, Shaafiy in the lead carrying a sack, Abda and Rifaa following with a big bundle. Rifaa, with his height, his slim build and his innocent face, was an attractive young man with a mild and peaceful air, a stranger to the earth he walked on. He examined the scene

eagerly, till his eye fell on the Great House, isolated at the head of the Alley, the tops of trees waving above its wall. He gazed at it for a long time, then asked:

— Our Ancestor's house?

Abda said happily:

— Yes! You remember what we told you about it? Your Ancestor lives there, the master of all this land and everything that stands on it. Its goodness is his and so is its abundance. If he wasn't shut away the Alley would be filled with light.

Shaafiy went on scornfully:

— And in his name Ihaab the Trustee robs us, and the strongmen attack us.

They went towards the Alley, past the south wall of the Great House, at which Rifaa continued to gaze. Then Trustee's House came into view, with its gatekeeper sitting on the bench by the open gate. Facing it stood the house of Bayoomi, Strongman of the Alley, in front of which stood a donkey cart with baskets of rice and fresh fruit. The servants were carrying them in one after another. The Alley itself looked like a playground for barefoot urchins, and women sat on the ground or on rush mats in front of their tenement-houses, shelling beans or mashing jute leaves and exchanging gossip, jokes and abuse. There was a great deal of laughter and shouting. Shaafiy and his family made for Gebel's sector. An old blind man, feeling his way slowly with a stick, met them at the side of the road. Shaafiy set down his sack and went up to him beaming. He stopped in front of him and exclaimed:

— Dear old Jawaad the bard! Hello!

The bard stopped, cocking an ear, then shook his head in puzzlement and said:

— Hello! That's a voice I seem to know.

— Have you forgotten your old friend Shaafiy the carpenter?

The man's face lit up and he exclaimed:

— Dear old Shaafiy! Good heavens!

He opened his arms and the two men embraced with such fervent affection that bystanders stared at them, and two urchins playfully imitated their embrace. Jawaad seized his friend's hand and said:

— You left us twenty-odd years ago, what an age! And how's your wife?

Abda said:

— Dear old Jawaad! I'm well thank you, and I hope you are too. And here's our son. Rifaa, come and kiss the hand of our dear old bard.

Rifaa came up to the bard happily, took his hand and kissed it. The old man patted him on the shoulder and reached up to feel at his head and his features. He said:

— Amazing! Amazing! How like your Ancestor!

This praise made Abda's face light up, but Shaafiy laughed and said:

— If you could see how thin he is you wouldn't say that,

— It's enough; there won't be another Gebelaawi. What does the young man do?

— I've taught him carpentry; but he's a spoilt only child. He stays in my shop very little and wanders about in the desert and on the Jebel most of the time.

The bard smiled.

— A man doesn't settle down before he's married. And where have you been, Shaafiy?

— In Muqattam Bazaar.

The man laughed loudly.

— Like Gebel! But Gebel came back a conjurer and you've come back as you left, a carpenter. Anyway your enemy's dead. But the new one's as bad as the old.

Abda said quickly:

— They're all like that, but we just want to live in peace.

Several men recognized Shaafiy and hurried towards him. There were embraces all round and a babble of voices. Rifaa looked about again with eager interest; his people were all

around him, and this allayed much of the loneliness he had felt since he had left Muqattam Bazaar. His gaze roved around till it fell on a window in the first tenement-house, from which a girl was staring fascinated at his face. When their eyes met she looked away at the horizon. One of his father's friends noticed this and whispered to him:

— Aysha, Dungbeetle's daughter! One look at her can cause a bloodbath.

Rifaa blushed and his mother said:

— He isn't that kind of boy; but this is the first time he's seen his Alley.

Out of the first tenement-house came a man as strong as an ox, strutting along in an ample jellaba, an aggressive moustache bristling on his scarred and pock-marked face. People murmured: 'Dungbeetle! Dungbeetle!' Jawaad took Shaafiy by the hand and led him forward, saying:

— A very good day to you, Strongman of Gebel's people. Here's our brother, Mr. Shaafiy the carpenter, who has come back to his Alley after twenty years' absence.

Dungbeetle gave Shaafiy's face a piercing look. For a moment he ignored his outstretched hand, then shook it without looking any friendlier and muttered coldly:

— Welcome!

Rifaa looked at him resentfully, and his mother whispered to him to go and greet him. Rifaa went reluctantly and offered his hand. Shaafiy said:

— My son Rifaa.

Dungbeetle gave Rifaa a look of dislike and contempt, interpreted by the onlookers as scorn at his gentleness — something unusual in the Alley. He shook his hand limply, then turned to his father asking:

— Do you think that while you've been away you've forgotten how we live in the Alley?

Shaafiy understood the hint but hid his discomfort.

— We're at your service, sir, any time.



Dungbeetle studied him doubtfully.

— Why did you leave your Alley?

Shaafiy said nothing, searching for a suitable answer.

Dungbeetle said:

— Running away from Snarler?

Jawaad the bard said hastily:

— It wasn't for any unforgivable offence.

Dungbeetle warned Shaafiy:

— You won't be able to run away from me when I'm angry.

Abda said hopefully:

— You'll find us very good people, sir.

Shaafiy and his family went surrounded by friends to Victory House, where they were to take over empty rooms that Jawaad would show them. At a window opening on to the entrance passage was a girl with a saucy kind of beauty. She stood combing her hair in front of her reflection in the window pane. When she saw the people coming she asked flirtatiously:

— Who's this coming like a bridegroom in procession?

There was laughter, and one man said:

— A new neighbor for you Jasmine. He'll live opposite you in the passage.

She laughed.

— God grant us more men!

Her eyes passed over Abda listlessly, but they rested on Rifaa with interest and admiration. Rifaa was even more struck by her look than by that of Aysha, Dungbeetle's daughter. He followed his parents to the door of the lodgings opposite Jasmine's, on the other side of the passage. Jasmine was singing:

Mother, what a beauty!

Shaafiy opened his carpenter's shop by the gate of Victory House. In the morning Abda went shopping, and Shaafiy and his son Rifaa went to the shop and sat on the doorstep waiting for custom. Shaafiy had enough money for a month or so and was not worried. He examined the covered passage, which led to the big courtyard, and said:

— This is the blessed passage where Gebel drowned our enemies.

Rifaa looked at him with far-away eyes and a smile on his attractive lips. His father went on:

And in this place Adham built his hut where so much happened; and here Gebelaawi blessed his son and forgave him.

Rifaa smiled still more, and his eyes swam. Great events were remembered here, and, but for time, the footprints of Gebelaawi and Adham would still be on the ground, and their breath would be in the air. From these windows the water had been poured on the tyrants in the pit, from Jasmine's window it had fallen on the enemy; and today nothing fell from it but provocative glances. Time plays tricks on all things, however great. Gebel himself had waited in the courtyard surrounded by weak men, and yet had won.

— Gebel won, Father, but what use was victory?

Shaafiy sighed and said:

— We agreed not to think about that. Didn't you see Dungbeetle?

A flirtatious voice called:

— Mr. Carpenter!

Father and son exchanged disapproving looks. The father stood up, turned his head and saw Jasmine looking out from her window, her two long plaits dangling. He called back:

— Yes!

She said in a playfully soft, slow voice:

— Send your boy up to fetch a table to be mended.

Shaafiy sat down again and said to his son:

— Go, and trust in God!

Rifaa found the door of the lodgings ready open for him. He coughed, she invited him in, and he entered. He found her in a brown gown with white trimmings round the neck and over the breasts, and her feet and legs were bare. She said nothing for a while, to test the effect of her appearance on him. When she saw that the innocent look in his eyes did not change she pointed to a small table standing on three legs in the corner of the room and said:

— The fourth leg is under the sofa; fix it on, please, and varnish the table.

— At your service, miss.

— And the price?

— I'll ask my father.

She exclaimed:

— And you? Don't you know the price?

— He's the one who deals with all that.

She studied his face intently and asked:

— And who will do the mending?

— Me, with him to supervise and help.

She laughed unrestrainedly.

— The youngest of our strongmen, 'Melonhead', is younger than you, but he can control a whole procession, and you can't put a leg on a table by yourself.

Rifaa's tone showed he wanted to end the conversation.

— The important thing is that it comes back to you as good as new.

He fetched the fourth leg from under the sofa and carried the table on his shoulder towards the door, saying goodbye. When he put the table down in the shop, his father said grumpily, as he examined it:

— I must say I really would have preferred our first job to come from somewhere cleaner.

Rifaa said innocently:

— There's nothing dirty about her, Father, but she seems to be very much alone.

— Nothing's more dangerous than a woman alone.

— Perhaps she needs guidance.

Shaafiy said scornfully:

— Our job's carpentry, not guidance. Bring me the glue.

In the evening Shaafiy and Rifaa went to the Gebelite Cafe. Jawaad the bard was sitting on his bench, sipping his coffee. 'Blubberlips', the owner of the cafe, sat near the door, while Dungbeetle was in the place of honor, surrounded by a circle of admirers. Shaafiy and his son went over to the strongman to pay him their humble respects, then sat down near to Blubberlips. It was not long before the hookah came round to Shaafiy. For his son he ordered a cup of cinnamon and hazel. The atmosphere in the cafe grew drowsy. A cloud of smoke gathered, and the stagnant air was thick with the smell of honeyed tobacco and mint and cloves. Bushy moustaches and heavy eyelids drooped on the men's pale faces. There was a babble of coughing and clearing of throats, dirty jokes and coarse laughter. From the Alley came the sound of urchins singing:

Children of our Alley, what news?

Are you Christians, are you Jews?

Dates are what you're eating.

Coffee's what you're drinking.

A cat crouched by the door, ready to attack; it pounced under a bench and there was the sound of a scuffle, then it emerged carrying a mouse in its jaws. Rifaa put down his cup of cinnamon, upset by the sight. He looked up and saw Dungbeetle spitting. The strongman shouted to Jawaad:

— When are you going to begin, you cunning old fox?

Jawaad smiled and nodded, took up his rebec and played some introductory music. Then he began with a salute to Trustee Ihaab, to Strongman Bayoomi, and to Dungbeetle, Gebel's successor, and went on to recite:

Adham sat in the office receiving the new tenants. He was looking in his ledger when the last man announced his name: 'Idrees Gebelaawi'. Adham raised his head fearfully and saw his brother standing before him...

The bard carried on the story to an attentive audience. Rifaa followed him eagerly; this was a real bard and these were the genuine stories. Many a time his mother had told him: 'Our Alley is the alley of stories.' And what good stories they were! Perhaps they would console him for the entertainments of Muqattam Bazaar and for his solitary musings. Perhaps they would soothe his heart which burnt with a longing as mysterious as the barred and bolted Great House, which showed no sign of life save the tops of the mulberry and fig and palm trees. What sign was there of the life of Gebelaawi, other than the trees and the tales? And what sign was there that he himself was descended from him, other than the likeness that Jawaad the bard imagined he felt with his hands?

The evening wore on and Shaafiy was smoking his third hookah. The shouts of peddlers and urchins died away in the Alley, leaving only the music of the rebec, the throb of a distant drum and the cries of a woman whose husband was beating her. In the story, Idrees had by now brought about Adham's expulsion into the desert, followed by Umayma weeping... 'Just as my mother left the Alley, with me stirring in her womb. Damn strongmen! And damn cats when mice die in their jaws! And damn scornful looks and cold laughs! Damn any man who welcomes his long-lost brother by saying: "You won't be able to run away from me when I'm angry!" Damn the merchants of terror and hypocrisy!'

By now Adham had nothing but the desert, and the bard was singing one of Idrees's drunken songs. Rifaa leaned across and whispered in his father's ear:

— I want to visit the other cafes.

Shaafiy was amazed.

— But ours is the best in the Alley.

— What do the bards there say?

— The same stories; but there they sound quite different.

Blubberlips overheard them and leaned towards Rifaa, saying:

— There are no worse liars than the people of this Alley, and the bards are the worst of all. You will hear in the next cafe that Gebel said he was a son of the Alley. My God! He only said that he was a son of Hamdaan's people.

Shaafiy said:

— A bard wants to please the audience at any price.

Blubberlips whispered:

— Or rather, he wants to please the strongman.

Father and son left the cafe in the middle of the night. The darkness was so thick they could almost feel it. Men's voices came out of the nothingness, and a cigarette glowed in an invisible hand like a shooting star. Shaafiy asked:

— Did you like the story?

— Yes! What wonderful stories!

His father laughed and said:

— Jawaad likes you; what did he say to you when he was taking a break?

— He invited me to visit him at home.

— How quickly you make friends. But you learn slowly.

— I have a whole lifetime for carpentry, but just now I'm anxious to visit all the cafes.

They felt their way back to the passage. From Jasmine's lodgings they heard a drunken noise and a voice singing:

Who made your lacy cap, my pet?

My heart is laced into your net.

Rifaa whispered to his father:

— She's not alone as I thought.

His father sighed and said:

— What a lot of life you've missed, wandering around on your own.

They began climbing the stairs slowly and carefully and Rifaa said:

— Father, I'm going to visit Jawaad the bard.

4 7 \*

Rifaa knocked on Jawaad's door in the third tenement-house in Gebel's sector. From the courtyard came the violent abuse of some women who had gathered to do their washing and cooking. He looked down over the balustrade of the balcony that ran round the courtyard. The cause of the trouble was a quarrel between two women, one of whom stood behind a washtub waving her soapy arms, while the other was planted at the entrance of the passage with rolled up sleeves, answering back in still worse language and wriggling her behind insultingly. The rest of the women had taken sides and the walls echoed their foul insults. Rifaa shied away from what he saw and heard, and he turned in disgust to the bard's door. Even the women! Even the cats! Not to mention the strongmen! Claws on every hand, poison on every tongue, fear and hatred in every mouth! Pure air was to be found only in Muqattam Desert, or in the Great House where the Founder enjoyed peace alone.

The door opened on the blind man's face. Rifaa greeted him, and he smiled and stepped aside for him with words of

welcome. A smell of incense like a breath of heaven met Rifaa as he went in. He followed Jawaad to a small square room, with cushions ranged round the sides and decorated rush matting spread on the floor. The fading light of late afternoon filtered through the shuttered windows. The ceiling around the hanging lamp was decorated with pictures of doves and other birds. The bard sat down cross-legged on a cushion and Rifaa settled down beside him. Jawaad said:

— We were just making coffee.

He called his wife, who brought in the coffee tray. He said:

— Come, Mother-at-Heart: this is Rifaa, Mr Shaafiy's son.

The woman sat down on the other side of her husband and poured some coffee.

— Welcome, my son!

She seemed to be in her mid-sixties, strong and well built. She had a tattooed chin and penetrating eyes. Jawaad pointed towards his guest and said:

— He's a good listener, Mother-at-Heart. He laps up stories. People like that are a bard's joy and inspiration. The others so quickly get drowsy from hashish and opium.

His wife said playfully:

— The stories are new to him, familiar to them.

The bard said indignantly:

— That's the voice of one of your evil spirits. (Then to Rifaa:) My wife's an exorcist.

Rifaa looked at her with interest, and their eyes met as she handed him his cup of coffee. How the beating of the exorcists' drums had attracted him at Muqattam Bazaar! His heart had danced to them. He used to stand in the road craning his neck towards the window to see the smoke of incense and the wagging heads. The bard asked him:

— Didn't you know anything about the Alley in your exile?

— My father told me about it, and my mother too, but my heart was over there, and I didn't care much about the Trust and its problems. I was amazed at the number of its victims, and



I shared my mother's wish for love and peace.

Jawaad shook his head sadly.

— How is it possible for love and peace to live surrounded by poverty and the strongmen's cudgels?

Rifaa did not answer, not because there was no answer but because his eyes had just come upon a strange picture on the right-hand side of the room, painted in oils on the wall like the pictures in the cafes. It represented a gigantic man, beside whom the buildings of the Alley looked like doll's houses.

Rifaa asked:

— Who is that a picture of?

Mother-at-Heart answered:

— Gebelaawi.

— Did somebody see him?

Jawaad said:

— Oh no! None of our generation has seen him. Even Gebel couldn't make him out in the darkness of the desert. But the artist painted him as he's described in the stories.

Rifaa said with a sigh:

— Why has he locked his doors against his children?

— They say it's old age. Who can tell how time has dealt with him? My God! If he opened his doors none of the people of the Alley would stay in their filthy hovels.

— Couldn't you...

Mother-at-Heart cut him short:

— Don't trouble your mind with him. When people start talking about the Founder they end up talking about the Trust, and then come disasters of every kind.

He shook his head in bewilderment.

— How can I not trouble my mind with such an amazing Ancestor?

— Let's do as he does. He doesn't trouble his mind with us.

Rifaa looked up at the picture and said:

— But he met Gebel and spoke to him.

— Yes, and when Gebel died, Snarler came and then

Dungbeetle, and now it's as if nothing had ever happened.

Jawaad laughed and said to his wife:

— The Alley needs something to drive out its devils as you drive out evil spirits.

Rifaa smiled.

— The real evil spirits are those people themselves; if only you'd seen how Dungbeetle received my father!

— Those people are not my business; my kind of spirits obey me as the snakes obeyed Gebel. I have all the things they like: incense from Sudan, amulets from Ethiopia and songs of power.

Rifaa asked her eagerly:

— Where does your power over spirits come from?

She looked at him cautiously.

— It's my job, as carpentry is your father's; it came to me from God who is the giver of all skills.

Rifaa drained his cup and was about to speak, but his father's voice shouted from the Alley:

— Rifaa, you lazy-bones!

Rifaa went to the window, opened it and looked out. When he had caught his father's eye he called down:

— Give me half an hour, Father.

Shaafiy shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and went back to his shop.

As he was closing the shutters, Rifaa caught sight of Aysha, stationed at her window, just as he had seen her the first time, gazing eagerly at him. It seemed to him that she smiled or spoke to him with her eyes. He hesitated a moment, then closed the shutters and went back to his seat. Jawaad was laughing.

— Your father wants you to be a carpenter, but what do *you* want?

Rifaa thought for a while.

— I'll have to be a carpenter like my father, but I love stories. These secrets about spirits, now — tell me about them.

She smiled and seemed ready to give him a little of her knowledge:

— Everybody has a ruling spirit, but not every spirit is evil and needs to be cast out.

— How can we tell one from the other?

— A person's behavior shows it. You, for example, are a good boy, and your ruling spirit deserves good treatment. The spirits of Bayoomi and Dungbeetle and Melonhead are not like that.

He asked innocently:

— And Jasmine's spirit? Ought that to be cast out?

Mother-at-Heart laughed.

— Your neighbor? But the Gebelite men want her as she is.

He entreated her:

— I want to know about these things; don't grudge it to me.

Jawaad said:

— Who could grudge anything to such a good fellow?

Mother-at-Heart agreed:

— You're welcome to join me whenever you have time, but on condition your father doesn't get angry. People will wonder what such a good boy has to do with evil spirits; but you must realize that the only thing wrong with people is their spirits.

Rifaa listened, gazing up at the picture of Gebelaawi.

4 8 \*

Carpentry was his job and his future; there seemed to be no getting away from it. If he did not like that, what *would* he like? It was better than toiling along behind a barrow or carrying a basket of wares. As for other 'jobs' like being a scrounger or a strongman, how hateful they were! Mother-at-Heart stirred his imagination as no one else had done, except of course the

picture of the Founder on Jawaad's wall. He urged his father one day to have one like it painted at home or in the shop, but he said:

— We need the money it would cost; besides, it's a fantasy, and what's the use of fantasy?

— I wish I could see it here.

His father roared with laughter and chided him:

— Wouldn't it be best if you got on with your job? I shan't live for ever, and you must be ready for the day when you'll have to support your mother and your wife and children on your own.

But Rifaa thought about hardly anything except what Mother-at-Heart said or did. What she told him about spirits seemed to him of the utmost importance. It left his mind only at the times when he visited the cafes one after another. Even the old stories did not sink into him so deeply as Mother-at-Heart's words, for example: 'Everybody has a spirit that rules them. As the ruling spirit is, so is the person.' Many an evening he spent with the woman, following the beating of the drum and watching the spirits being brought under control. Some sufferers were led to the house, weak and apathetic. Others were carried in, bound and fettered because they were so bad. The appropriate incense was burnt, for each condition had its incense; and the necessary rhythm was beaten, for each spirit demanded a particular rhythm; and then the miracles happened.

'So we know the cure for each evil spirit; but what is the cure for the Trustee and his strongmen? Those evil men despise exorcism, but perhaps it was created just for them. Killing was the means to get rid of them, but an unclean spirit gives in to pure scents and beautiful sounds. Why should a wicked demon like something good? What wonderful things we can learn from exorcism and spirits.'

He told Mother-at-Heart he wanted from the depths of his being to learn the secrets of exorcism. She asked him if he

hoped to earn a lot of money and he replied that what he wanted was to clean up the Alley, not to make money. She laughed and said he was the first *man* to want that job; what drew him to it? He said with conviction: 'The wisdom of your work is that you overcome evil with good.'

He was very happy when she began telling him her secrets. To savor his joy, he used to go up on the roof in the exhilaration of dawn and watch the rebirth of light, but the sight of the Great House took his mind off the stars and the stillness and the crowing of the cocks. He would gaze for a long time at the house sleeping amid its trees and wonder: 'Where are you, Gebelaawi? Why don't you show yourself, even just for a moment? Why don't you come out, even just once? Why don't you speak, even just one word? Don't you know that a word from you could change the Alley completely? Or are you pleased at what goes on? How lovely the trees are round your house! I love them because you love them; look at them so that I can find your glances on them.'

Whenever he confided his thoughts to his father, he rebuked him and said: 'What about your work, lazy-bones? Young men like you are toiling about the streets after a living, or making the Alley tremble with their cudgels.'

One day the family was sitting round after lunch and Abda said with a big smile:

— Tell him, Shaafiy.

Rifaa looked at his father for explanation, but Shaafiy spoke to his wife:

— You tell him what you want to say first.

Abda looked admiringly at her son and said:

— Good news, Rifaa: Zakia, wife of Dungbeetle our strongman, has been to see me. I returned the visit, naturally, and she gave me a warm welcome and presented her daughter Aysha to me, a girl as beautiful as the moon. Then she came to see me again, bringing Aysha.

Shaafiy looked sidelong at his son as he lifted his cup of

coffee to his lips, to see the effect of the story on him, then shook his head over the difficult task that awaited him and said pompously:

— This is an honor that no other family in Gebel's sector has enjoyed. Imagine it; the wife and daughter of Dungbeetle visiting this home of ours!

Rifaa looked up at his mother in confusion. She said eagerly:

— Their home is so wonderful — comfortable chairs; a marvelous carpet, even curtains hanging at the windows and doors...

Rifaa said angrily:

— All this finery out of the stolen wealth of Gebel's people! Shaafiy suppressed a smile.

— We agreed to keep off that subject.

Abda said anxiously:

— Let's just remember that Dungbeetle is the ruler of Gebel's people and that his family's friendship is an answer to prayer.

Rifaa said in exasperation:

— Congratulations on this friendship!

Father and mother exchanged meaningful looks, and she said:

— Aysha's coming with her mother meant something.

Rifaa felt apprehensive.

— What did it mean, Mother?

Shaafiy laughed, throwing up his hands helplessly. He said to Abda:

— We ought to have told him how our marriage came about.

Rifaa shouted:

— No! No! Oh no, Father!

— What do you mean? What's wrong with you, behaving like a girl?

Abda tempted him hopefully.

— It's in your power to bring us into the management of Gebel's Trust. They'll welcome you if you go ahead. Even

Dungbeetle will welcome you, for his wife wouldn't have gone this far if she wasn't sure of him. You'll be so important that the whole Alley from end to end will envy you.

His father said laughing:

— Who knows; we may see you the Trustee of Gebel's Trust one day, or you may see one of your sons there.

— Can you say that Father? Have you forgotten why you left the Alley twenty years ago?

Shaafiy blinked in confusion.

— Today we live like other people. We can't miss a chance like this.

Rifaa murmured, as if talking to himself:

— How can I be son-in-law to a devil when all that matters to me now is casting out devils?

Shaafiy exclaimed:

— I never hoped to make more than a carpenter out of you, but now good fortune offers you a high place in our Alley, and all you want is to be an exorcist! What a scandal! What evil eye has fallen on you? Stop joking and say you'll marry her.

— I shan't marry her, Father.

Shaafiy took no notice.

— I'll visit Dungbeetle to ask for her hand.

Rifaa shouted furiously:

— Don't do that, father.

— Tell me what's wrong, boy.

Abda pleaded with her husband:

— Don't be harsh with him; you know very well how he is.

— Damn what I know! The whole Alley will blame us for his softness.

— Be gentle with him so that he'll think again.

— People his age are fathers, and the ground trembles under their feet. (He looked at him angrily and went on:) Why do you go pale at the idea? You come from the loins of men.

Rifaa sighed, almost on the point of tears, and thought: 'Anger destroys the bonds of fatherhood, and home some-

times becomes a prison. What you seek is not in this place or among these people.' He said hoarsely:

— Don't torment me, Father.

— It's you who are tormenting me, as you have done since you were born.

Rifaa bowed his head so that his face was hidden from his parents. Shaafiy lowered his voice, controlling his temper as best he could, and asked:

— Are you frightened of marriage? Don't you want to marry? Explain to me what's in your mind. Or should I go to Mother-at-Heart? Perhaps she knows things about you that we don't.

Shouting 'No, never!', Rifaa jumped up and left the room.

4 9 \*

Shaafiy went down to open the shop and did not find Rifaa as expected. Still, he did not call him but said to himself: 'I'd better seem not to mind about his absence!' The day passed slowly by, sunlight disappeared inch by inch from the surface of the Alley, and sawdust piled up round Shaafiy's feet, but still Rifaa did not appear. Evening came and Shaafiy shut up shop, upset and angry. He went as usual to Blubberlips' cafe and took his seat. When he saw Jawaad the bard coming alone he was overcome with amazement and asked:

— Where's Rifaa then?

Jawaad answered, as he felt his way towards his bench:

— I haven't seen him since yesterday.

Shaafiy said anxiously:

— I haven't seen him since he left us after lunch.

Jawaad raised his white eyebrows. He sat down cross-legged on the bench, putting the rebec down beside him, and asked:



— Has there been any trouble between you?

Shaafiy did not answer. He stood up suddenly and left the cafe. Blubberlips was astonished at Shaafiy's anxiety and said scornfully:

— The Alley hasn't seen such silliness since Idrees set up his hut in the wilderness. When I was young I used to be away from the Alley for days at a time and nobody asked about me. When I got back, my father — God rest his soul — would shout: 'What brings you back you son of a bitch!'.

Dungbeetle spoke from the place of honor:

— Because he wasn't sure you were his son.

The cafe was rocked by laughter and everyone congratulated Dungbeetle on his joke.

Shaafiy went home and asked Abda if Rifaa had come back. She was filled with anxiety and said she had thought he was in the shop as usual. She grew still more worried when he told her that Rifaa had not been to Jawaad's home either. She kept asking: 'Where can he have gone, then?'

They heard Jasmine calling a fig seller. Abda looked inquiringly at Shaafiy, and he shook his head wearily and let out a little laugh of scorn, but she said:

— A girl like her knows how to untie knots.

Shaafiy went to Jasmine's home, driven by despair alone. He knocked at the door and Jasmine herself opened it. When she saw who it was she jerked her head back in a mixture of surprise and triumph. She said:

— You?! Under the dreamer lurks a schemer!

He looked away from her flimsy blouse and said curtly:

— Is Rifaa with you?

She was still more surprised:

— Rifaa! Why?

He became embarrassed, and she pointed inside and said:

— Come and see for yourself.

But he turned to go, and she asked scornfully:

— Has he grown up today?

As he left he heard her speaking to someone inside:

— These days they worry more about a boy than about a girl!  
Shaafiy found Abda waiting in the passage. She said to him:

— We'll go together to Muqattam Bazaar.

He shouted angrily:

— Damn it! Is this my reward for a hard day's work?

They took a donkey-cart to Muqattam Bazaar and asked their former neighbors and acquaintances about Rifaa but found no trace of him. Of course, he sometimes went off for a few hours in the afternoon or early evening to lonely places or to the Jebel, but no one could imagine him staying in the desert till this hour of the night. His parents returned to the Alley as they had left it, but still more worried.

Tongues wagged more and more over his disappearance as the days passed. He became a joke in the cafe and in Jasmine's place and all over Gebel's sector. Everyone made fun of his parents' fears. Mother-at-Heart and Jawaad were perhaps the only ones who shared their grief. Jawaad said: 'Where's the boy gone? He's not that kind of youth; if he was, we wouldn't worry.'

Melonhead shouted one time when he was drunk: 'Oyez, oyez! A child is lost; oyez!' Everyone laughed over this and all the urchins went about repeating it. Abda grieved so much that she fell ill, and Shaafiy worked in his shop with his mind elsewhere and with eyes red from loss of sleep. Dungbeetle's wife Zakia broke off her visits to Abda and cut her dead in the street.

One day Shaafiy was bending over, sawing a piece of wood, when Jasmine, on her way back from an outing, shouted: 'Mr Shaafiy... look!' He found she was pointing to the end of the Alley by the desert. He left the shop, the saw still in his hand, to see what she was pointing at, and there was his son Rifaa, approaching shame-faced. Shaafiy dropped his saw in front of the shop and hurried towards his son, staring at him in astonishment. Then he gripped his arms and said:

— Rifaa! Where have you been? Don't you know what your absence has meant for us — for your poor mother who is almost dying of grief?

The young man said nothing. His father saw how thin he was and asked:

— Have you been ill?

— No, no! Let me see my mother.

Jasmine came up to them and asked suspiciously:

— But where have you been?

He did not look at her. Some urchins collected round him, and his father took him home. They were soon joined by Jawaad and Mother-at-Heart. When his mother saw him she jumped up from her bed and hugged him, saying in a weak voice:

— God forgive you! How could you think so little of your mother?

He took her hand in his and sat her down on the bed, then sat beside her saying:

— I'm sorry.

A scowl clouded his father's face, hiding the relief that shone within. He said:

— We only wanted to make you happy.

Abda's eyes brimmed with tears.

— Did you imagine we'd force you to marry?

He said sadly:

— I'm tired.

Several voices asked:

— Where have you been?

He sighed and said:

— I couldn't bear life, and I went to the desert. I felt the need to be alone. I only left the desert to buy food.

His father slapped himself on the forehead and exclaimed:

— Sensible people don't do that sort of thing.

Mother-at-Heart said anxiously:

— Leave him alone. I know all about these states. With a

person like him it's wrong to force him to do anything he doesn't want.

Abda clasped his hand, saying:

— We hoped for his happiness, but what must be must be.

How thin you've got, my son!

Shaafiy asked angrily:

— When did anything like this ever happen in the Alley?

Mother-at-Heart scolded him:

— For me there's nothing strange about his condition.

Believe me, my dear Shaafiy, he's a unique young man.

— We've become the talk of the Alley.

Mother-at-Heart said indignantly:

— There's no young man like him in the Alley.

Shaafiy said:

— This is a time for sorrow.

Mother-at-Heart shouted:

— For God's sake! You don't know what you're saying, and you don't understand what's said to you.

5 0 \* \* \* \* \*

The shop was beginning to look busy and flourishing. Shaafiy stood at one end of the bench sawing, while at the other Rifaa hammered. Under the bench the glue-pot was half buried in a heap of sawdust. Window frames and doors leaned against the walls, with a pile of new boxes in the middle, the pale, planed surface needing only to be varnished. The air was full of the smell of wood and the noise of sawing, hammering and planing. The hookahs gurgled for four customers who smoked as they chatted, sitting in the doorway of the shop. Hijaazi said to Shaafiy:

— I'll test your skill with this sofa and, please God, the next

job will be my daughter's trousseau. (Then, to his friends:) I say it again: if Gebel came back and saw the times we're living in, he'd go mad.

They shook their heads sadly and went on smoking. Brahoom the grave-digger asked Shaafiy with a smile:

— Why don't you want to make a coffin? Everything has its price doesn't it?

Shaafiy stopped sawing for a moment and chuckled as he said:

— God forbid! Having a coffin in the shop would scare away my customers.

Farhaat said:

— Very true! Curse death and all that!

Hijaazi spoke again:

— The trouble with you people is that you're more afraid of death than you should be. That's why Dungbeetle can lord it over you, and Bayoomi can rule, and Ihaab can rake off your funds.

— Aren't you afraid of death like us?

He spat and said:

— It's the fault of us all. Gebel was strong, and by force he won us the rights that we've lost by cowardice.

Rifaa stopped hammering, took the nails out of his mouth, and said:

— Gebel wanted to win our rights by fair means. He only used force in self-defence.

Hijaazi laughed mockingly and said:

— Tell me, my boy, can a nail be knocked in without force?

— Men aren't like wood, sir.

His father gave him a look and he went back to his work.

Hijaazi continued:

— The fact is, Gebel was a strongman, one of the most powerful the Alley has ever known, and he urged his people to use strongman methods.

Farhaat backed him up:

— He wanted them to be the strongmen of the whole Alley, not just of Gebel's sector.

— And today we're just mice and rabbits.

Shaafiy wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and asked:

— What color would you like, Hijaazi my friend?

— Choose a color that won't show the dirt. (Then, turning back to the discussion:) The day Digger put out Triptoe's eye, Gebel put out Digger's eye, using violence to establish justice.

Rifaa sighed deeply and said:

— Violence gets us nowhere. Every hour of the day and night we see people hitting or wounding or killing. Even the women draw blood with their nails. But where's justice? How horrible all this is!

They were all silent for a time. Then Hanoora spoke for the first time:

— This young gentleman despises our Alley. He's softer than he should be, and it's your fault, Mr. Shaafiy.

— Me?!

— Yes! He's a spoilt child.

Hijaazi turned to Rifaa and said with a laugh:

— You'd better find yourself a wife.

There was laughter. Shaafiy frowned and Rifaa blushed. Hijaazi said:

— Force..! Force..! Without it there can be no justice.

Rifaa spoke firmly, in spite of looks from his father:

— The fact is our Alley needs mercy.

Brahoom laughed and said:

— Do you want to ruin me?

They roared with laughter which led in turn to fits of coughing. Hijaazi's eyes turned the color of glue. He said:

— Long ago Gebel went asking for mercy and justice, and the Effendi sent Thudclub and his men after him. It was cudgels — not mercy — that kept Gebel and his people from being destroyed.

Shaafiy exclaimed:

— For goodness' sake! The walls have ears; if *they* hear you, you won't find anybody to speak up for you.

Hanoora said:

— He's right; you're just good-for-nothing dope-heads. If Dungbeetle walked past now you'd fall at his feet. (Then, to Rifaa:) Don't blame us, my boy; a hashish smoker can't help it. Have you tried hashish, Rifaa?

Shaafiy said laughing:

— He doesn't like hashish parties; if he takes more than two puffs he gasps for breath or falls asleep.

Farhaat said:

— What a nice boy he is! Some say he's an exorcist because he sees so much of Mother-at-Heart, and some think he must be a bard because of his liking for tales.

Hijaazi said with a snigger:

— And he hates hashish parties just as he hates marriage.

Brahoom called for the serving boy from the cafe to take away the hookahs. Then they stood up and said good-bye, and the session came to an end. Shaafiy put down his saw and glared at his son.

— Don't let yourself get dragged into the conversations of such people.

Some urchins came and played in front of the shop. Rifaa went round the bench to his father and led him by the hand to a corner of the shop where no ear could hear them. He seemed excited and uneasy, but his mouth was set firmly. There was a strange light in his eyes and Shaafiy wondered what it could mean. Rifaa said:

— I can't keep quiet any longer.

His father was annoyed. What a nuisance he was, this darling son; wasting his precious time in Mother-at-Heart's home and mooning around for long hours alone at Hind's Rock. And he couldn't spend an hour in the shop without creating problems with his arguments.

— Are you feeling tired?

Rifaa said with a strange quietness:

— I can't hide from you what is in my mind.

— What is it?

He drew closer to him and said:

— Yesterday, after I had left the bard's home about midnight, I felt the urge to go off into the desert. I walked through the darkness till I was tired, then I picked a spot under the wall of the Great House where it overlooks the desert and sat down with my back propped against the wall. (Shaafiy's eyes were full of interest and urged him to go on.) I heard a strange voice speaking, as if it was talking to itself in the dark. The feeling suddenly overwhelmed me that it was the voice of our Ancestor Gebelaawi.

Shaafiy gaped at his son's face and murmured in amazement:

— Gebelaawi's voice! What gave you that idea?

Rifaa said hotly:

— It's not just an idea, Father; you shall have proof. I stood up as soon as I heard the voice and turned towards the house, drawing back to be able to see him. But I saw only darkness.

— Thank God!

— Patience, Father! I heard the voice saying: 'Gebel did his job and gave satisfaction, but things have become even worse than before.'

Shaafiy felt a burning in his chest and the sweat poured from his forehead. He said in a trembling voice:

— So many people have sat where you sat under the wall and heard nothing!

— But I did hear, Father.

— Perhaps it was somebody talking in his sleep in the desert. He shook his head vigorously.

— No; the voice came from the house.

— How do you know that?

— I shouted: 'Grandfather, Gebel is dead and others have taken his place. Stretch out your hand to us.'



— I hope to God nobody heard you.

Rifaa's eyes shone.

— My grandfather heard me. His voice came again, saying: 'It's wrong for a young man to ask his old grandfather to act: the beloved son is the one who acts.' I asked: 'What means can I who am weak use against those strongmen?' and he replied: 'The true weakling is the fool who does not know the secret of his strength, and I do not like fools.'

Shaafiy asked anxiously:

— Do you really think these words passed between you and Gebelaawi?

— Yes, by heaven!

Shaafiy moaned:

— Too much imagination can bring disaster.

— Believe me, Father. There's no doubt about what I say.

— Don't take away my hope of finding some doubt.

Rifaa's face shone as he said:

— And now I know what's wanted of me.

Shaafiy slapped himself on the forehead and exclaimed:

— Is anything wanted of you?

— Yes. I am weak but I am not a fool, and the beloved son is the one who acts.

Shaafiy felt as if the saw was rasping at his chest. He shouted:

— Your deeds will be dark. You'll be destroyed, and you'll drag us down with you to destruction.

Rifaa smiled.

— They only kill those who have their eye on the Trust.

— And do you have your eye on anything but the Trust?

Rifaa's voice was full of confidence:

— Adham longed for a pure, full life. So did Gebel, and he only wanted the Trust as a means to a full life. But the idea took hold of him that such a life wouldn't be possible for anybody unless the Trust was shared out equally so that everybody received their due and profited by it, released from toil and free to live a full life. But what a paltry thing the Trust is if such

a life can be attained without it — which is possible to anybody who wants it. It's in our power to be free from need, starting this very hour.

Shaafiy sighed, somewhat relieved:

— Did our Ancestor say that to you?

— He said he didn't like foolishness, and that the true fool is the one who doesn't know the secret of his strength. I'd be the last person to ask for a fight over the Trust. The Trust is nothing, Father; the happiness of a full life is everything. Only the devils hidden deep inside us come between us and happiness. It's not for nothing that I love the science of spirits and am perfecting it. Perhaps it's the will of God in Heaven that has brought me to it.

Shaafiy was relieved, but the anguish had left him weak. He gave up trying to saw, stretching out his legs and resting his back against a window frame that was awaiting repair. He asked his son sarcastically:

— How come we haven't attained the full life when we had Mother-at-Heart among us before you were born?

Rifaa said confidently:

— Because she waits for well-to-do patients to come to her, and doesn't go to the poor.

Shaafiy looked round the corners of his shop and said:

— Look how many jobs we're getting; what shall we get tomorrow thanks to you?

— All that's good, Father; healing the sick will upset only the devils.

Mirrored by a wardrobe in the doorway, the rays of the sinking sun flooded the shop with light.

5 1 \*

There was anxiety that night in Shaafiy's home. Although the story reached Abda in a peaceful setting, and although she learnt only that Rifaa had heard their Ancestor's voice and had decided to visit the poor and cast out spirits from them, she was greatly troubled and kept turning over in her mind the possible consequences. Rifaa was out. From the bottom of the Alley, far away from Gebel's sector, came the sound of a wedding feast, drums and pipes and women's whoops of joy. Abda tried to face up to the truth and said sadly:

— Rifaa doesn't lie.

Shaafiy protested:

— But his imagination has played tricks on him. It happens to all of us.

— What do you think about what he heard?

— How can I judge?

— It's not impossible as long as our Ancestor is alive.

— God help us if the news gets out!

She said hopefully:

— Let's keep the story secret and thank God that he's fixed his thoughts on people, not on the Trust. As long as he harms nobody, nobody will harm him.

Shaafiy said helplessly:

— What a lot of people are harmed in our Alley without having harmed anybody!

The music of the wedding feast was drowned by an outburst of noise in the passage. They looked out of the window and saw the passage full of men. By the light of the lamp that one of them held, the faces of Hijaazi, Brahoom, Farhaat and Hanoora could be made out, among others. Everyone was talking or yelling and there was a babble of voices and general confusion. Someone shouted: 'The honor of Gebel's people is in the balance. We shan't allow anybody to tarnish it!' Abda shivered. She whispered to her husband:

— Our son's secret is out.

Shaafiy drew back from the window moaning:

— My heart has never lied to me.

He rushed out, not caring about the danger, and his wife followed close behind. He pushed his way through the crowd calling out loudly:

— Rifaa! Where are you, Rifaa?

He could not see his son in the circle of lamplight and could not hear his voice, but Hijaazi came up to him and asked him above the din:

— Has your son got lost again?

Farhaat shouted to him:

— Come and hear what people are saying, and see the latest game that's being played with the honor of Gebel's people.

Abda shouted wretchedly:

— For God's sake, tolerance is a virtue.

There were angry yells: 'The woman's mad!' 'She doesn't know what honor is.' Shaafiy was terrified and implored Hijaazi to tell him:

— Where is the boy?

Hijaazi pushed his way to the gate and shouted at the top of his voice:

— Rifaa! Come here my boy and talk to poor old Shaafiy.

The whole business was beyond Shaafiy. He had thought his son trapped in a corner of the passage; yet here he was, walking into the circle of lamplight. Shaafiy grabbed him by the arm and led him to where Abda stood. A moment later Blubberlips appeared, carrying a lamp, followed by Dungbeetle, who was scowling furiously. All eyes were fixed on the strongman, and a hush fell. Dungbeetle growled:

— What's all this?

Several voices answered at once:

— Jasmine has disgraced us!

Dungbeetle said:

— Let the witness speak!

Zaytoona the carter came forward and stood in front of Dungbeetle. He said:

— A little while ago I saw her coming out of Bayoomi's back door. I followed her back here and asked her what she'd been up to in his house. I could see she was drunk. The stink of wine from her mouth filled the passage. She got away from me and locked herself in. Now, ask yourselves, what could a woman have been doing drunk in a strongman's house?

This relieved Shaafiy and Abda, but it worried Dungbeetle. He realized that his position as strongman was being severely tested. If he punished Jasmine lightly he would lose the respect of Gebel's people, and if he let the angry crowd deal with her, he would provoke Bayoomi, Strongman of the Alley. What was to be done? The men of Gebel were pouring out of the tenement-houses and gathering in the courtyard and in the road in front of Victory House. Dungbeetle's position was rapidly worsening. Angry voices clamored:

— Drive her out of Gebel's sector.

— She must be beaten before she's driven out.

— Kill her!

There was a scream from Jasmine who was listening in the dark behind her window. Everyone stared at Dungbeetle. They heard Rifaa saying to his father:

— Wouldn't it be better, Father, if they turned their anger on Bayoomi who seduced her?

Many of them were annoyed, including Zaytoona, who answered him:

— She went to his house of her own accord.

Another man shouted:

— If you've no sense of honor you'd better keep quiet.

Rifaa went on, in spite of a look from his father:

— Bayoomi only did what you do.

Zaytoona screamed:

— She's one of Gebel's people; she's not for other men.

— The boy's stupid; he has no honor.

Shaafiy kicked him to silence him, while Brahoom shouted:  
— Let the chief speak.

Dungbeetle was almost choking with rage. Jasmine cried out for help. Murderous looks were directed at her window. Jasmine's cries pierced Rifaa till he could bear it no longer. He slipped from his father's grasp and pushed his way through to Jasmine's home shouting:

— Have pity on her weakness and terror!

Zaytoona roared at him:

— You woman!

Shaafiy called him desperately but he took no notice. He answered Zaytoona:

— God forgive you! (Then, to the crowd:) Have mercy on her! Do what you like to me! Don't her cries for help move your hearts?

Zaytoona shouted again:

— Don't bother with this shameless idiot! (Then to Dungbeetle:) It's for you to speak, chief.

Rifaa asked:

— Would it satisfy you if I married her?

There were screams of anger and shouts of derision. Zaytoona said:

— We're only interested in getting her punished.

Rifaa persisted courageously:

— The punishment will be my business.

— Not at all! It's everybody's business.

Dungbeetle saw in Rifaa's suggestion an escape from his dilemma. He was not in his heart satisfied with it, but he had no better idea. He scowled still more to hide his weakness, and said:

— The boy has undertaken before us to marry her, let him have his wish.

Zaytoona was blind with fury. He shouted:

— Honor is lost because of cowardice.

Dungbeetle's fist landed on his nose, and he staggered back

howling, the blood streaming from his nostrils. They all understood that Dungbeetle would cover up his weak position by terrorizing anyone who opposed him. He glared at their frightened faces in the lamplight and not one of them showed any sympathy for the bloodied nose. On the contrary Farhaat reproached Zaytoona: 'The trouble with you is your wagging tongue.' Brahoom said to Dungbeetle: 'Without you we couldn't have found a solution.' Hanoora said to him: 'Your anger shakes the world, chief.'

The crowd drifted away, till in the end there remained only Dungbeetle, Blubberlips, Shaafiy, Abda and Rifaa. Shaafiy went up to Dungbeetle to greet him, and offered him his hand, but the man flared up and swung his knuckles into Shaafiy's hand, so that he stepped back with a gasp. His wife and son hurried to him, while Dungbeetle stormed out of the passage, cursing Gebel's people and everyone else, and even Gebel himself.

The pain made Shaafiy forget his son's position. He put his hand in warm water and Abda rubbed it, saying:

— You see how Zakia has stirred up her husband against us?  
Shaafiy groaned.

— The coward forgot that it was our stupid son who saved him from Bayoomi's cudgel.

5 2 \* \* \* \* \*

The hopes of Rifaa's parents had rested on him, and how they were dashed! By marrying Jasmine he would become nothing, and his family was already the subject of gossip even before the wedding. Abda cried secretly till she was ill, and Shaafiy looked miserable, but in front of Rifaa they hid their

feelings and avoided confrontation. Jasmine may have made things better by the way she behaved after the scandal; she hurried over to Shaafiy's home and knelt before him and his wife, poured out some of the gratitude that filled her heart, and told them of her regret for the past. It was impossible to back out of the marriage after Rifaa had undertaken it publicly in front of Gebel's people, so Shaafiy and his wife surrendered to the idea and made up their minds to accept it. They had two conflicting wishes; one was to celebrate the marriage in the traditional way with a bridegroom's procession, and the other was to have a quiet little ceremony at home to avoid exposing it to the mockery of Gebel's people, who continued to criticize the match wherever they met.

Abda said with feeling:

— I've always wanted to see the bridegroom's procession of Rifaa, my only son, marching round the district.

Shaafiy growled:

— Not one of Gebel's people would want to join in.

Abda frowned.

— It'd be better to go back to Muqattam Bazaar than stay among people who don't like us.

Rifaa stretched out his legs under the open window to catch the sun. He said:

— We shan't leave the Alley, Mother.

Shaafiy cried out:

— If only we'd never come back. (Then, to his son:) You were sad the day we got back, weren't you?

Rifaa smiled.

— Today isn't yesterday. If we went away, who'd save Gebel's people from devils?

Shaafiy spoke with feeling.

— Let devils possess them for ever. (Then after a pause:) Anyway, you can simply bring round...

— I shan't bring her to our place. I'll move to hers.

His mother cried out:



— That's not what your father meant.

— But that's what I mean, Mother. My new home is not far away; we could shake hands every morning through the window.

Although Shaafiy was unhappy about it, he decided to celebrate the wedding, though in a very small way. He hung decorations in the passage and over their doors, and he hired a singer and a cook. He invited all their friends and acquaintances, but the only ones to accept were Jawaad and Mother-at-Heart, Hijaazi and his family, and some poor people who came for the food. Rifaa was the first young man to marry without a procession. The family crossed the passage to the bride's home. The musician sang without enthusiasm as the guests were so few. During the meal, Jawaad praised Rifaa for his fine character, saying he was an intelligent, wise, pure-minded young man, but living in an alley that had no use for anything except bullying and cudgels. At that moment they heard some urchins who had stopped in front of the tenement-house to chant:

Lousy-faced Rifaa it's only you  
Who finds such a crazy thing to do!

They finished off with cheers and shouts. Rifaa stared at the ground and Shaafiy paled. Hijaazi was angry and said:

— Sons of bitches!

But Jawaad said:

— There's a lot of filth in our Alley, but the good is never forgotten. How many strongmen have we had? Yet only Adham and Gebel are remembered.

Then he asked the musician to sing so as to drown the noise. The party dragged on till everyone had drifted away, leaving Rifaa and Jasmine alone in her lodgings. In her bridal dress she looked a picture of beauty. Beside her sat Rifaa in a fine silk jellaba, with a brocaded turban on his head and bright yellow

pumps on his feet. They sat on the sofa opposite the bed with its pink linen. In the mirror on the wardrobe door were reflected the wash-basin and water jug under the bed. She was obviously waiting for his initiative, or at least his preparations for the expected initiative, but he just went on looking up at the ceiling lamp and down at the matting. When the waiting grew too long she said gently:

— I shall never forget your kindness. I owe you my life.

He looked at her affectionately and said in a tone that showed he did not want to return to this subject:

— We all owe our lives to other people.

What a good man! On the night of the scandal he had refused to let her kiss his hands, and now he did not want to be reminded of his good deed. His goodness was matched only by his patience. But what could he be thinking of now? Was he annoyed that his goodness had forced him into marrying a girl like her?

— I'm not as bad as people think. They loved me and despised me for the same thing.

He comforted her:

— I know. What a lot of wickedness there is in our Alley!

— They're always boasting about being descended from Adham, and at the same time they're competing to see who can be worst.

He said confidently:

— As long as it's easy to cast out spirits, we're close to happiness.

She did not see what he meant, but suddenly she felt how ridiculous her position was. She said laughing:

— What a strange conversation for a wedding night!

She tossed her head back proudly and seemed to have forgotten her gratitude. She threw the sash off her shoulders and eyed him seductively. He said:

— You'll be the first to find happiness.

— Yes indeed! I have some wine.

— I drank a little at supper. It was enough.

She thought for a while, bewildered, then said:

— I have some good hashish.

— I tried it, and found I couldn't take it.

She said with amusement:

— Your father's a real dope-head. I once saw him coming out of a session at Blubberlips', and he couldn't tell night from day!

He smiled and said nothing. She turned her eyes away in defeat, jumped up and went to the door, bursting with anger, then came back and stood under the lamp. Her lovely body was visible through her thin dress. She looked into his peaceful eyes till despair overcame her.

— Why did you save me?

— I can't bear anybody to suffer.

She was furious.

— Because of that you married me? Just because of that?

— Don't go back to the days of anger.

She bit her lip and said in a low voice:

— I thought you loved me.

He said simply and sincerely:

— I do love you, Jasmine.

Her eyes filled with amazement, and she murmured:

— Really?

— There's no creature in this Alley that I don't love.

She groaned and stared at him doubtfully.

— I understand. You'll stay with me a few months and then divorce me.

His eyes widened. He muttered:

— Don't go back to the old thoughts.

— You bewilder me. What can you give me?

— True happiness.

She said resentfully:

— I sometimes enjoyed that before ever I saw you.

— There's no happiness without honor.

She laughed in spite of herself:

— It will take more than honor to make us happy.

He said sadly:

— Nobody in our sector knows real happiness.

She took a few slow steps towards the bed and sat down listlessly on its edge. He looked at her affectionately:

— You're like all the people in our sector; you only think of the lost Trust.

Her face was full of resentment.

— God help me to understand your riddles.

— They'll solve themselves when you're rid of your unclean spirit.

She shouted:

— I like myself as I am!

— That's how Dungbeetle and the others speak.

She puffed.

— Are we going to go on talking like this till morning?

— Go to sleep! Sweet dreams!

She moved further on to the bed and lay on her back, looking from his eyes to the space beside her and back again.

He said:

— You can settle down. I'll sleep on the sofa.

She had a fit of giggles, but not for long. She said sarcastically:

— I'm afraid your mother will come tomorrow to warn you against overdoing it!

She looked at him to enjoy the revenge of seeing him embarrassed; but he looked at her with calm, pure eyes and said:

— I'd love to set you free from your unclean spirit.

She shouted:

— Leave women's work to women.

And she turned her face to the wall, her heart burning with anger and dismay. Riffa stood up, turned down the wick of the lamp and put it out. Darkness fell.

The days that followed the wedding saw Rifaa's life full of ceaseless activity. He more or less stopped going to the shop, and but for his father's love and sympathy he would have had nothing to live on. He began calling on all he met of Gebel's people to put their trust in him, so that he could deliver them from their spirits and enable them to enjoy undreamed of happiness. Gebel's people whispered that Shaafiy's son Rifaa was wrong in the head and must be counted a lunatic. Some said it was because of his natural eccentricity, while others attributed it to his having married a woman like Jasmine. Such discussions went on in the cafes and tenement-houses, around the barrows and in the hashish dens.

Mother-at-Heart was astounded when Rifaa whispered in her ear with his usual gentleness:

— Won't you let me cure you?

She clapped her hand to her heart and said:

— Who says I'm possessed by an evil spirit? Is that what you think of the woman who's loved you like a son?

— I only offer my services to people I love and respect. You do good and bring blessings; but you're a bit greedy, and so you make a trade of sick people. If you were delivered from your ruling spirit you'd do good free of charge.

She couldn't help laughing as she said:

— Do you want to ruin me? God help you, Rifaa!

Mother-at-Heart's story was passed round amid laughter. Even Shaafiy laughed, though without joy, but Rifaa said to him:

— Even you need my treatment, Father; it's my duty as a son to start with you.

Shaafiy shook his head gloomily and hammered the nails in front of him with a ferocity that betrayed his distress.

— God give me patience!

Rifaa tried to persuade him, but he said miserably:

— Isn't it enough for you to have made us the talk of the sector?

Rifaa went away into a corner of the shop, dejected. Shaafiy looked at him suspiciously.

— Have you really given your wife the same invitation as you've given me?

— And she like you does not want happiness.

Rifaa went to Blubberlips' hashish den in the ruins behind the cafe. He found Blubberlips, Hijaazi, Brahoom, Farhaat, Hanoora and Zaytoona round the brazier. They looked at him queerly and Blubberlips said:

— Welcome, son of Shaafiy; has marriage shown you the value of hashish?

Rifaa put down a packet of honeycakes on the table and said as he sat down:

— I've brought you this in honor of the company.

Blubberlips passed round the hookah, saying:

— Thank you for your generosity.

But Brahoom laughed and said unkindly:

— The next thing will be that Master 'Up-in-the-Air' Rifaa will offer to cure us of our devils.

Zaytoona glared at Rifaa with hatred and snarled in his nasal voice:

— Your wife is possessed by a devil called Bayoomi; free her from him if you can.

The men looked embarrassed at this rudeness. Zaytoona pointed to his squashed nose:

— Because of him I had my nose broken.

Rifaa seemed not to be angry. Farhaat looked at him sadly and said:

— Your father's a good man and a wonderful carpenter. But you're giving him no end of trouble with this behavior of yours. The man's scarcely got over your marriage when you march

out of his shop to free people from devils. May God restore you to health!

— I'm not ill. All I want is your happiness.

Zaytoona inhaled a long puff and held it, glaring at him, then spoke as he breathed out the smoke:

— Who told you we aren't happy, Master Up-in-the-Air?

— Our Ancestor wants something different for us.

Farhaat guffawed.

— Leave our Ancestor out of it! How do you know he hasn't forgotten us?

Zaytoona fixed Rifaa with a look of hatred and anger, but Hijaazi gave him a warning prod.

— You must respect the company and not be unfriendly.

He wanted to change the atmosphere, nodded his head and gave his friends a signal. They sang:

Here is the boat — bringing my lover.

Trailing her hair — over the water.

Rifaa left, followed by pitying looks, and went home dejected. Jasmine met him with a peaceful smile. At first she had scolded him for his behavior, which had made a laughing stock of them both. But she had given up in despair, and bore this life patiently, though she did not know where it might lead, and she even treated him kindly and gently.

There was a knock at the door, and there stood Dungbeetle. He came in uninvited, and Rifaa rose to greet him, but the strongman seized his shoulder with a grip like that of a dog's jaws. He asked Rifaa without any preliminaries:

— What did you say about the Founder at Blubberlips' hashish den?

Jasmine went pale with fear, but Rifaa spoke calmly, though he was like a sparrow in the talons of an eagle:

— I said our Ancestor wants our happiness.

He shook him violently.

— How do you know that?

— It's one of the things he said to Gebel.

The hand gripped his shoulder still tighter:

— He talked to Gebel about the Trust.

Rifaa was drained by the effort of bearing the pain.

— The Trust doesn't concern me at all. The happiness that I've so far been unable to give anybody doesn't come from the Trust or drink or hashish. I've said that all over Gebel's sector, and everybody's heard me say it.

He shook him again and said:

— Your father was a rebel and then thought better of it. Mind you don't go his way, or I'll squash you like a bedbug.

He pushed him backwards on to the sofa and left. Jasmine hurried over to comfort Rifaa. He was bending his head over his aching shoulder, and she rubbed it. He seemed almost in a daze, and murmured as if to himself:

— It was my grandfather's voice that I heard.

She looked into his face with alarm and anxiety, and wondered whether he was right out of his mind. She did not mention to him again what he had said. Fear such as she had never known gripped her.

One day Rifaa went out, and a woman who was not one of Gebel's people stood in his path and greeted him warmly:

— Good morning, Mr Rifaa, sir!

He was amazed at the tone of respect in her voice and at the way she called him 'sir'. He asked her:

— What do you want?

She beseeched him:

— I have a son who's possessed. I hope you can cure him.

Like all Gebel's people he looked down on the others in the Alley, and he was unwilling to put himself at her service lest his people should despise him still more. He said:

— Isn't there an exorcist down the Alley?

She almost cried as she said:



— Yes, but I'm a poor woman.

His heart warmed to her and he rejoiced at her having come for help to him — to him who met with nothing but scorn and mockery from his own people. He looked at her, his mind made up, and said:

— I'm at your service.

5 4 \* \* \* \* \*

Jasmine was looking down from her window on the Alley, enjoying her new view. Urchins played in front of the tenement-house and a woman was crying her wares of palm nuts, while Melonhead had a man by the collar and was punching him in the face. The man tried to placate him, but in vain. Rifaa, who sat on the sofa cutting his toenails, asked her:

— Do you like our new home?

She turned to face him:

— Here we have the Alley below us; there we used to see only the dark passage.

— If only the passage had remained ours! It was a blessed place, for in it Gebel won his victory over his enemies. But it wasn't possible to stay on with people who mocked us at every step. But here the poor people are good. And good people, not Gebel's people, are the real lords.

— I've hated them ever since they decided to persecute me. He smiled.

— So why do you tell the neighbors you're one of Gebel's people?

She laughed, showing her pearly teeth, and said proudly:

— So that they'll know I'm above them all.

He put the scissors down on the sofa and set his feet on the rush matting, saying:

— You'll be a better person when you conquer vanity. Gebel's people are not the best in the Alley; the best are those who do most good. I used to make the same mistake as you, and paid attention only to Gebel's people. But the only ones who deserve happiness are those who seek it sincerely. Look at the way the good accept me and are cured of evil spirits.

— But everybody here works for wages except you.

— If it wasn't for me, the poor wouldn't have found anybody to heal them. They can be cured, but they can't pay the price. I didn't have any real friends before I knew them.

She refused to argue and looked resentful. Rifaa said:

— If only you'd submit to me as they do! Then I could cure you of what spoils the joy of life.

— Do you find me that annoying?

— Some people love a devil without realizing it.

She shouted indignantly:

— How I hate this talk!

He smiled:

— You're one of Gebel's people, and all of them refused to submit to my healing, even my own father.

A knock at the door announced the arrival of a new patient and Rifaa got ready to receive him. The truth was that he had never known happier days than these. In the new sector he was called 'Mr Rifaa, sir', which was said sincerely and lovingly. He was known as the man who delivered people from devils and gave health and happiness, just for the love of God. Such a way of life had never been known before, and because of this the poor loved him as they had never loved anyone. Of course, Melonhead, strongman of their new sector, did not love him, partly because of his goodness and partly because he was not able to pay any protection money; but at the same time, he could find no excuse to attack him.

As for those who had been cured at his hands, they all had their stories to tell and tell again: Um Daood had bitten her baby in a fit of nerves, and now she was a model of calm and

balance; 'Fishhook', whose only pleasure had been arguing and quarrelling, had become mild and gentle; Talba the pickpocket had repented genuinely and worked for a tinner; Uwayss had given up his old way of life and married.

Rifaa chose four of his patients, Zaki, Hussein, Ali and Kareem, to be his special friends, and they became brothers. None of them had known friendship or affection before they knew him. Zaki had been a thug and Hussein an incurable opium-addict. Ali had been a budding strongman and Kareem a pimp. All changed into good-hearted men. They used to meet at Hind's Rock where there was open space and pure air, and there they used to talk with innocent affection, looking at their healer with eyes full of love and sincerity and dreaming of a happiness that would shelter the Alley with wings of mercy.

One day Rifaa asked as they sat in the evening stillness gazing at the red sunset:

— Why are we happy?

Hussein answered enthusiastically:

— It's you; *you* are the secret of our happiness.

He smiled gratefully.

— No! It's because we've been freed from our evil spirits and from spite and greed and hatred and the other evils that play havoc with our Alley.

Ali took this up:

— We're happy even though we're poor and weak, with no share in the Trust and no strongmen's power.

Rifaa shook his head sadly.

— How people have suffered for the sake of the lost Trust and blind power! Join me in cursing the Trust and strongman methods!

They cursed them. Ali picked up a stone and threw it with all his might towards the Jebel. Rifaa spoke again:

— Ever since the bards started saying that Gebelaawi told Gebel to make the houses of his sector as magnificent and beautiful as the Great House, people have set their hearts on

the power and the glory of Gebelaawi. They have forgotten his other virtues. That's why Gebel was unable to change people by winning rights in the Trust, so when he died the strong took over and the weak became full of hatred, and misery came back. But I'm opening the gates of happiness without any Trust or power and glory.

Kareem embraced him and said:

— And tomorrow, when the strong see the happiness of the weak they'll realize that their power and glory and their stolen money are nothing.

The friends joined in with words of love and praise. A shepherd's song was carried on the wind from far off in the desert. A single star appeared in the sky. Rifaa looked into his friends' faces and said:

— But I can't cure all the people by myself. It's time for you to do it yourselves, and to learn the secrets of freeing the sick from spirits.

Their faces filled with joy, and Zaki exclaimed:

— That's what we most want.

He smiled at them and said:

— You will be the keys of happiness in our Alley.

When they got back to their sector they found it bright with the lights of a wedding in one of the tenement-houses. Many people saw Rifaa coming and greeted him with handshakes. Melonhead was annoyed and got up from his place in the cafe, cursing and swearing and cuffing one or two people, then turned to Rifaa and asked rudely:

— Who do you think you are, sonny?

Rifaa said gently:

— The friend of the poor, sir.

Melonhead shouted:

— Then go around like the poor, not like a bridegroom. Have you forgotten that you're a refugee and a tart's husband doing a woman's work?!

He spat provocatively and people moved away and gloom

descended. But the women's whoops of joy at the wedding drowned everything.

5 5 \*

Bayoomi, Strongman of the Alley, stood behind the back gate of his garden, which gave on to the desert. It was early in the night, and he was waiting and listening. When a finger tapped lightly on the door he opened it, and into the garden slipped a woman. In her chador and veil she seemed like part of the darkness. He took her by the hands, then led her along the garden paths, avoiding the house, till he came to the garden house. He pushed the door open and went in, with her following. He lit a candle and set it on a window sill. The place became dimly visible, with sofas arranged round the sides and a big brass tray in the middle bearing a hookah and its accessories and surrounded by cushions.

The woman took off her chador and veil, and Bayoomi hugged her so fiercely that her eyes begged for mercy. She wriggled free, and he laughed softly then sat down on a cushion and poked about with a finger in the ashes of the brazier, till he uncovered a glowing coal. She sat down beside him and kissed his ear, then pointed to the brazier saying:

— I'd almost forgotten the smell.

He covered her cheek and neck with kisses, tossed a bit of hashish into her lap and said:

— Nobody in the Alley smokes this brand except the Trustee and yours truly.

From the Alley came the noise of a fight breaking out: insults flying, sticks banging, glass breaking, feet running off, a woman's screams, then dogs barking. The woman's eyes took

on an anxious, questioning look, but Bayoomi went on cutting hashish, not caring. She said:

— It's difficult for me coming here. To be safe from prying eyes I go from the Alley to Gemalia, and from there to Derrasa, and from there into the desert and then to your back gate.

Without stopping the work of his fingers he leaned over and sniffed playfully at her armpit:

— I wouldn't mind visiting you in your place.

She smiled.

— If you did, none of the cowards would get in your way. Even Melonhead would smooth out the sand for you. Then they'd take it out on me. (She twirled his bushy moustache.) But you slip out to the garden house for fear of your wife.

Heset down the piece of hashish, put his arm round her and drew her to him so hard that she groaned. Then she whispered:

— God preserve us from the love of strongmen!

He let her go, tossing his head back and puffing his chest out like a turkey cock. He said:

There's only one strongman; the rest are boys.

She played with the hair on his chest, which showed through the neck of his jellaba.

— Strongman over the people, not over me!

He pinched her gently on the breast.

— You are the crown on the Strongman's head.

He reached over behind the tray and picked up a jug.

— Marvelous ale!

She said regretfully:

— It has a strong smell which my dear husband might notice.

He drank his fill from the jug and began packing together the lumps of hashish. He scowled.

— What a husband! I've caught sight of him several times, wandering around like a madman; the first male exorcist this amazing Alley has ever seen.

She watched him smoking.

— I owe him my life; that is why I put up with his company. And he does no harm, for nothing is easier than deceiving him.

He passed her the hookah and she thrust the mouthpiece between her hungry lips and took several greedy puffs, then breathed out the smoke with closed eyes and reeling senses. He smoked in his turn, taking short puffs and talking between them:

— Leave him... He's fooling about... with you... like a child. She shrugged her shoulders scornfully.

— My husband does nothing in this world except relieve the poor of devils.

— And you — haven't you relieved him of anything?

— Not on your life! One look at his face says it all.

— Not even once a month?

— Not even once a year! People's devils leave him no time for his wife.

— Let devils possess him! What does he get out of it?

She shook her head hopelessly:

— Nothing at all. But for his father we should have starved to death. He believes it's his duty to make the poor happy and to cleanse them.

— And who gave him this duty?

— He says it's what the Founder wants for his children.

An anxious look came into Bayoomi's narrow eyes. He put the hookah down in the ash bowl.

— He says the Founder wants that?!

— Yes!

— And how does he know what the Founder wants?

She felt unhappy and alarmed and was afraid the atmosphere would be spoilt or dangerous things would happen. She said:

— That's what he makes of his sayings, which the bards sing of.

He pressed down some more grains of hashish.

— Alley of bitches! And Gebel's sector is the foulest of all; that's where the worst swindler came from. They spread strange stories about the Trust and the Ten Clauses, as though the Founder was the Ancestor of them alone. Yesterday their swindler Gebel came with lies to steal the Trust, and today this lunatic starts interpreting words that don't bear interpretation. Next he'll be claiming he heard them from Gebelaawi himself.

She said anxiously:

— He isn't interested in anything except freeing the poor from devils.

The strongman snorted scornfully:

— How do we know? Maybe the Trust has a devil! (Then, in a voice louder than befitted the secrecy of their meeting:) The Founder is dead, or as good as dead, you dogs!

Jasmine was alarmed. She was afraid the opportunity would be lost and the atmosphere spoilt. She put her hand to her dress and drew it slowly off. His face relaxed and lost its scowl and he gazed at her with eager eyes.

5 6 \* \* \* \* \*

The Trustee looked shrunken in his loose cloak. There was anxiety in his round, white face with its drooping eyelids and its prematurely old eyes, baggy from debauchery. Bayoomi's puffy face did not betray the inward pleasure he felt at his master's anxiety — an anxiety which showed the importance of the news he had brought and of his service to the Trustee and the Trust. He said:

— I'm sorry to have to bother you with this, but I couldn't act without referring the matter to you as it concerns the Trust. Besides, this crazy troublemaker is one of Gebel's people, and



we have an agreement not to attack any of them without your permission.

Ihaab asked with a scowl:

— Does he really claim to have been in touch with the Founder?

— I'm certain of that from more than one source. His patients believe it, although they keep very quiet about it.

— He may be a madman, just as Gebel was a swindler. But this filthy Alley loves madmen and swindlers. What more do Gebel's people want after plundering the Trust? Why doesn't Gebelaawi get in touch with anybody else? Why doesn't he get in touch with me, when I'm the most closely related to him? He's confined to his room, and the gates of his house only open when his provisions are brought. Nobody sees him, and he sees nobody except his maid. And yet it's so easy for Gebel's people to meet him or hear him!

Bayoomi said indignantly:

— They won't rest till they've taken over the whole Trust.

The Trustee was livid with rage and jumped up to give orders, but he sank back and asked:

— Has he said anything about the Trust, or has he confined himself to casting out devils?

— Like Gebel who confined himself to getting rid of snakes! (Then, scornfully:) What does the Founder have to do with devils?

Ihaab stood up.

— I don't want to suffer the fate of the Effendi.

Bayoomi invited Jaabir, Handoosa, Khaalid and Melonhead to his hashish den and told them they must find a cure for the madness of Rifaa son of Shaafiy. Melonhead asked with annoyance:

— Have you invited us just for that, chief?

Bayoomi nodded, and Melonhead was astonished and shouted:

— For him! The strongmen of the Alley meet over a creature who's neither male nor female?!

Bayoomi gave him a look of contempt:

— He's carried on his activities under your very nose, and you didn't see any danger — and of course you never heard his claims to have been in touch with the Founder.

They exchanged glances through the smoke. Melonhead was flabbergasted.

— The son of a bitch! What does the Founder have to do with devils? Is our Ancestor an exorcist?

They began to laugh but stopped in a moment at Bayoomi's scowl as he said:

— You're a cocaine-snorter, Melonhead. A strongman can get drunk and smoke hashish, but snorting does him no good.

Melonhead defended himself:

— Chief! I was at Antar's wedding and twenty men came at me with their sticks, and my face was covered with blood but I didn't let my cudgel drop from my hand.

Handoosa said hopefully:

— Let's leave him to deal with the matter as he thinks best, or he'll lose face. I hope to goodness he finds a better way than attacking the madman. It would be beneath a strongman's dignity to fight with such a creature.

Meanwhile the Alley slept, and no one knew what was hatching in Bayoomi's hashish den. Next morning Rifaa went out and found Melonhead in his path. He greeted him:

— Good morning, Melonhead.

The man gave him a look of hatred and yelled:

— A black morning to you, son of an old baggage! You get back home, and don't leave it or I'll smash your head in.

Rifaa was astonished.

— What's upsetting our strongman?

He yelled:

— You're talking to Melonhead now, Master Up-in-the-Air, not the Founder. That's enough fooling around; clear out!

Rifaa was about to speak, but the strongman gave him a shove that sent him staggering back against the wall. A woman saw what happened and let out a scream that filled the Alley, and other women took up the cry. Voices called loudly for help for Rifaa. In the twinkling of an eye many people were running towards the spot, among others Zaki, Ali, Hussein and Kareem. Then up came Shaafiy, and Jawaad the bard feeling the way with his stick. In no time the place was crowded with Rifaa's friends, both men and women. Melonhead, who had not anticipated any trouble, was surprised. He lifted his hand and brought it down on Rifaa's cheek, and Rifaa took the blow without any defence, but the bystanders shouted their distress and were thoroughly roused. Some implored Melonhead to leave him alone and others recounted Rifaa's virtues. People asked what had led to the attack, and there were loud protests. Melonhead exploded with anger and roared:

— Have you forgotten who I am?

The love for Rifaa that had brought them crowding round gave them the courage to answer back to Melonhead's warning. A man standing at the front said:

— You're our strongman, our leader; we only came to ask your pardon for this good man.

A man in the middle of the crowd took courage from the number of people and his position among them and shouted:

— You may be our strongman, but what has Rifaa done?

A third man shouted from the back, where he was safely hidden:

— Rifaa is innocent. God help any man who stretches out a hand to harm him!

Melonhead was beside himself with rage and he brandished his cudgel above his head shouting:

— You women! I'll make an example of you.

Women howled on all sides so that the scene was like a funeral. There were bloodthirsty warnings. Stones began land-

ing in front of Melonhead to prevent him from advancing. He found himself in a nastier situation than he had ever known, even in his worst dreams. He would rather die than ask the other strongmen for help, and the shower of stones threatened to kill him. He showed that he was still the strongman by his silence, and his eyes blazed. The stones continued to fall and the people went on defying him completely. Nothing like it had ever happened to any of the strongmen.

Rifaa suddenly moved across and stood in front of Melonhead. He raised both hands to call for silence, then shouted:

— Our strongman has done nothing wrong. I'm to blame.

There were looks of protest, but no one spoke. Rifaa said:

— Break it up before you become the objects of his anger.

Some people understood that he wanted to save Melonhead's honor as a solution to the crisis, and they dispersed. Others followed, bewildered by the whole business, and the rest hurried off for fear of being left alone with Melonhead. The sector was deserted.

5 7 \* \* \* \* \*

Tension grew after this incident. What the Trustee most feared was that people would feel that in solidarity lay the strength to withstand the strongmen. It was therefore necessary in his view to destroy Rifaa and those who had talked themselves into supporting him, though this needed the agreement of Dungbeetle, strongman of Gebel's people, to avoid causing a general battle. The Trustee said to Bayoomi:

— Rifaa is not as weak as you think. Behind him he has friends who can save him in defiance of a strongman. What would things come to if the whole Alley was as attached to him

as his sector is? Then he would leave devils and declare that his goal is the Trust.

Bayoomi poured out his anger on Melonhead. He shook him violently by the shoulders and said:

— We left it to you, and look what you've done, you apology for a strongman!

Melonhead gritted his teeth in resentment. He said:

— I'll rid you of him, even if it means killing him.

Bayoomi shouted:

— The best thing you can do is vanish from the Alley for good.

Bayoomi then summoned Dungbeetle to meet him, but Shaafiy, who was more frightened than ever, intercepted him. He had tried to persuade Rifaa to come back to the shop and to give up the activities that were bringing such trouble upon him; but this attempt had failed and he had come back disappointed. When he learnt that Dungbeetle had been sent for by Bayoomi, he stopped him and said:

— Dungbeetle, my dear sir, you're our strongman and our protector. They want you to give Rifaa up, but don't do it! Promise them whatever they want, but don't give him up! Order me to and I'll leave the Alley and take him with me, by force if need be. But don't give him up!

Dungbeetle spoke guardedly:

— I know better than anybody what I have to do and what's in the interest of Gebel's people.

The truth was that Dungbeetle had been afraid because of Rifaa ever since he had heard of Melonhead's trouble; he had said to himself that he was the one who must be on his guard, not the Trustee or Bayoomi. He continued on his way and met Bayoomi in his garden house. Bayoomi explained that he had sent for him in his capacity as strongman of Gebel's people to come to an agreement over the problem of Rifaa.

— Don't underestimate him; events have proved his dangerous influence.

Dungbeetle agreed with this, but he said:

— I hope he won't be attacked in front of me.

— We are men, my dear sir; our interests are the same. We don't attack anybody in our own homes. The boy will come before us now and I will question him in your presence.

Rifaa came in looking radiant and greeted them. He sat down where Bayoomi indicated, on a cushion in front of them. Bayoomi studied his beautiful, calm face wondering how this gentle youth had become the source of frightening disturbances. He asked him in a harsh voice:

— Why have you left your sector and your people?

He said simply:

— None of them answered my call.

— What did you want from them?

— To set them free from the spirits that spoil their happiness.

Bayoomi asked indignantly:

— Are you responsible for people's happiness?

— Yes, as long as I am able to give it to them.

Bayoomi scowled.

— They've heard you say you despise power and glory.

— To show them that happiness lies not in their imaginings but in what I'm doing.

Dungbeetle asked angrily:

— Doesn't that mean you despise the people who have power and glory?

Quite unruffled, he answered:

— No, sir; but it does mean that happiness is not the same as their power and glory.

Bayoomi asked with a piercing look:

— They've also heard you say that this is what the Founder wants for them.

His innocent eyes grew anxious.

— They say that?!

— And what do you say?

He hesitated for the first time.

— I speak according to my understanding.

Dungbeetle said sinisterly:

— Disasters can come from an addled brain.

Bayoomi's eyes narrowed.

— But they also say you repeat to them what you've heard from Gebelaawi himself.

His eyes were confused, and he hesitated again, then said:

— That's how I understand his words to Adham and Gebel.

Dungbeetle shouted:

— His words to Gebel don't bear interpreting.

Bayoomi grew still angrier and said to himself: 'You're all liars, and Gebel was the biggest liar of you all, you thieves.' Out loud he said:

— You say that you've heard Gebelaawi, and you say this is what Gebelaawi wants; but nobody can speak in the name of Gebelaawi except his Trustee and heir. If Gebelaawi wanted to say anything he would say it to him. He is responsible for the Trust and is the executor of its Ten Clauses. You idiot; how can you despise power and glory and wealth in the name of Gebelaawi when those are his very qualities?

Rifaa's open face showed signs of pain:

— I am speaking to the people of our Alley, not to Gebelaawi; it is they who are possessed by spirits, and it is they who are tormented by their desires.

Bayoomi bellowed:

— It's just that you are incapable of getting power and glory, and you curse them because of that and in order to raise your contemptible position — in the eyes of the idiots in our Alley — above that of their masters; but once you've got them under your thumb, you'll use them to seize the power and the glory.

Rifaa's eyes widened in astonishment.

— My only aim is the happiness of the people of our Alley.

Bayoomi shouted:

— You cunning bastard! You make people think they're

sick, that we're all sick and that you alone in the whole Alley are well.

— Why do you hate happiness when it's in your grasp?

— Cunning bastard! A curse on any happiness that comes from the likes of you!

Rifaa sighed.

— Why do people hate me when I've never hated anybody?

Bayoomi screamed at him:

— You won't take us in as you've taken in idiots. Stop taking people in, and understand that my orders are not to be disobeyed. Be thankful that you're in my house, or you wouldn't have got away in one piece.

Rifaa stood up hopelessly, saluted them and left. Dungbeetle said:

— Leave him to me!

But Bayoomi said:

— The lunatic has many friends, and we don't want a bloodbath.

5 8 \* \* \* \* \*

Rifaa set off home from Bayoomi's house. The sky was veiled in autumn cloud and a mild breeze stirred the air. As it was the pickling season, people in the Alley were crowding round the lemon-sellers' baskets, chattering and laughing, while urchins brawled and pelted each other with dirt. Rifaa received the greetings of many people but also a spattering of mud. He went on home, brushing the filth off his shoulder and his turban. He found Zaki, Ali, Hussein and Kareem waiting for him and they embraced as they always did when they met. Then he told them, and his wife who joined them, what had passed between him and Bayoomi and Dungbeetle. They followed anxiously,



and when he had finished his story they were frowning. Jasmine wondered what this delicate situation would lead to; was there not some solution that would save this good man from destruction without threatening her happiness? Their eyes were all full of questions, but Rifaa just leaned his head against the wall, exhausted. Jasmine said:

— You can't ignore Bayoomi's orders.

Ali was of course the boldest of them. He said:

— Rifaa has friends. They attacked Melonhead, and he's vanished from the Alley.

Jasmine frowned.

— Bayoomi is not Melonhead. If you defy Bayoomi it'll be goodbye to you.

Hussein turned to Rifaa.

— First let's hear our chief.

Rifaa spoke with his eyes almost closed:

— Don't think of fighting. One who tries to bring happiness to people can't lightly shed their blood.

Jasmine's face brightened. She hated the idea of being a widow in case people should watch her and prevent her from finding a way to her terrible lover. She said:

— The best thing you can do is to spare yourselves that sort of trouble.

Zaki said:

— We must leave the Alley, not the work.

Jasmine's heart pounded at the thought of going far away from her lover. She said:

— We can't live as strangers, lost far away from our Alley.

They all looked at Rifaa's face and he lifted up his head slowly and said:

— I don't want to leave.

At that point there was an impatient knocking at the door. Jasmine went to open it. Rifaa and his friends heard Shaafiy and Abda asking about their son. Rifaa stood up and embraced his parents, then they sat down. Shaafiy and his wife were

breathing heavily, and their faces expressed the bad news they brought. Shaafiy quickly got to the point.

— My son, Dungbeetle has withdrawn his protection from you and your life is in danger. My friends tell me that the strongmen's henchmen are hovering round your home.

Abda dried her reddened eyes and said:

— If only we hadn't come back to this Alley where people are sold for nothing.

Ali said over-enthusiastically:

— Don't be frightened, dear lady; all the people in our sector are our friends.

Rifaa sighed.

— What have we done to deserve punishment?

Shaafiy spoke anxiously:

— You belong to Gebel's people whom they so hate. I've been afraid ever since you first mentioned the Founder.

— Yesterday they made war on Gebel for wanting the Trust and today they make war on me for despising it.

Shaafiy made a helpless gesture with his hand:

— Say what you like about them; it won't change them at all. But realize that you're a dead man if you set foot outside your house — and I don't feel you're safe if you stay in it.

Fear crept into Kareem's heart for the first time, but he hid it with a great effort of will and said to Rifaa:

— They're lying in wait for you outside, and if you stay here they'll come and get you if we know anything about our strongmen. Let's escape over the roofs to my home, and there we can think about what's to be done.

Shaafiy exclaimed:

— From there you can escape from the Alley by night.

Rifaa sighed:

— And leave what I've built to be ruined?

His mother implored:

— Have pity on your mother and do as he says.

His father said insistently:

— Start again on the other side of the desert if you must.

Kareem stood up anxiously and said:

— Let's get things organized. Shaafiy and his wife can wait a little and then go to Victory House as if they were going home from an ordinary visit. Jasmine can go off to Gemalia as if she was shopping, and when she comes back she can slip round to my place; that will be easier for her than escaping over the roofs.

Shaafiy liked the plan. Kareem said:

— There's not a moment to lose, I'm going up to scout round the roofs.

He left the room. Shaafiy rose and took hold of Rifaa. Abda told Jasmine to collect their few clothes together in a bundle, which she proceeded to do, heart-sore and with a lump in her throat, a wave of fury mounting in her. Abda turned to kiss her son and recite a charm over him, her eyes brimming with tears. Rifaa thought sadly about his predicament. He loved others with all his heart and he had striven so hard for their happiness; how could he be the target for their hatred? And would Gebelaawi accept failure?

Kareem came back and said to Rifaa and his friends:

— Follow me!

Abda burst into tears.

— We'll see you... in a while.

Shaafiy fought back his tears as he said:

— I wish you a safe journey, Rifaa!

Rifaa embraced his parents, then turned to Jasmine and said:

— Wrap yourself up in your chador and veil so that nobody knows you. (Then, whispering in her ear:) I couldn't bear it for any hand to be raised against you.

Jasmine left the tenement-house in her black chador, with Abda's parting words echoing in her ears: 'Good-bye my daughter; may God preserve you and guard you. Rifaa is in your care; I'll pray for you both, night and day.' Darkness was gathering and lamps were being lit in the cafes. Urchins played in the light shed by the lanterns on barrows, and cats and dogs fought over piles of garbage, as usual for the time of day. Jasmine went towards Gemalia, and passion left no room for pity in her heart. She felt no hesitation, but she was full of fear and imagined that many eyes were fixed on her. She did not even begin to relax till she emerged from Derrasa into the desert, and she did not relax properly till she was with Bayoomi in the garden house. When she had taken off her veil he examined her with concern and asked:

— Frightened?

She was breathing hard.

— Yes!

— But no, you're no coward. Tell me what's up.

She said almost inaudibly:

— They've escaped across the roofs to Kareem's place, and they'll leave the Alley at dawn.

Bayoomi muttered:

— At dawn! The sons of bitches!

— They've persuaded him to go away; why not let him?

He smiled scornfully:

— Gebel went away, long ago, and then he came back. These vermin don't deserve to live.

Her mind was in turmoil.

— He denies life, but he doesn't deserve death.

His lips curled in disgust.

— There are enough madmen in the Alley.

She looked at him imploringly, then dropped her gaze and whispered, as if to herself:

— He once saved me from being destroyed.

He laughed brutally.

— And here you are, handing him over to destruction. Tit for tat — and the one who acts first ends worst!

She was so upset that she felt ill. She looked at him reproachfully and said:

— I've done this because you're dearer to me than my life.

He stroked her cheek gently.

— It'll be easy for us afterwards; and if things get tough for you, there's a place for you in this house.

She recovered a little from her gloom.

— If they offered me the Founder's house without you I wouldn't accept it.

— You're a faithful girl.

The word 'faithful' pierced her, and again she was so upset that she felt ill. She wondered whether the man was mocking her. But there was no more time for talking, and she rose. He stood up too, to see her off, and she slipped out by the back gate.

She found her husband and his friends waiting for her and sat down beside Rifaa, saying:

— Our home is being watched. Your mother was wise to leave a lighted lamp behind the window. It'll be easy to escape at dawn.

Zaki said to her, looking sadly at Rifaa:

— He's depressed, though. But aren't there sick people everywhere? And don't they need to be healed too?

Rifaa said:

— The need for healing is greatest where the sickness is worst.

Jasmine looked at him mournfully and thought to herself it was outrageous for him to be killed. She wished he had just one feature that deserved punishment. She remembered that he was the only person in this world who had been good to her;

and his reward was to be death. Inwardly she cursed these thoughts and said to herself: 'Let those who find good in their lives do good.' Then she saw him returning her look and she said:

— Your life is more precious than the whole of this damned Alley.

Rifaa smiled:

— That's what you say, but I read sadness in your eyes.

She trembled and said to herself: 'I'd be lost if he could read eyes as he can cast out devils.' She said to him:

— I'm not so much sad as afraid for you.

Kareem got up, saying:

— I'll make supper.

He came back carrying a tray and invited them to sit round it. It was a supper of bread and cheese and whey with cucumbers and radishes, and there was a jug of ale. Kareem filled their mugs, saying:

— Tonight we shall need warmth and courage.

They drank. Then Rifaa said, smiling:

— Drink wakens devils, but it gives life to those who have been freed from their spirits.

He looked at Jasmine by his side, and she understood the meaning of his look and said:

— You shall free me from my spirit tomorrow, if God grants us life.

Rifaa beamed with pleasure and his friends congratulated one another. They went on eating. The bread was broken, and their hands met over the dishes. It seemed as though they had forgotten death which hovered all around them. Rifaa said:

— The master of the Trust wanted his children to be like him, but they refused to be like anything but devils. They are fools, and he does not like foolishness, as he told me.

Kareem shook his head sadly and swallowed his mouthful, then said:

— If he had some of his former strength, things would go as he wished.

Ali said angrily:

— If... if... if..! What's the use of ifs? We must act.

Rifaa said forcefully:

— We've never fallen short. We've waged war on devils, and whenever one of them has made room, love has entered in. There's no goal beyond that.

Zaki said with a sigh:

— If they'd leave us to our work we could fill the Alley with health and love and peace.

Ali protested:

— I'm amazed that we can think of running away when we have so many friends.

Rifaa smiled.

— Your evil spirit still has a hold on you. Don't forget that our goal is to cure, not to kill. It's better for a man to be killed than to kill.

Rifaa turned suddenly to Jasmine.

— You're not eating and not listening.

Her heart contracted with fear, but she controlled her agitation and said:

— I'm amazed that you can talk so cheerfully, as if you were at a wedding.

— You'll get used to joy when you're set free from your spirit tomorrow. (Then, looking at his brothers:) Some of you are ashamed of being peaceful, and we are children of an alley that respects only strongman methods, but true strength isn't a matter of intimidation; battling against spirits is many times harder than attacking the weak or fighting the strongmen.

Ali shook his head sadly:

— And the reward for doing good is the miserable position we're in.

Rifaa said:

— The battle won't end as they imagine. We're not weak as

they think, only we've moved the fight from one battlefield to another one where we need more courage and strength.

They went on with their supper, thinking about what they had heard. He seemed in their eyes calm, relaxed and strong as well as beautiful and gentle. In a moment of silence they heard the bard of their sector relating how:

Once Adham sat dozing at midday in Watawit Alley when he was wakened by a movement and saw some urchins about to make off with his barrow. He stood up to threaten them, and one boy noticed him and warned his friends with a whistle, pushing the barrow over to distract him from giving chase. The cucumbers spilt all over the ground while the urchins bounded away like locusts. Adham was furious and poured forth a torrent of the foulest curses. Then he bent down to gather up the cucumbers which were smothered in dirt. His rage mounted without any outlet till he burst out passionately:

- Why did your rage burn everything up? Why did you love your pride more than your own flesh and blood? How can you be happy with your life of ease and plenty, knowing that we are trampled on like insects? Mercy and sweetness and tolerance are all lacking in your Great House, you tyrant.

He took hold of the shafts of the barrow and was about to push it far away from this wretched alley when he heard a jeering voice:

— How much are those cucumbers, mister?

He saw Idrees standing with a mocking smile on his lips.

A woman shouted, drowning the bard's voice:

— Oyez! Oyez! A child is lost. Oyez!



The companions passed the time talking, but Jasmine was in torment. Hussein wanted to take a look at the Alley, but Kareem protested that someone might see him and wonder what was up. Zaki wondered whether they had attacked Rifaa's home but Rifaa pointed out that there was nothing to be heard except the drone of the rebec and the shouting of urchins. Life went on as usual in the Alley, and there was nothing to show that a crime was being prepared. So many thoughts whirled round and round in Jasmine's head that she was afraid her eyes would give her away. She wished her torment would end, in any way and at any price. She wished she could fill herself with drink and forget what was going on around her. She said to herself that she was not the first woman in Bayoomi's life and would not be the last; stray dogs gather round garbage. But let this torment end at any price! As time went on, silence gradually swallowed up the noises. The urchins' shouts and the peddlers' cries ceased, and only the drone of the rebec was left. A sudden hatred for these men came over her, simply because they were, in a way, what tormented her.

Kareem asked:

— Shall I get the brazier ready?

Rifaa said firmly:

— We need to have our wits about us.

— I thought it would help us to bear the passing of time.

— You're more frightened than you need to be.

Kareem denied this charge:

— There doesn't seem to be any reason to be frightened.

Indeed, nothing had happened and Rifaa's home had not been attacked. The music stopped and the bards left. There were the sounds of doors being locked, the chatter of men on their way home, coughs, laughs, then silence. They watched and waited till the first cock crowed. Zaki got up and looked out of the window at the road:

— Silent and empty. The Alley is as it was the day Idrees was thrown out.

Kareem said:

— Time for us to go.

Jasmine was in anguish. She wondered what would become of her if Bayoomi was late or had changed his mind. The men stood up, each carrying his bundle. Hussein said:

— Good-bye to you, hellish Alley!

Ali led the way. Rifaa pushed Jasmine gently in front of him and followed her with a hand on her shoulder as though afraid he might lose her in the dark. Next went Kareem, then Hussein, then Zaki. They crept out one by one through the door of Kareem's lodgings, and climbed the stairs, guiding themselves by the handrail in the thick darkness. The roof seemed less dark, though there was not a star to be seen. A sheet of cloud in headlong flight across the sky hid the moon and diffused its light. Ali said:

— The roofs almost touch. We can help Jasmine if she needs us.

They followed one another on to the roof. As Zaki, the last of them, came up, he sensed a movement behind him. He turned to face the trap door and saw four figures. In a panic he asked:

— Who's that?

They all stopped dead and looked round. Bayoomi's voice spoke:

— Stop where you are, you bastards!

To his right and left stood Jaabir, Khaalid and Handoosa. Jasmine let out a cry, slipped from Rifaa's hand, and ran to the trap door. None of the strongmen stopped her, and Ali said to Rifaa in dismay:

— The woman has betrayed you.

In a moment they were surrounded. Bayoomi peered at their faces, one by one, asking: 'Where's the exorcist?' till he

recognized Rifaa and seized his shoulder in a grip of iron, jeering:

— Where are you off to, you friend of devils?

Rifaa said:

— Our presence here annoys you; we prefer to go away.

Bayoomi gave a scornful laugh and turned to Kareem.

— And you; what was the use of hiding them in your place?

Kareem swallowed hard and trembled with fear as he said:

— I didn't know of any quarrel between you and them.

With his free hand, Bayoomi hit him in the face. Kareem fell down but in a moment scrambled up and fled in terror over the roof of the next tenement-house. Hussein and Zaki rushed after him. Handoosa leapt at Ali and kicked him in the stomach. He fell to the ground, groaning from the depths of his being. At the same time Jaabir and Khaalid started after those who had fled, but Bayoomi said contemptuously:

— There's nothing to fear from them. They won't say a word — or they're doomed.

Rifaa's head was twisted sideways by the pain of Bayoomi's tight grip. He said:

— They've done nothing to deserve punishment.

Bayoomi hit him in the face and asked mockingly:

— Tell me; haven't they heard Gebelaawi as you did? (Then, pushing him forward:) Go in front of me and keep your mouth shut.

Rifaa moved off, surrendering to fate. He went carefully down the dark stairs, followed by their heavy footsteps. He was overwhelmed by the darkness and the hopelessness and the evil that threatened him, and he hardly thought of those who had fled or betrayed him. A deep sadness invaded him completely, even smothering his fears. It seemed to him that this darkness would always cling to the world. They stepped into the Alley and went through the sector where, thanks to him, no one was sick. Handoosa led them towards Gebel's sector, and they passed the barred and bolted Victory House, so that Rifaa

imagined he could hear his parents breathing. He wondered about them for a moment and thought he heard Abda weeping in the stillness of the night, but in no time he was reclaimed by the darkness and hopelessness and the evil that threatened. Gebel's sector looked in silhouette like a huge ruin. How dark it was, how deeply asleep! The squeaking of the executioners' shoes in the thick blackness was like the laughter of demons in the night.

Handoosa led them to the desert opposite the walls of the Great House. Rifaa looked up at the house, but he saw it was as dark as the sky. A figure appeared at the end of the wall and Handoosa asked:

— Dungbeetle?

— Yes!

He joined them without another word. Rifaa's eyes remained on the house. Did his Ancestor know of his plight? A word from him could save him from the clutches of these tyrants and frustrate their schemes. He could speak to them as he had done to him in this place. Gebel had been cornered like this and had then escaped and been victorious. But he passed the wall without hearing a thing, except the footsteps and heavy breathing of the villains. They went deep into the desert, and the sand slowed their steps. Rifaa felt lost and remembered that the woman had betrayed him and that his friends had fled. He wanted to turn towards the house, but Bayoomi's hand pushed him suddenly in the back and he fell on his face. Bayoomi raised his cudgel and shouted:

— Dungbeetle?!

The man raised his stick.

— With you all the way, chief.

Rifaa asked in despair:

— Why do you want to kill me?

Bayoomi cracked his cudgel down on his head and Rifaa cried out from the depths of his being: 'Gebelaawi!' A moment

later Dungbeetle's cudgel caught him on the back of the neck and blows rained down.

Silence fell, broken only by his death rattle.

Their hands began furiously digging in the dark.

6 1 \*

The murderers left, heading for the Alley, and very soon they had melted into the darkness. Four figures rose from a hiding place not far from the scene of the crime. They moaned and sobbed till one of them shouted:

— You cowards; you wined me, and so he was killed without anybody to defend him!

Another said to him:

— If we'd listened to you we'd all be dead and he still wouldn't have been saved.

Ali spoke again:

— You're cowards — just cowards.

Kareem said tearfully:

— Don't waste time talking, we have to work hard before morning.

Hussein looked up at the sky with his eyes full of tears and murmured:

— Daybreak is near, we must hurry.

Zaki cried out:

— It flashed past like a bad dream, but in that short time we lost the best friend we've ever had.

Ali started towards the place of the crime muttering: 'Cowards!' The others followed him, fanning out in a semicircle, and knelt down, feeling the ground. Kareem suddenly yelled as though he had been bitten:

— Here! This is his blood.

At that moment Zaki yelled out:

— This soft place is his grave.

They gathered round him, scrabbling at the soil. No one in the world was more miserable than they over the loss of their friend and over their inability to save him. In a moment of madness Kareem said stupidly:

— Perhaps we'll find him alive.

Ali spoke contemptuously as his hands worked away:

— Listen to the coward's delusions!

Their nostrils were filled with the smell of earth and blood. From the direction of the Jebel they heard dogs howling.

Ali exclaimed:

— Go slowly! This is his body.

Their hearts almost stopped beating. Their hands searched gently. In anguish they felt his clothes and they wept aloud. They worked together to free the body from the sand and lifted it out carefully. From the streets and alleys came the crowing of cocks. One of them urged haste, but Ali insisted that they fill up the hole. Kareem took off his jellaba and spread it on the ground, and they lifted the corpse on to it. They worked together again to fill in the hole. Then Hussein took off his jellaba and put it over the corpse, and they carried it towards Bab el-Nasr.

The darkness began to thin out over the Jebel, revealing clouds. Dew and tears moistened their faces. Hussein led the way to his tomb. They busied themselves silently opening it. The light gradually became stronger, till they could see the shrouded body and their bloodstained hands and their eyes red from crying. They carried the body down into the depths of the tomb, and stood round it humbly, fighting back their tears. Kareem whispered, sobbing:

— Your life was a brief dream, but it has filled our hearts with love and purity. We didn't imagine you'd leave us so soon, let alone that somebody would kill you, somebody from our ungrateful Alley. You loved it and served it, and all it wanted

was to destroy the mercy and healing you brought. They've damned themselves till the end of time.

Zaki moaned:

— Why do the good die? Why do the wicked live?

Hussein sighed:

— But for your love remaining in us, we'd hate people for ever.

At that Ali said:

— We shan't know any peace of mind till we've made up for our cowardice.

As they left the cemetery for the desert, dawn was tinting the horizon rose-red.

6 2 \*

None of the four friends reappeared in Gebelaawi Alley. Their people thought they had left with Rifaa to be safe from attack by the strongmen. They lived on the edge of the desert in a distraught state of mind, fighting with all their might against their anguish and remorse. The loss of Rifaa was worse than death to them, and his absence was a dreadful torture. Their only hope in life was to defy his death by reviving his mission, and to punish his murderers as Ali was resolved to do. Of course, it was not in their power to return to the Alley, but they hoped to achieve their aims outside it.

One morning Victory House was awakened by Abda's wailing. The neighbors hurried round to find out what had happened and she cried out in a hoarse voice:

— My son Rifaa has been killed.

The neighbors were dumfounded. They looked at Shaafiy who was drying his eyes. He explained:

— The strongmen killed him in the desert.

Abda moaned:

— My son who never harmed anybody in his life!

Someone asked:

— Did our Dungbeetle know about it?

Shaafiy said angrily:

— Dungbeetle was one of the murderers.

Abda sobbed:

— Jasmine betrayed him and told Bayoomi where he was.

They looked disgusted. A voice said:

— So that's why she's been living in his house since his wife left him!

The news spread in Gebel's sector, and Dungbeetle came to Shaafiy's home and yelled at him:

— Are you crazy? What's this you've been saying about me?

Shaafiy faced him fearlessly.

— You joined in his murder — you — his strongman and protector.

Dungbeetle put on a show of resentment and shouted:

— You're crazy, Shaafiy; you don't know what you're saying. I'm not staying here, in case you force me to teach you manners.

He stalked out, fuming with rage. The news reached Rifaa's sector, where he had stayed after leaving Gebel's, and the people were stunned. There were shouts of rage and sounds of crying. But the strongmen went out into the Alley and patrolled it up and down, their cudgels in their hands and a cruel glint in their eyes. Then a report went round that the sand to the west of Hind's Rock had been found stained with Rifaa's blood. Shaafiy went with his closest friends to look for the body. They searched and dug, but found nothing. There was uproar at the news, and great confusion, and many people expected things to happen in the Alley. The people of Rifaa's sector wondered what he had done to be condemned to death. Gebel's people pointed out that, now that Rifaa was dead, Jasmine was living in Bayoomi's house.



The strongmen slipped out by night to the place where Rifaa had been killed. They dug up his grave by torchlight, but found no trace of the body. Bayoomi mused:

— Has Shaafiy taken it?

Dungbeetle answered him:

— Oh no; he found nothing, so my spies tell me.

Bayoomi stamped on the ground and shouted:

— It was his friends! We were wrong to let them escape; here they are fighting us from behind our backs.

As they went back Dungbeetle whispered in Bayoomi's ear:

— Your keeping Jasmine is a source of trouble for us.

Bayoomi retorted:

— Admit that you aren't in control of your sector.

Dungbeetle left him in a fury.

Tension rose again in Gebel's sector and Rifaa's. Again the strongmen acted against the malcontents. Terror reigned so that people avoided going out unless they had to. One night, when Bayoomi was at Blubberlips' cafe, relatives of his wife crept into his house to attack Jasmine. She detected them and fled into the desert wearing her night-dress, with them in hot pursuit. She ran like mad in the darkness, even after they had given up the chase. She went on till she could hardly breathe and had to stop, panting violently. She threw her head back and shut her eyes, standing like that till she got her breath back. Behind her she could see nothing, but she was afraid to go back to the Alley by night. She looked in front of her and saw a faint light far off, coming perhaps from a hut. She set off towards it, hoping to find a refuge till the morning. She had to walk a long way before she reached it. It was, as she thought, a hut. She approached the door, calling out to whoever was inside. Suddenly she found herself face to face with her husband's friends: Ali, Hussein, Zaki and Kareem.

Jasmine stood fixed to the spot, her glance shifting from face to face. She seemed to be living a nightmare, finding her way barred by a wall. They stared at her in disgust, and Ali's eyes were cold and cruel as steel. She shouted:

— I'm innocent, by the Lord of Heaven, I'm innocent. I went with you till they attacked us, and then I ran away just like you.

They scowled. Ali asked furiously:

— Who told you we ran away?

She said in a trembling voice:

— If you hadn't you wouldn't have lived. But I'm innocent; all I did was run away.

Ali gnashed his teeth.

— You ran away to your master, Bayoomi.

— Never! Let me go! I'm innocent.

Ali shouted:

— You shall go under the ground.

She tried to escape but he leapt at her and seized her by the shoulders. She screamed:

— Let me go, for his sake! He didn't love killing or killers.

Ali seized her by the throat. Kareem said wretchedly:

— Wait till we've thought about it.

Ali roared:

— Quiet, cowards!

He tightened his grip on her throat, putting into it all his pent-up anger and hatred and suffering and remorse. She tried in vain to free herself, seizing his forearms, kicking him, shaking her head — all to no avail. Her strength ebbed away, her body was convulsed, and she was still for ever. He dropped her at his feet, a corpse.

Next morning Jasmine's body was found at Bayoomi's gate. The news spread like wind-driven dust. A crowd of men and women quickly assembled by Trustee's House, and there was

uproar. Conflicting commentaries were offered, and people hid their true feelings. The gate of Bayoomi's house opened and out he charged like a mad bull. He laid about him with his cudgel, hitting anyone he could catch. People ran away in terror and took refuge in the tenement-houses and cafes. Bayoomi stood in the empty alley, cursing and swearing and uttering threats, beating the air and the walls and the ground.

That same day Shaafiy and his wife left the Alley. It seemed as if all trace of Rifaa had vanished, but there were still things that recalled him, such as Shaafiy's home in Victory House, the carpentry shop, Rifaa's home in the sector that was now called the Home of Healing, the place west of Hind's Rock where he had died, and above all, his faithful friends. They kept in touch with his followers and taught them the secrets of casting out spirits to cure the sick. They were convinced that in this way they were bringing Rifaa back to life. However, Ali's mind would not be at rest until he had destroyed the culprits. Hussein reproached him:

— You have nothing of Rifaa in you at all.

Ali retorted fiercely:

— I know Rifaa better than you. He spent his short life in a violent struggle against devils.

Kareem said:

— You want to go back to strongman methods, but he hated nothing more.

Ali shouted:

— He was a strongman, the greatest of all, but his mildness deceived you.

Each party set to work according to its views with sincere faith. The true story of Rifaa, which most people did not know, was told in the Alley. It was also recounted that his body had remained in the desert till Gebelaawi himself had carried it away and buried it in his luxuriant garden.

Major events seemed almost to have stopped after that, but then strongman Handoosa disappeared suspiciously. One

morning his mutilated body was found in front of the home of Trustee Ihaab. Trustee's House trembled, as did Bayoomi's, and the Alley went through a terrible period of fear. Attacks were made on anyone who had any connection — or seemed to have any — with Rifaa or one of his friends. No head was safe from sticks, no stomach from kicks, no chest from punches, no neck from bruises. Some barricaded themselves in their homes and others fled. Those who were careless of the danger got killed in the desert. The Alley resounded with shouting and wailing, and all seemed black and overcast. The smell of blood hung everywhere.

The strange thing was that all this did not put an end to the actions of whoever was responsible. The strongman Khaalid was killed as he was leaving Bayoomi's house a little before dawn. The reign of terror reached an insane peak. Then the Alley was awakened in the early hours by a fire that destroyed the home and the family of another strongman, Jaabir. Bayoomi roared: 'Rifaa's madmen are spreading like bedbugs. They must be killed, by God, even if it's in their own homes.' The rumor went round that their homes would be attacked by night. People were crazy with terror. They stormed out brandishing sticks, stools, saucepan lids, knives, clogs, bricks... Bayoomi decided to strike before all was lost. Waving his cudgel, he charged out of his house with a crowd of supporters.

Ali was at the head of the rebels, together with some tough men, showing himself for the first time. As soon as he saw Bayoomi coming up he ordered a volley of stones to be thrown. The stones fell like a cloud of locusts on Bayoomi and his men, and the blood began to flow. Bayoomi attacked, roaring like a wild beast, but a stone landing on his head stopped him in his tracks, in spite of his anger and power and strongman's pride. He staggered and fell, his head covered in blood. His men fled in no time and the angry crowd surged into his house. The sounds of rending and breaking reached the Trustee in his house. Contagion spread everywhere. Retribution fell on the

remaining strongmen and their friends, and their homes were destroyed. The danger mounted and all order almost broke down. At that moment the Trustee sent for Ali. Ali went to meet him, and his men stopped their vengeance and destruction to wait for the outcome of the meeting. Things quieted down and tempers cooled.

The meeting produced a new covenant for the Alley; the Rifaaites were recognized as a new sector, with the same rights and privileges as Gebel's. Ali was made trustee of their part of the Trust, which meant strongman over them. He would receive their share of the Trust's revenues and share it between them on a basis of perfect equality. All those who had fled from the Alley during the reign of terror came back to the new sector, led by Shaafiy and his wife and Zaki, Hussein and Kareem. Rifaa enjoyed in his death an honor and respect and love that he had never dreamed of while alive. His life became a glorious story repeated by everyone, and chanted to the music of the rebec, especially the part about Gebelaawi taking up his body and burying it in his luxuriant garden. The Rifaaites all agreed about this, as they agreed on loyalty to his parents and veneration for them, but they disagreed about everything else.

Kareem, Hussein and Zaki maintained that Rifaa's mission had been simply to heal the sick and to despise power and glory. They and their followers continued his ways. Some of them went to extremes and shunned marriage out of a desire to imitate him and follow his way of life. Ali on the other hand took all that was due to him from the Trust and married. He called for the renovation of Rifaa's sector and said that Rifaa had not despised the Trust for itself, but in order to show that real happiness could be gained without it, and to condemn the evils aroused by greed; if the revenues were fairly shared out and used for building and good works, then they were nothing but good.

In any case people enjoyed a good life and joy was in their faces. They said with faith and conviction that today was better than yesterday, and tomorrow would be better than today.

Why is our Alley plagued with forgetfulness?

# QAASIM

6 4 \*

Hardly anything changed. Bare feet still left their prints in the dust, and flies went on flitting between heaps of garbage and human eyes. Faces were still haggard and drawn, clothes still tattered. Insults were routinely exchanged like greetings, and hypocrisy was rife. The Great House remained closed up behind its walls, immersed in silence and memories. To the right stood Trustee's House and to the left Strongman's House. Next to them was Gebel's sector and adjoining it lay Rifaa's. As for the rest of the Alley, the part that ran down to Gemalia, it was the home of a mass of ill-bred people, the 'Desert Rats' as they were called, who were the poorest and most wretched of all.

At this time the Trustee was Rifaat, who was just like his predecessors. The Strongman was 'Guzzler', a short, slim man whose appearance did not betray his strength, but who was transformed in battle into an enemy as swift, as sharp and as deadly as flame. He had become Strongman of the Alley after a series of battles that had made the blood flow in every sector.

The strongman of Gebel's sector was called 'Bruiser'. His people were still pleased with themselves, boasting that they were the most closely related to Gebelaawi, that theirs was the best sector, and that their man Gebel had been the first and last to whom Gebelaawi had spoken and given his favor. For this they were little loved.

'Pilgrim Grim' was the strongman of Rifaa's people. He did not follow Ali's example in his conduct of affairs, but behaved like Dungbeetle and Bruiser and other usurpers. He took the Trust income for his own use and beat up anyone who complained, urging his people to follow Rifaa's example and despise glory and wealth.

Even the Desert Rats had their strongman, known as 'Omnibus', but he of course was not trustee of part of the Trust. Things went on like this, and those who held the cudgels maintained, as did the bards with their rebecs, that it was a just system in accordance with the Founder's Ten Clauses, and that the Trustee and strongmen watched over its efficient operation.

Among the Desert Rats a sweet-potato vendor called Zakaria was known for his goodness. He was distinguished by a distant connection with Omnibus, strongman of the sector. He used to push his barrow up and down the Alley, crying his wares. In the middle of the barrow stood a stove from which wafted aromatic smoke that attracted urchins in the Alley just as it did in Gemalia, Otouf, Derrasa, Kafr el-Zaghari and Beit el-Qadi.

Zakaria had been married a long time without having any children, but his little nephew, Qaasim, had come to live with them when his parents died. Zakaria did not find the child a burden, for human life, especially in that part of the Alley, cost little more than that of the dogs and cats and flies, which found their food amidst the garbage. Zakaria loved him as he had loved the boy's father. When his wife became pregnant after the little boy had joined the family, he regarded him as a good



omen and grew still more fond of him. His love did not lessen when he was blessed with a son, Hassan.

Qaasim grew up almost alone, for his uncle passed the day away from home and his aunt was busy with her house and her baby. Then, as he grew up, his world expanded and he took to playing in the courtyard and the Alley, and made friends with boys his own age from Rifaa's sector and Gebel's, as well as from his own. He went out to Hind's Rock and played around it, became familiar with the desert from east to west, and climbed Jebel Muqattam. He used to gaze up with the other little boys at the Great House and feel proud of his great Ancestor. But he did not know what to say when some spoke of Gebel and others of Rifaa, nor did he know what to do when words became insults and quarrels and battles. Often he looked at Trustee's House in wonder and admiration, and gazed with longing at the fruit on the trees.

One time he saw the gatekeeper dozing and slipped quietly into the garden without seeing anyone or being seen. Full of joy, he walked along the paths and picked up guavas off the grass and ate them with delight, till he found himself in front of the fountain. He marvelled at the column of water rising out of the basin and, throwing off his jellaba, he jumped in and waded about, splashing his hands in the water and pouring it over his body, completely forgetting where he was. In no time a harsh voice shouted, 'Uthmaan, you son of a bitch, come here you blind idiot!' He turned to see where the voice came from, and there on the veranda was a man wearing a red robe, pointing at him with a trembling finger, his face burning with rage. Qaasim rushed to the side of the basin and swung himself out, pivoting on his elbows. Then he saw the gatekeeper hurrying up and sped towards the jasmine trellis against the wall, forgetting his jellaba where he had shed it. He raced to the gate, shot out into the Alley and ran off at top speed. Cheeringurchins and barking dogs chased after him. Uthmaan the gatekeeper rushed after him into the Alley and overtook

him in the middle of his sector. He grabbed him by the arm and stood there panting. Qaasim screamed so loud that the whole sector heard.

In a moment his aunt arrived, carrying her baby, and Omnibus came out from the cafe. His aunt was amazed at his appearance and took his hand, saying to the gatekeeper:

— For Heaven's sake, Uthmaan, you've frightened the boy. What's he done? Where's his jellaba?

The gatekeeper spoke haughtily:

— His Honor the Trustee saw him bathing in his fountain. The little devil needs a beating. The damned brat got in while I was asleep. Why don't you keep your devils away from us?

— Forgive him, Uthmaan; he's an orphan. You're quite right, of course.

She rescued the boy from his hands.

— I'll beat him for you, but please give back his one and only jellaba.

The gatekeeper waved his hand angrily, turned his back and went off, saying:

— Because of this insect I've been cursed and insulted. Devils! Alley of dogs!

The aunt went back home, carrying Hassan on her hip and dragging along Qaasim, who was in floods of tears.

6 5 \* \* \* \* \*

Looking at Qaasim with admiration, Zakaria told him:

— You're no longer a child, Qaasim; you're almost ten. It's time you had a job.

Qaasim's eyes lit up with pleasure.

— I always hoped you'd take me with you, Uncle.

Zakaria laughed.

— You wanted to come for play, not for work. But now you're a sensible boy and you can help me.

The boy rushed over to the barrow and tried to push it, but Zakaria stopped him. His aunt said:

— Mind the potatoes don't roll away, or we'll starve to death.

Zakaria took hold of the shafts of the barrow, saying:

— Walk in front and shout: 'Best sweet potatoes! Roast sweet potatoes!'. Watch everything I say or do. You can carry the potatoes upstairs to people. And keep your eyes open all the time!

Qaasim looked sadly at the barrow.

— But I'm strong enough to push it.

Zakaria set off pushing the barrow.

— Do as I tell you and don't be stubborn; your father was such a helpful man.

The barrow rumbled off towards Gemalia with Qaasim shouting in his squeaky voice: 'Best sweet potatoes! Roast sweet potatoes!'. Nothing could match his joy as he went off to strange parts and worked like a grown-up. When the barrow got to Watawit Alley, Qaasim looked round and said to his uncle:

— This is where Idrees got in Adham's way.

Zakaria nodded absently, and the boy went on, laughing:

— Adam was pushing his barrow just like you, Uncle.

The barrow followed its daily route, from El-Hussein to Beit el-Qadi and from there to Derrasa. Qaasim gazed in wonder at the passers-by and at the shops and mosques, till they came to a little square which Zakaria said was Muqattam Bazaar. The boy looked at it in wonder:

— Is this really Muqattam Bazaar — which Gebel ran away to, and where Rifaa was born?

Zakaria answered without enthusiasm:

— Yes! But those two have nothing to do with us.

— But we're all children of Gebelaawi: why shouldn't we be like them?

Zakaria laughed and said sarcastically:

— At any rate we're all equally poor.

He pushed his barrow towards a shack built of old cans, on the edge of the market place next to the desert; it was a tin shack that served as a stall selling prayer-beads, incense and charms. In front, on a skin, sat an old man with a white beard. Zakaria parked the barrow in front of the hut and shook the old man warmly by the hand. The man said:

— I have enough sweet potatoes today.

Zakaria sat down beside him.

— Sitting with you is better than looking for profit.

The old man examined the boy with interest. Zakaria called to him:

— Come here, Qaasim, and kiss Mr Yahiaa's hand.

He went up to the old man, took his wrinkled hand and kissed it respectfully. Yahiaa stroked the boy's hair and studied his attractive face. He asked:

— Who is he, Zakaria?

Zakaria stretched his legs out in the sun.

— My late brother's son.

The old man sat him down beside him on the skin.

— Do you remember your father, my boy?

— No, sir!

— Your father was a friend of mine. He was a good man.

Qaasim stared up at the different kinds of goods for sale. Yahiaa stretched out his hand, took an amulet from a nearby shelf and hung it round the boy's neck.

— Keep this, and it will keep you from all evil.

Zakaria told Qaasim:

— Yahiaa is from our Alley — from Rifaa's sector.

Qaasim looked at Yahiaa.

— Why did you leave, sir?

Zakaria answered:

— The strongman of Rifaa's sector took a dislike to him a long time ago, and he preferred exile.

Qaasim exclaimed:

— Just like Shaafiy, Rifaa's father!

Yahiaa gave a long laugh, revealing toothless gums.

— So you know about that, my boy! How well the people of our Alley know the old stories; what's wrong with them, that they don't learn their lesson?!

A boy brought a pot of tea from a cafe and put it down in front of Yahiaa, then scurried back. Yahiaa brought out a small package from the breast of his jellaba and began opening it, saying gleefully:

— I've got something precious and very powerful; the effect is guaranteed to last till tomorrow.

Zakaria said eagerly:

— Let's try it!

Yahiaa chuckled.

— I never heard you say no.

— How could I say no to pleasure, Yahiaa?

The two men shared the lump and began chewing it. Qaasim watched them so eagerly that he made his uncle laugh. The old man sipped his tea and asked Qaasim:

— Do you dream of being a strongman like the other people in our Alley?

Qaasim smiled.

— Yes!

Zakaria laughed and said apologetically:

— Forgive him, Yahiaa! As you know, in our Alley either you're a strongman or you must be ready for their blows.

Yahiaa sighed.

— God rest your soul, Rifaa; how did you come out of our hellish Alley?

— That's why he met his end, as you know.

Yahiaa said, frowning:

— Rifaa didn't die the day he was killed; he died the day his successor turned into a strongman.

Qaasim asked eagerly:

— Where was he buried, sir? His people say our Ancestor buried him in his garden, and Gebel's people say his body was lost in the desert.

Yahiaa roared:

— Damn their hard hearts! They still hate him to this day. (Then changing his tone:) Tell me, Qaasim, do you like Rifaa?

The boy looked cautiously at his uncle, but answered clearly:

— Yes, sir, I like him very much.

— Which would you prefer; to be like him or to be a strongman?

Qaasim looked up at the old man, his eyes both smiling and confused. His lips moved but he made no sound. Zakaria guffawed.

— Be content with selling sweet potatoes, like me.

They fell silent, At the same time a row began in the market place, where a donkey had thrown itself down on the ground, pulling over the cart to which it was harnessed. The women riding in it scrambled out while the driver flogged the donkey violently. Zakaria stood up and said:

— We have a long walk ahead of us. Goodbye, old friend!

— Bring the boy with you whenever you come.

He shook Qaasim's hand and fondled his hair.

— You're a good lad.

6 6 \*

In all the desert one place alone offered shelter from the angry sun: Hind's Rock. Qaasim sat there on the ground with only the flock for company. He was wearing a clean, blue jellaba — as clean as is possible for a shepherd — and had a turban to protect him from the sun, and a pair of old shoes worn through at the toes. Part of the time he was sunk in

himself, and part of it he watched the sheep and goats, the lambs and kids. His staff lay beside him. From where he sat he could see Jebel Muqattam close by, towering up, vast and threatening. It was as if he were the only creature under the pure dome of sky who persisted obstinately in defying the sun's wrath. The desert stretched to the horizon, sunk in heavy silence and stifled in hot air.

When he tired of his thoughts and dreams and passionate youthful desires, he turned his gaze to the sheep, watching their pranks and antics, their quarrels and courtships, their prancing and lazing. He paid special attention to the lambs, which he loved. He used to marvel at their eyes and his heart would beat harder at the sight of them, as if they spoke to him. He in turn used to speak to them and compare the love they found in his care with the degradation that the people of the Alley suffered under the arrogant strongmen. He was not worried by the way the Alley despised shepherds, for he had always believed that a shepherd was better than a crook, a thug or a beggar. Quite apart from that, he loved the desert and the fresh air, and knew well Jebel Muqattam and Hind's Rock and the marvelously changeful dome of sky. Besides, being a shepherd led him constantly to visit Mr Yahiaa.

Yahiaa asked him when first he saw him as a shepherd:

— From selling sweet potatoes to watching sheep?

Qaasim answered

— Why not, sir! It's a job that hundreds of poor wretches in my sector envy.

— Why's your uncle left you?

— My cousin Hassan has grown up; he has more right to go with my uncle on his rounds. Herding sheep is better than begging.

Never a day passed without his visiting his teacher. He loved him and enjoyed his conversation. He found that he knew all about the Alley, past and present. He knew the tales chanted by the bards — and things that they did not know. Qaasim used

to say to Yahiaa: 'I watch over sheep from every sector, sheep from Gebel's and Rifaa's sectors, and sheep belonging to rich people in our sector too. The strange thing is that they graze together in the brotherly spirit that their hard-hearted owners lack.' He also said: 'Humaam was a shepherd. And who are the people who look down on shepherds? They're beggars and down-and-outs and poor wretches. Yet at the same time they look up to the strongmen who are just shameless robbers and shedders of blood. God forgive you, people of the Alley!'

One time Qaasim said to Yahiaa playfully:

— I'm poor and content. I've never harmed any man. Even my sheep meet with nothing but love from me. Don't you think I'm like Rifaa?

Yahiaa looked at him disapprovingly and said:

— Rifaa! You like Rifaa! Rifaa spent his life freeing his brothers from devils to win happiness for them. (Then, laughing:) And you're crazy about women. You watch for girls in the desert when the sun goes down.

Qaasim smiled.

— Is there anything wrong in that, Yahiaa?

— That's your business. But don't say you're like Rifaa.

Qaasim thought a while about this, then said:

— And Gebel, wasn't he, like Rifaa, one of the good men of our Alley? Yet he loved and married, and won his people's rightful share of the Trust and handed it out fairly.

Yahiaa said sharply:

— But he made the Trust his goal.

The young man thought for a while, then said candidly:

— No, rather community and justice and order were also his goals.

Yahiaa was annoyed.

— So you prefer Gebel to Rifaa?

Qaasim's dark eyes were filled with perplexity. He hesitated for a long time, then said:

— They were both good men, and there have been so few



good men in our Alley — Adham, Humaam, Gebel, Rifaa — that's all our share of goodness. But what a lot of strongmen there have been!

Yahiaa sid sadly:

— And Adham died of grief, and Humaam was killed, and Rifaa was killed.

'Such were the truly good men of our Alley: a blameless life and a tragic end!' Thus he spoke to himself as he sat in the shade of the big rock. A strong desire to be like them sprang up in his heart. 'And the strongmen, how foully they behave!' A deep sadness filled him with anxiety. He soothed himself: 'This rock has seen so many events and people: the love of Qadri and Hind; the killing of Humaam; Gebel's meeting with Gebelaawi; Rifaa's conversation with his Ancestor... And now where are those events and those people? But the memory remains, and is worth more than flocks and flocks of sheep and goats. This rock saw our great Ancestor too, when he roamed here alone as far as the eye can see, taking possession of what he wanted and scaring off brigands. I wonder how he is in his isolation. Is he still in his right mind or is he senile? Does he come and go, or is he bed-ridden with age? Does he know what's going on around him, or has he lost touch with everything? Does he remember his children, or has he forgotten even himself?'

At the end of the afternoon Qaasim stood up and stretched and yawned. He picked up his staff and whistled a tune, then waved the staff and called the sheep, which flocked together and moved off towards civilization. He began to feel hungry, having eaten nothing all day except a sardine and some bread, but a good supper would be waiting at his uncle's. He walked faster, till he caught sight of the Great House in the distance with its high wall and its shuttered windows and the tops of its trees. What did the garden look like — that garden of which the bards sang, and for which Adham had died of grief?

When he drew near to the Alley he began to hear its hubbub. He followed the great wall to the top of the Alley. Dusk was shedding its gloomy light. He pushed his way through gangs of urchins who were playing and throwing mud. His ears were assailed by vendors' calls, women's chatter, men's arguments and insults, madmen's cries for help and the bell on the Trustee's carriage. His nose was filled with the penetrating smell of treaced tobacco, the stench of garbage, the pungent outwear of garlic. He stopped in Gebel's sector to return their sheep and did the same in Rifaa's sector.

He was left with just one ewe which belonged to Madam Qamar, the only woman in the Desert Rats' sector who owned property. She lived in a house with one upper floor and a central courtyard, in the middle of which stood a date-palm and in the far corner a guava tree. Qaasim drove 'Grace' into the courtyard, meeting the maid, Sakeena, with her curly greying hair. They greeted one another and she smiled and asked him in her husky voice: 'How's Grace?' He told her of his admiration for the ewe, handed her over and was about to leave when in from the Alley came the mistress of the house. A chador was wrapped round her plump body, and her dark eyes looked out affectionately over her veil. Qaasim stepped aside for her and looked down modestly. She said to him gently and politely:

— Good evening!

— Good evening, madam!

She stopped and studied Grace, then looked at him.

— Grace is getting fatter every day, thanks to you.

He was affected by her tender glance even more than by her kind words.

— Thanks to God, and to your care!

Qamar turned to Sakeena.

— Bring him some supper!

He threw up his hands to decline gratefully.

— You're too good, madam.

He won another glance from her as he said goodbye, then off he went. He was much moved by her gentleness and affection, as he was whenever he was lucky enough to meet her. It was an affection of a kind he knew of only from what he had heard about the mother-love that he had never experienced. If his mother had lived she would have been about this woman's age, about forty. How wonderful this quality seemed in an alley that took pride in strength and violence. The only thing more wonderful was her shy beauty and the joy it breathed into him. It was not like the hot-blooded adventures in the desert with their blind, burning hunger and their sad, transient satisfaction.

He hurried towards his uncle's home, carrying his staff over his shoulder, hardly seeing what was in front of him for the strength of his emotion. He found his uncle's family waiting for him on the balcony overlooking the courtyard. He sat down to table with the three of them. A supper of falafel, leeks and melons had been prepared. Hassan was sixteen, and so tall and well built that Zakaria dreamed that he would one day become strongman of the Desert Rats. After supper Qaasim's aunt cleared the table and Zakaria went out. The two cousins stayed on the balcony till they heard a voice calling from the courtyard:

— Qaasim!

The two youths stood up and Qaasim answered:

— Coming, Saadiq!

Saadiq met them happily. He was about the same age and height as Qaasim, but thinner. He worked as assistant to the tinner in the last shop before Gemalia. The three friends went off to Freewheeler's cafe. As they went in they were watched by Taza, the bard, who sat cross-legged on his bench at the back. Omnibus was sitting near to Freewheeler by the entrance and they went over and shook hands with the strongman, meekly in spite of his close relationship to Qaasim and Hassan. They sat down side by side on one bench, and the boy brought them

their usual orders. Qaasim loved the hookah and mint tea.

Omnibus looked contemptuously at Qaasim and asked rudely:

— What's wrong with you, boy, as neat and tidy as a girl?

Qaasim blushed with embarrassment and said apologetically:

— There's nothing wrong with being clean, sir.

The strongman scowled.

— It's bad manners at your age.

There was silence in the cafe, as though all ears and even the very walls were listening to Omnibus' words. Saadiq gave his friend a sympathetic glance, for he knew how sensitive he was. Hassan hid his look of anger behind his cup of ginger so that the strongman would not see it. Taza picked up his rebec and started playing. After saluting Rifaat the Trustee, Guzzler, Strongman of the Alley, and Omnibus, master of the sector, the bard began:

Adham imagined he heard footsteps, slow and heavy. Submerged memories flooded back like a wonderful but elusive fragrance. He turned his head towards the door of the hut and saw it open. Then the doorway seemed to be filled by a huge person. He gazed in astonishment and with a mixture of hope and despair. He sighed deeply and murmured:

— Father?!

It seemed that he heard the old voice saying:

— Good evening, Adham!

His eyes swam with tears and he tried to stand up but could not. He felt a joy he had not known for over twenty years.

Sakeena, the maid, said:

— Wait, Qaasim! I have something for you.

Qaasim stood where he had tethered the ewe to the base of the palm tree, waiting for the maid, who had gone inside. His heart pounded, for he told himself that the thing she promised could come only from the generous heart of the mistress of the house. He longed to see her glance or hear her voice and for her beauty to soothe his body which had burnt all day long in the desert. Sakeena came back with a package which she gave him, saying:

— A pancake; enjoy it!

— My thanks to the generous lady!

He heard her voice from behind the window, saying gently:

— Thanks be to God, my dear boy!

He made a gesture of gratitude with his hand without looking up, and left. He repeated her words to himself joyfully: 'my dear boy'. The shepherd had never heard anything like it before. And who had said it? The most respected lady in his wretched sector. He looked with affection at the Alley in the gathering darkness and thought: 'In spite of our Alley's misery, it is not empty of things that could bring happiness to troubled hearts.'

He was roused from his daydreams by a voice shouting: 'My money! My money is stolen!' He saw a man in a turban and a flowing jellaba hurrying towards the top of the Alley, coming from the Gemalia end. Everyone turned towards the shouting man; urchins ran after him; peddlers and people sitting in their doorways craned their necks. Heads were poked out of windows, and faces peered up from basements. The customers came out of the cafes, and the man was soon surrounded on all sides. Qaasim saw a man standing near to him, scratching his back with a stick through the neck of his jellaba and watching the scene with languid eyes. Qaasim asked him who the man

was, and he answered without ceasing to scratch:

— An upholsterer who has been working in Trustee's House.

The strongmen of the three sectors arrived on the scene — Omnibus, Pilgrim Grim and Bruiser. They quickly made the crowd move back a few paces. A woman shouted from a window in Rifaa's sector:

— The man's been touched by the Evil Eye.

And another woman's voice came from the first house in Gebel's sector:

— She's right. There's nobody who didn't envy him the money he was going to make out of upholstering the Trustee's furniture. God preserve us from the Evil Eye!

A third woman called from where she stood in a doorway delousing a boy's head:

— He was laughing as he came out of Trustee's House. He didn't know he'd soon be screaming and crying. Damn money!

The man was yelling at the top of his voice:

— All the money I had on me: stolen! A week's wages! And more besides that was in my pocket! Money for the house and the shop and the children! Twenty-odd pounds! Perish the bastards!

Bruiser, strongman of Gebel's sector, shouted:

— Sh! Quiet everybody! Quiet you sheep! The good name of the Alley is in the balance, and any blame will be put on the strongmen in the end.

Pilgrim Grim, strongman of Rifaa's sector, said:

— My God! There had better not be any blaming! But how do we know he lost the money in our Alley?

The upholsterer shouted hoarsely:

— It was stolen in your Alley: I'll divorce my wife if I lie. I got it from the gatekeeper of his Honor the Trustee, and when I felt in the breast of my jellaba at the other end of the Alley I found no trace of it.

There was a hubbub of voices. Pilgrim Grim shouted:

— Quiet, you cattle! Listen, man; where did you realize your money was gone?

He pointed to the end of the Desert Rats' sector:

— In front of the tinner's shop, but, to tell the truth, nobody was near me there.

Omnibus said:

— Then it was stolen before he got to our sector.

Pilgrim Grim said:

— I was in the cafe when he went past, and I didn't see anybody in Rifaa's sector go near him.

Bruiser roared:

— There are no thieves among Gebel's people; they're the lords of this Alley.

Pilgrim Grim retorted:

— That'll do, Bruiser, my friend! You're wrong about the lords.

— Only a fool can deny it.

Pilgrim Grim thundered:

— Don't tempt the devil in me! Damned bad manners!

Bruiser shouted as loudly:

— A thousand curses! There's no bad manners like that in our sector.

The upholsterer said tearfully:

— Gentlemen, my money was lost in your Alley. You're all lords I'm sure, but where's my money? Poor Fanjari is ruined.

Pilgrim Grim said decisively:

— We must make a search. Let us search every pocket, every man, every woman, every child, every corner.

Bruiser said contemptuously:

— Search away; you won't disgrace any of us.

Pilgrim Grim said:

— The man left Trustee's House and passed first through Gebel's sector, so let's begin by searching Gebel's people.

Bruiser snorted:

— Over my dead body! Remember who you are, Pilgrim Grim, and who I am.

— I have more scars than hairs on my body.

— Scars leave no room for hair on my body.

— God, don't let the devil in me get loose!

— Send me all the devils in the world!

Fanjari yelled again:

— Look here! My money — doesn't it worry you that people will say it was stolen in your Alley?

A woman shouted furiously:

— Careful, owl-face, with your insults !

A voice asked:

— Why should the money not have been stolen in the Desert Rats' sector, where most of them are thieves and beggars?

Omnibus shouted:

— Our thieves don't steal in their own Alley.

— How do we know that?

Omnibus grew red with rage.

— We don't need any more bad manners; the search will uncover the thief, or it's goodbye to the Alley.

More than one voice shouted:

— Begin with the Desert Rats.

Omnibus roared:

— Anybody who changes the natural order of the search will get my cudgel in his face.

He brandished his cudgel and his men flocked round him. Pilgrim Grim did likewise, and Bruiser withdrew to his sector and did the same. The upholsterer took refuge in a doorway, crying. Night was about to fall. Everyone expected a bloody battle. Suddenly Qaasim rushed to the middle of the Alley and shouted at the top of his voice:

— Stop! Bloodshed won't bring back the lost money. People in Gemalia and Derrasa and Otouf will say that anybody who enters Gebelaawi Alley is robbed, even if it's protected by its Trustee and its strongmen.



One of Gebel's people asked:

— What does the shepherd boy want?

— I have a plan for giving the money back to its owner without a fight.

The upholsterer ran towards him, shouting his gratitude.

Qaasim addressed the crowd:

— It will give the money back to its owner without exposing the thief.

There was complete silence. All eyes were fixed on Qaasim.

He continued:

— Let's wait till it's pitch dark, which it soon will be. Not a single candle shall be lit. Then we'll all walk from one end of the Alley to the other, so that suspicion doesn't settle on any one sector, and while we do that the one who has the money will be able to throw it down without giving himself away. Then we'll find the money and avoid a nasty battle.

The upholsterer seized Qaasim's arm in desperate entreaty and shouted:

— A good solution; accept it for my sake!

Someone echoed this:

— A sensible solution, young man!

Someone else called:

— A chance for the thief to save himself and save the Alley!

A woman whooped with joy. The people looked from one to another of the three strongmen, half hopeful and half afraid. But each of them was too proud and haughty to be the first to announce his acceptance. The people waited and wondered whether reason would prevail or whether the cudgels would fall and the blood would flow. Then there came a voice they all knew: 'Look here!' Every head jerked round in its direction. There stood Guzzler, Strongman of the Alley, not far from his house. Silence fell, and everyone hung on his words. He said contemptuously:

— Accept the plan, you vagabonds! If you weren't such idiots you wouldn't have to be saved by a shepherd boy.

A murmur of relief ran through the crowd, and there were more whoops of joy. Qaasim's heart pounded. He looked at Qamar's house, feeling certain that her dark eyes were gazing at him from one of the two windows that overlooked the road. A glow of happiness filled him, and he felt the pleasure of a great triumph such as he had never known before. Everyone was waiting for night, looking now towards the sky, now towards the desert, following the gradual darkening. Landmarks disappeared; faces blurred; people became shapes. The two paths into the desert on either side of the Great House were swallowed up in the darkness.

At last the figures began to move and walked up to the Great House and then hurried down towards Gemalia. Then they all went back to their own sectors. Guzzler shouted: 'Lights on!' The first to appear was in Qamar's house, in the Desert Rats' sector. Then the lanterns were lit on the barrows, and the lamps in the cafes, and the Alley came back to life. People began searching the ground, and soon the cry went up: 'Here's the wallet!' Fanjari rushed straight over, seized the wallet and counted the money, then hurried off to Gemalia, taking no notice of anyone or anything and leaving in his wake a tumult of laughter and shouting. Qaasim found himself the focus of attention, the center for congratulations, jokes and commentaries.

When Qaasim went with Hassan and Saadiq to the Desert Rats' cafe that evening, Omnibus greeted him with a smile of welcome, and called:

— A hookah for Qaasim on my account!

6 8 \*

His face flushed, his eyes shining, his expression open and his heart joyful, Qaasim went into Qamar's courtyard to collect

the ewe, calling out a warning to wear veils. He was untethering Grace from the foot of the stair when he heard the door creaking open, and her voice saying:

— Good morning!

He gave a heartfelt reply:

— A very good morning to you, madam!

— What you did for our Alley yesterday was a great good.

His heart pounded.

— God was my guide.

She spoke in admiring tones:

— You've taught us that wisdom is better than strongman methods.

'And your affection is better than wisdom,' he thought to himself. He said:

— You're very kind.

There was a smile in her voice as she said:

— We saw you shepherding the people as you shepherd your flock. Goodbye and bless you!

He set off with Grace, and, with every tenement-house he passed, he added a billy goat or a nanny goat or a ram or a ewe to the procession. Everyone greeted him. Even the strongmen, who had always ignored him, returned his salutations. He followed the long file of sheep and goats up the path by the wall of the Great House on his way to the desert. He was met by the burning heat of the sun, which was just up over Muqattam, and by warm puffs of morning wind. At the foot of the Jebel could be seen some shepherds. A man in tattered clothes passed him, playing a bamboo flute. In the cloudless bowl of sky kites circled. Every breath of air he took was pure and clean. He imagined the great Jebel must contain hidden treasures, hopes and promises. His gaze roamed over the desert with a strange satisfaction and his heart was light with joy. He began to sing:

Dear love from Upper Egypt's land,  
Your name is tattooed on my hand.

His gaze wandered over the rock of Qadri and Hind, and the places where Humaam and Rifaa had been killed, and where Gebelaawi and Gebel had met. Here were the sun and the Jebel and the sands, majesty and love and death, and a heart in which love was dawning. But he wondered about the meaning of all this, about what had passed and what was to pass, about the Alley with its warring factions and its feuding strongmen, and about the stories that each cafe heard in a different form.

A little before noon he drove his flock to Muqattam Bazaar, and sat down in Yahiaa's hut. The old man asked:

— What's this about what you did yesterday in the Alley?

Qaasim sipped his tea to hide his embarrassment. The old man went on:

— It would have been better to let them fight it out and all kill each other.

Qaasim said, without raising his eyes:

— You're only saying that.

— Avoid your admirers or you'll provoke the strongmen.

— Could somebody like me provoke them?

The old man sighed:

— Who could have imagined that anybody would betray Rifaa?

Qaasim was amazed.

— What do I have in common with the great Rifaa?

When he stood to go, the old man's parting words were:

— Always keep my amulet.

In the afternoon he was sitting in the shade of Hind's Rock, when he heard Sakeena's voice calling 'Grace!' He leapt up and went round the rock to find Qamar's maid standing by the ewe's head, fondling its wool. He greeted her with a smile and she said in her husky voice:

— I've been on an errand to Derrasa and I took this short cut home.

— But it's a hot way to come.

She laughed.

— And that's why I'm going to rest a little in the shade of the rock.

They sat down together in the shade where he had left his staff. Sakeena said:

— When I saw what you did yesterday I was sure your mother must have prayed for you before she died.

He asked with a smile:

— And you, don't you pray for me?

She dissembled a cunning glance.

— For a man like you I pray for a wife from a good family.

He laughed.

— Whoever would be satisfied with a shepherd boy?

— Good fortune works wonders. Today you are looked up to like the strongmen without having shed any blood.

— I swear your words are sweet as honey.

She looked at him with her languid eyes.

— Shall I show you a wonderful path?

A sudden agitation overcame him.

— Please!

With a maid's simplicity she said:

— Try your luck and propose to the lady of our sector.

Everything looked suddenly different.

— Who do you mean, Sakeena?

— Don't pretend you don't know who I mean; there's only one lady in our sector.

— Madam Qamar?!

— Who else?!

His voice trembled.

— Her husband was an important man, and I'm just a shepherd.

— But when fortune smiles everything smiles with it, even poverty.

He said, almost to himself:

— Won't my proposal annoy her?

Sakeena stood up.

— Nobody knows when women will be pleased and when they will be annoyed; trust in God. (Then, as she was going:) Take care of yourself!

He turned his face towards the sky and shut his eyes as though overcome by fatigue.

6 9 \* \* \* \* \*

Zakaria stared at Qaasim's face in amazement, as did his wife and Hassan. They were resting in the corridor in front of their flat after supper. The uncle said:

— Don't talk like that. I thought you were a model of sense and honor in spite of your poverty — of our poverty. What's happened to your common sense?

His aunt's eyes were filled with a hungry desire for information. Qaasim said:

— I've been encouraged; her maid's the one who opened the door for me.

— Her maid?!

The words burst from his aunt and her eyes begged for more. His uncle let out a short laugh that betrayed his confusion.

— Perhaps you've misunderstood.

Qaasim spoke quietly to hide his emotion:

— Oh no, Uncle!

His aunt cried out:

— I see! If the maid has said it the mistress has said it.

Hassan spoke out of his great love for his cousin:

— There's no man like Qaasim.

Zakaria shook his head and muttered to himself: 'Best sweet potatoes! Roast sweet potatoes!' Then he said:

— But you don't possess a single piaster!

His wife said:

— He grazed her ewe, as she very well knows. (Then, laughing:) Mind you never kill a ewe, Qaasim, in honor of Grace!

Hassan said thoughtfully:

— Mr Uwayss the grocer is Madam Qamar's uncle and the richest man in our sector. He'll be our in-law, just as Omnibus is our relative. How splendid!

His mother said:

— Madam Qamar has connections with Lady Ameena, the Trustee's wife. Her late husband was Ameena's relative.

Qaasim said uneasily:

— That will make things more difficult.

Zakaria spoke with sudden enthusiasm, realizing the status he would get from the proposed match:

— Talk as you did on the day of that business with the upholsterer. You're bold and sensible. We'll go along together to the lady to take up the matter with her, and then we must talk to Uwayss. If we began with Uwayss he'd send us to the madhouse.

Things went as Zakaria had planned. And so Uwayss sat down in the parlor in Qamar's house, waiting for her and playing with his huge moustache to hide his confusion. Qamar came in, wearing a modest dress, with a brown scarf over her head. She shook hands graciously with him and sat down, a look of calm determination in her eyes. Uwayss said:

— You bewilder me, my girl! Not long ago you refused the hand of my manager Mr Mursi, on the grounds that he was not good enough for you; and now you're satisfied with a shepherd boy!

She blushed.

— Uncle, he is indeed a poor man, but everybody in the sector can witness to his goodness and his family's.

Uwayss frowned.

— Yes, just as we say a servant is trustworthy or clean. Being eligible is something quite different.

Qamar said politely:

— Show me one man in our Alley as courteous as him; show me just one man who doesn't boast of some act of trickery or meanness or brutality.

The grocer nearly burst with rage, but he remembered that he was talking not just to his niece but to the woman who had invested so much money in his business, so he said:

— Qamar, if you wanted I could marry you to any strongman in the Alley. Guzzler himself would have you if you agreed to share him with his three other wives.

— I don't like those strongmen, nor that kind of man. My father was a good man, like you. He suffered so much from their cruelty that I inherited his hatred of them. But Qaasim has a good character. He only lacks money, of which I have plenty.

Uwayss sighed and looked at her for a long time, then said as a last resort:

— I have a message from Lady Ameena, the Trustee's wife. She said to me: 'Tell Qamar to be sensible; she's heading for a mistake that would make us the gossip of the whole Alley.'

Qamar said sharply:

— I don't care about her advice. It's a pity she doesn't know who it is that gets talked about!

— My dear niece, she's concerned for your reputation.

— Don't you believe it, Uncle; she doesn't care about us or even remember us. Since my husband died ten years ago, she's never given me a thought.

Her uncle hesitated a while in obvious embarrassment, then spoke with annoyance:

— She also said it's foolish for a woman to marry beneath her, especially if for some reason he's been visiting her house.

Qamar jumped up, livid with rage, and shouted:

— Let her hold her tongue! I was born and bred in this Alley



and married and widowed here; everybody knows me and speaks well of me.

— Of course, my girl, of course; she's only pointing out what might be said.

— Uncle, let's forget about her ladyship; she'll only give us a headache. I tell you as my uncle that I've agreed to marry Qaasim, and it'll be with your approval and in your presence.

Uwayss was silent, deep in thought. It was impossible to stop her, and it would be dreadful to anger her to the point of her withdrawing her money from his business. He just stared at the floor in misery and confusion. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was an indistinct mumble. Qamar watched him with a steady, patient gaze.

7 0 \* \* \* \* \*

Zakaria gave his nephew some money — mostly borrowed — to prepare for the wedding. He told him:

— If only I could cover you with money, Qaasim! Your father was a generous brother; I'll never forget how good he was to me on my wedding day.

Qaasim bought a jellaba, some underclothes, a brocaded turban, some bright yellow pumps, a cane and a snuff-box. Soon after dawn he went to the bath house and steamed himself, then plunged into the cold pool and had a massage. Then he washed and perfumed himself, and finally stretched out in his cubicle sipping tea and dreaming of bliss.

Qamar undertook to provide the wedding feast. She got the roof of her house ready to receive the women guests, booked a famous woman singer and hired the best cook in the neighborhood. A marquee was erected in the courtyard for the male guests and the musicians. Qaasim's family and friends

came, and the men of the sector led by Omnibus. The ale flowed freely, and twenty hookahs went round, so that the smoke dimmed the lights and the air was heavy with the scent of the very best hashish. Every corner echoed the whoops of joy and the cheering and laughter.

Zakaria was the worse for drink and began boasting:

— We're a noble family, and we go back a long way.

Uwayss hid his annoyance. He was sitting between Omnibus and Zakaria. He said tersely:

— It's enough that you're related to Omnibus.

Zakaria shouted drunkenly:

— A thousand greetings to Omnibus!

The band at once played for Omnibus who smiled smugly and waved his hand. In the past he had been annoyed by Zakaria harping on his distant relationship to him, but his feelings had begun to change when he heard that Qaasim was to marry Qamar; indeed, he had already made up his mind not to exempt Qaasim from paying protection money. Zakaria went on:

— Qaasim is well liked; is there anyone who doesn't like him?

He detected a certain annoyance in Omnibus's look and added:

— But for his wisdom on the day of the theft, nobody would have saved the skulls of Rifaa's people and Gebel's from the cudgel of our Omnibus.

Omnibus beamed, and Uwayss hastily agreed with Zakaria:

— You're right, by the God of Heaven and Earth!

The musician sang: 'The hour of love's delight draws near.' and Qaasim's emotion grew more intense. Saadiq as usual understood his feelings and fetched him a fresh mug of drink, which he drained to the dregs, still holding the hookah in his hand. Hassan had drunk too much, and the marquee was dancing before his eyes. Uwayss saw this and said to Zakaria:

— Hassan's drinking more than's good for him at his age.

Zakaria stood up, mug in hand, and said to his son:

— Hassan, don't drink like that.

He replied by emptying his mug down his throat, spluttering with laughter. Uwayss was infuriated and said to himself: 'But for my niece's foolishness, what you've drunk tonight would cost you all that you possess.'

In the middle of the night, Qaasim was summoned to his procession and the male guests assembled at Freewheeler's cafe, headed by Omnibus, leader and protector of the procession. The Alley outside the house was crowded with urchins and beggars and cats, drawn by the smell of the cooking. Qaasim sat down between Hassan and Saadiq. Freewheeler greeted them, and said to his serving boy:

— What a happy evening! Freewheeler's own hookah for the young men.

Then everyone who could afford to paid for a hookah for the company. Saadiq brought out from the breast of his jellaba a lump the size of a marble. He turned it between finger and thumb under the lamp and spoke in Qaasim's ear:

— Mixed with something sweet. And what an effect!

Qaasim took it and put it in his mouth, smiling, already red-eyed from drink. Saadiq went on:

— Chew it first, then suck it.

The singers arrived, following the pipers and drummers. Omnibus stood up and commanded:

— Let the procession commence!

'Knuckles' led, wearing only a jellaba, dancing barefoot and balancing a cudgel on the top of his head. Behind him went the singers and Omnibus, then the bridegroom's party, Qaasim and his two friends, flanked by torch-bearers. The singer began in a sweet voice:

What is my one-oh? One's for my eyes-oh.

What is my two-oh? Two's for my hands-oh.

What is my three-oh? Three's for my feet-oh.

When love did snare me, 'twas through these eyes-oh.  
When I did wave-oh, 'twas with these hands-oh.  
When I did reach her, 'twas by these feet-oh.

There were drunken 'ohs' and 'ahs' as the procession made its way to Gemalia and Beit el Qadi and then to the Hussein Mosque and Derrasa. The night slipped away, unnoticed by the merry-makers, and the procession returned, as it had set out, gaily and happily. It was the first bridegroom's procession in the Alley ever to pass off without incident. Not a cudgel was raised, not a drop of blood spilt. The entertainment ended with Zakaria seizing his stick and dancing, twirling the stick, swaying proudly, twisting and turning now his head, now his chest, now his waist, his movements now aggressive, now erotic. When he brought his dance to an end with a final spin, there was cheering and clapping.

Then Qaasim went in to the women and found Qamar sitting at the head of the two rows of women guests. He went to her, accompanied by whoops of delight, and took her by the hand. She stood up and they walked together behind a belly-dancer who seemed to be giving a last lesson, until the two of them were enfolded by the bridal chamber. The closing of the door shut out the world, on which silence fell, except for a few whispers or light footsteps. In a glance Qaasim took in the bed with its pink linen, the comfortable couch, the patterned carpet, things such as he had never imagined. Then his eyes rested on the woman, who sat taking off her jewelry. She looked beautifully plump, soft and sweet. The walls seemed to shimmer with light, and he saw everything with confused excitement and boundless happiness. He drew close to her in his silk jellaba, glowing with the combined effects of drink and hashish, and stood looking down at her, while she dropped her eyes expectantly. He took her face between his hands and was about to say something, but then seemed to change his mind. He bent over till her hair stirred under his breath, and kissed

her forehead and her cheeks. From behind the door the smell of incense reached his nose, and he heard Sakeena's voice murmuring a prayer.

7 1 \* \* \* \* \*

The days and nights passed in love and companionship, joy and peace of mind. How sweet is happiness in this world! Qaasim went out of the house only because he would have been ashamed for it to be said that he had not left it since his wedding. His heart was sated with every kind of pleasure, and he enjoyed all the affection, tenderness and care that he wished for. He liked things to be clean, and here he saw everything tidy, breathed a perfumed atmosphere and looked upon a wife who always appeared before him immaculate and with adoration on her radiant face. One day as they were sitting side by side in the drawing room, she said to him:

— You're gentle as a lamb. You don't demand or boss or scold, though everything in the house is yours.

He played with a lock of her henna-red hair.

— I've reached a state in which I have no demands to make.

She squeezed his hand hard.

— My heart told me from the beginning that you were the best man in our sector. But sometimes you're so polite that you seem like a stranger in your own house, and that hurts me you know.

— You're talking to a man whose good fortune carried him from the burning sands to the paradise of this house.

She tried to look serious but couldn't help smiling.

— Don't imagine you're going to have an easy time in my house. One of these days you'll take my uncle's place managing my property. Don't you think you'll find it a burden?

He laughed.

— It'll be child's play compared with minding sheep.

So he took over the management of her property, which lay scattered about between the Desert Rats' sector and Gemalia. Handling the difficult tenants called for skill, but with his flexibility he coped with things in the best possible way. The job only took up a few days each month and the rest of his time was free, something he was not used to. Perhaps the greatest triumph he won in his new life was earning the confidence of Uwayss, his wife's uncle. Qaasim treated him from the outset with respect and attention, and volunteered to help him with some of his work, so that Uwayss grew to like him and returned his friendship and respect. He could not help saying frankly one day:

— Sometimes we get things quite wrong. You know, I used to think you were one of the Alley's scoundrels, and that you were taking advantage of my niece's passion to get her money. I thought you'd waste it on a life of pleasure or you'd use it to marry another woman. But you've proved that you're wise and trustworthy and that she chose well.

In Freewheeler's cafe Saadiq used to laugh merrily and say to Qaasim:

— Order us a hookah on your account; that's what important men like you are meant to do.

And Hassan used to say:

— Why don't you take us to a bar?

But he answered seriously:

— I have no money except what I earn by managing my wife's property, or by jobs I do for Uwayss.

Saadiq was amazed.

— A loving woman is a plaything in a man's hand.

Qaasim retorted angrily:

— Unless the man is also loving. You're just like everybody else, Saadiq; you only see love as a means of exploitation.

Saadiq smiled in embarrassment and said apologetically:

— That's how weak men think. I'm not as strong as Hassan, or even as strong as you, so I've no hope of being a strongman; and in our Alley it's either hit or be hit.

Qaasim softened his tone, seeming to accept the excuse.

— What a strange place! You're right, Saadiq; our Alley's in a sad state.

Hassan smiled.

— If only it was what people outside think it is!

Saadiq agreed with him:

— They say Gebelaawi Alley is the one with real strongmen.

Qaasim's face filled with sadness. He stole a glance at Omnibus's place at the front of the cafe, to be sure he was out of earshot, and said:

— It's as if they'd never heard of our misery.

— People worship power, even its victims.

Qaasim thought for a while, then said:

— But remember there's the power that does good, like Gebel's and Rifaa's, not the power of thugs and crooks.

Taza, the bard, was reciting his tale:

Adham yelled at him:

— Carry your brother.

Qadri groaned:

— I can't.

— You were able to kill him...

— I can't, Father.

— Don't call me 'father'; a man who kills his brother has no father, no mother, no brothers.

— I can't.

He tightened his grip on him and said:

— A murderer must carry his victim.

Then the bard took his rebec and began singing. At that point Saadiq said to Qaasim:

— Today you're living the life that Adham dreamed of. Disagreement clouded Qaasim's face.

— But at every step I meet some cause of grief and destroyer of pleasure. Adham only dreamed of leisure and plenty as the means to pure happiness.

They were all silent for a while, till Hassan said frankly:

— This pure happiness can't ever exist.

Qaasim said, with a dreamy look in his eyes:

— Unless the things that lead to it are plentiful for everybody.

He thought about his situation: how he was graced with money and leisure but how the misery of others spoilt his happiness. Yet here he was, meekly paying his protection money to Omnibus. That was why he loved filling his leisure time with work, as if to escape from himself or from this cruel Alley. Perhaps Adham, if he had got what he longed for in such circumstances, would have been oppressed by his happiness and would have longed to work.

At that time Qamar began to show strange cravings and Sakeena said they were the first signs of pregnancy. Qamar could hardly believe it. Her hope of a baby had been just a dream, so she was beside herself with joy. Qaasim was delighted and spread the news wherever he had friends — in his uncle's house and in the tinner's shop, in Uwayss's grocery and in Yahiaa's hut. Qamar became excessively concerned about herself. She said to Qaasim in a voice full of meaning:

— I must avoid any sort of upset.

His smile showed that he understood what she meant.

— Sakeena must take over the house for you, and for me it'll have to be sweet patience.

She kissed him, and said with child-like happiness:

— I'm so grateful I could kiss the ground.

He set off across the desert to visit Yahiaa, but he stopped by Hind's Rock, went round to the shade and sat down. In the distance he saw a shepherd grazing his flock. His heart filled



with sympathy and he wished he could say to him: 'Being a strongman isn't enough to make a man happy; in fact, it doesn't make a man happy at all.' But wouldn't it be better to say it to the strongmen like Guzzler and Omnibus? How he felt for the people of the Alley; they dreamed of happiness, but time scattered their dreams with the garbage. Why not enjoy the happiness he had been granted and shut his eyes to what surrounded him? Perhaps this question had baffled Gebel and later Rifaa. It was open to both of them to enjoy lifelong ease and tranquillity. What is the secret of this pain that pursues us?

Thus he pondered as he gazed at the sky over the Jebel, a pure blue sky apart from a few flecks of cloud like white rose petals. He lowered his head wearily and his glance fell upon something moving. It was a scorpion hurrying towards a stone. He lifted his stick quickly, brought it down on the creature and squashed it. He looked at it for a while in disgust, then stood up and went on his way.

7 2 \* \* \* \* \*

Qaasim's house welcomed a new life and the poor people of the sector joined in the celebrations. The baby was called Ihsaan after Qaasim's mother whom he had never seen. With her birth the house became used to tears and messes and sleepless nights, but she also brought joy and satisfaction. But why did the baby's father sometimes seem far away, staring into space as if weighed down by cares? Qamar became deeply uneasy, and asked him one time:

— Are you worried about your health?

— I'm fine.

— But you're not your usual self.

He lowered his eyes.

— God knows what's wrong with me.

She hesitated before asking:

— Is there something about me you don't like?

He denied it firmly.

— Nobody's dearer to me than you; not even our little girl.

She sighed.

— Perhaps it's the Evil Eye.

He smiled.

— Perhaps!

She recited a charm and burnt incense for him and prayed for him in her heart. One night she was wakened by Ihsaan crying and did not find him beside her. At first she thought he had not yet come back from the cafe, but when the baby stopped crying, she noticed a deep silence such as normally fell only some time after the cafes had closed. Doubts assailed her, and she got up to look out of the window. She saw that complete darkness covered the sleeping Alley. She went back to the baby, who had started crying again, and fed her. She wondered what could have kept him till this hour for the first time in their life together. Ihsaan fell asleep and she left the bed to go to the window again.

Not hearing a sound, she went to the hall and woke Sakeena. The maid sat up drowsily then jumped up in alarm. Her mistress told her why she had come and Sakeena decided at once to go to Zakaria to enquire about her master. Qamar asked herself what could have kept him at his uncle's till such an hour, and she knew at once that the answer left no hope. Still she did not stop Sakeena from going, perhaps because she hoped for something unexpected or because she wanted at least to ask for his uncle's help in her distress. When Sakeena had gone, Qamar wondered again what had kept him; could it have anything to do with the change that had come over him? Might it be connected with his evening walks in the desert?

Zakaria and Hassan woke in alarm at Sakeena's calls. Hassan

said Qaasim had not joined him that evening. Zakaria asked when his nephew had left home, and Sakeena answered that it had been early in the afternoon. The three of them then set out; Hassan went to the neighboring tenement-house and came back with Saadiq, who said anxiously:

— It will soon be dawn. Where can he have gone?

Hassan said:

— Perhaps he fell asleep out at the Rock.

Zakaria told the maid to go back to her mistress and tell her they were setting out to look for him in the most likely places. The three men made for the desert. They felt the dampness of the autumn night and wound their turbans more tightly round their heads. They walked along, guided by the crescent of the waning moon, which had appeared in a star-studded patch of sky revealed by a gap in the clouds. Hassan shouted in a piercing voice: 'Qaasim... Qaasim!', and the cliffs of Muqattam threw back the echo. They hurried on to Hind's Rock, round which they walked searching the ground, but they found no trace of him. Zakaria asked in a thick voice:

— Where can he have gone? He isn't a rake, and he doesn't have any enemies.

Hassan murmured in despair:

— And there's nothing else that would make him run away.

Saadiq remembered that there were bandits in the desert, and his heart sank, but he said nothing. Zakaria asked without conviction:

— Could he be with Mr Yahiaa?

The two young men both let out what sounded like a desperate appeal:

— Mr Yahiaa!

But Zakaria mused unhappily:

— What could make him stay there?

They walked in silence to the edge of the desert, overcome by dark thoughts. Far away they heard a cock crow, but the sky grew no lighter because of the thick cloud. Saadiq moaned:

'Where are you, Qaasim?' The mission seemed hopeless, but they walked on till they stood in front of Yahiaa's hut which was sunk in sleep. Zakaria went up and banged on the door with his fist, till Yahiaa's voice was heard:

— Who's there?

The door opened and his figure appeared, leaning on his stick. Zakaria apologized:

— Sorry to disturb you! We've come to ask about Qaasim.

Yahiaa said calmly:

— I've been expecting you.

Their spirits revived for the first time, but at once they became anxious again. Zakaria asked:

— Do you have news of him?

— He's inside, asleep.

— Is he all right?

— I hope so. (Then, trying to sound natural:) He's all right now. But some of my neighbors, coming back from Otouf, found him at Hind's Rock, unconscious. They carried him to me and I splashed perfume on his face till he came round. But he seemed exhausted and I left him to rest, and soon he was fast asleep.

Zakaria said reproachfully:

— If only you'd sent word to us.

He said very gently:

— They came in the middle of the night; there was nobody I could send.

Saadiq said anxiously:

— He must be ill.

The old man said:

— He'll be better in the morning.

Hassan said:

— Let's wake him, to be sure about him.

But Yahiaa was firm:

— We must wait till he wakes by himself.

7 3 \*

He was sitting up in bed, his back propped against the pillow, the blanket pulled right up over his chest, and his eyes were thoughtful. Qamar sat at the foot of the bed, holding Ihsaan in her arms. The baby was waving her arms and making strange little noises whose meaning nobody could tell. A fine thread of smoke rose from the incense burning in the middle of the room, twirling and breaking and spreading, seeming to divulge a fragrant secret. Qaasim stretched his hand out to the bedside table, took his cup of caraway infusion, sipped from it slowly, and put it back, leaving only the dregs. His wife talked to the baby and played with her. But the anxious looks she stole at her husband showed that her attention to the baby was only to hide her feelings. At last she asked him:

— How are you now?

He turned his head involuntarily towards the closed door, then looked back at her and said quietly:

— What I have is not an illness.

She looked bewildered.

— I'm glad to hear it, but for God's sake tell me what it is.

He seemed to hesitate for a while, then said:

— I don't know. No, that's not what I should say. I know the whole thing, but... The fact is, I'm afraid the easy days are over.

Ihsaan suddenly began to cry. Qamar quickly gave her a nipple, then looked at him, searching anxiously to know more.

— Why?

He sighed and pointed to his heart, saying:

— I have a big secret here, too big for me to bear alone.

She grew still more anxious and said:

— Tell me about it, Qaasim.

He sat back a little, his eyes serious and determined.

— I'll reveal it for the first time; you're the first to hear it. But you must believe me; I'm telling nothing but the truth. Yesterday evening something amazing happened out there at the

foot of Hind's Rock when I was alone in the desert night.

He swallowed hard. She encouraged him with a warm look. He went on:

— I was sitting watching the crescent moon rise. Soon it was hidden by cloud and it went so dark that I thought of getting up when suddenly a voice spoke close to me: 'Good evening, Qasim!' I trembled at the shock. No noise or movement had warned of it. I looked up and saw the shape of a man standing a step away from where I sat. I couldn't make out his face but I could see his white turban and the cloak wrapped round him. I hid my confusion and said: 'Good evening. Who are you?' He answered, and what do you think he said?

Qamar nodded anxiously.

— Tell me; I can't wait to hear.

— He said to me: 'I am Qindeel.' I was surprised and said: 'I beg your pardon, I...' but he interrupted me: 'I'm Qindeel, servant of Gebelaawi.'

She exclaimed:

— What did he say?

— He said: 'I'm Qindeel, servant of Gebelaawi.'

She was so amazed that her nipple slipped from Ihsaan's mouth. The baby's face puckered up ready to cry, but Qamar gave her back the nipple. She grew pale.

— Qindeel, the Founder's servant?! Nobody knows anything about the Founder's servants. The Trustee himself prepares the things needed at the Great House, and then his servants leave them to be collected from the garden by the one of the Founder's servants.

— Yes, this is all the Alley knows. But that's what he said to me.

— And you believed him?

— I stood up at once, partly out of politeness and partly to be ready to defend myself if need be. I asked him how I was to know he was telling the truth. He said calmly: 'Follow me if you like, and watch me go back to the Great House.' My mind was

set at rest and I said to myself: 'I'll believe him so that he'll explain what he's doing.' I didn't hide my delight at meeting him and I asked him how our Ancestor is and what he does...

Qamar interrupted him in astonishment.

— All this passed between you?

— Yes! For God's sake, listen! He told me our Ancestor is well, but he said no more than that. Then I asked whether he knows what goes on in the Alley. He answered that he does know everything and is aware of every event, great or small, and that because of this he'd sent him to me.

— To you!

Qaasim frowned his annoyance.

— That's what he said. It was obvious that I was astounded, but he took no notice and said: 'Perhaps he chose you because of your wisdom on the day of the theft and your loyalty to your family. He informs you that all the people of the Alley are equally his children, that the Trust is equally their inheritance, that strongmen are an evil to be got rid of and that the Alley must become an extension of the Great House.' Silence fell, and I seemed to have lost the power of speech. Looking up at his head I saw the clouds roll back to reveal the crescent moon in a clear patch of sky. I asked him politely: 'Why does he inform me of this?' 'So that you yourself can bring it about.'

— You!

He continued in a trembling voice:

— That's what he said. I was going to ask him to explain, but he took leave of me and went off. I followed him and thought I saw him climb to the top of the wall overlooking the desert up a very long ladder, or something like that. I stood in amazement. Then I went back to where I had been, meaning to go to Yahiaa's, but I fainted and only came round in his hut.

There was silence in the room again, and Qamar did not take her astonished eyes off his face. Ihsaan fell asleep as she sucked, and her head rested on her mother's arm. Qamar laid her gently on the bed, then looked again at her husband with

anxious eyes and a pale face. From the Alley came the harsh voice of Omnibus insulting someone, whose cries and groans announced the blows that fell on him. Then Omnibus's voice was heard again as he went off uttering warnings and threats. His victim shouted in a voice of anger and despair: 'Gebelaawi!'

Qaasim was upset by the way his wife looked at him, and wondered: 'What can she think of me?' And she said to herself: 'He's a truthful man who's never lied to me; and why should he make up such a story? He's honest and didn't want my money, though it would have been safe to get it; why should he want the Trust's money, which is so dangerous to get? I wonder whether the easy days are really over?' She asked:

— Am I the first person you've told your secret to?

He nodded. She went on:

— Qaasim, our lives are one, and I care for you more than for myself. This secret of yours is dangerous, and its consequences can't be hidden from you. But try hard to remember; did it really happen or was it a dream?

He said with conviction and some indignation:

— It really happened. It was no dream.

— They found you unconscious?

— That was after the meeting.

— Perhaps you've mixed things up.

He groaned, suffering torment.

— I've mixed nothing up. The meeting was as plain as day.

She hesitated a little, then asked:

— How do we know he's really the Founder's servant and his messenger to you? Why not just someone high on dope like so many men in our Alley?

He said stubbornly:

— I saw him climb over the wall of the Great House.

She sighed.

— There isn't a ladder in the Alley that would reach half-way up the wall.

— But I saw it.



She was caught like a mouse in a trap but refused to give in. She asked:

— Had you taken hashish?

He frowned sadly.

— You don't believe me, Qamar, and I can't force you to believe me.

She was upset.

— It's just that I'm afraid for you; you know what I mean. I'm afraid for you and our home, for our daughter and our happiness. I am wondering why he's fixed on you, and why he can't carry out his wishes himself when he's the master of the Trust and the lord over all.

He in his turn asked:

— And why did he go to Gebel and Rifaa?

Her eyes widened, and the corners of her mouth tightened, like those of a child about to cry. She lowered her eyes in dismay. He said:

— You don't believe me, and I can't force you to believe me.

She burst into tears and abandoned herself to them as if to escape from her thoughts. Qaasim leaned over, took her hand and drew her towards him. He asked gently:

— Why are you crying?

She looked at him through her tears, and her words were interrupted by sobs:

— Because I believe you. Yes, I believe you. I'm afraid the easy days are over. (Then, in a low, anxious voice:) What are you going to do?

7 4 \* \* \* \* \*

The atmosphere in the drawing room was tense and anxious. Zakaria frowned, deep in thought. Uwayss kept fiddling

with his moustache. Hassan seemed to be talking to himself. Saadiq could not take his eyes off the face of his friend Qaasim. Qamar was in the corner of the room praying to God to guide them all on the right path. The coffee cups were empty, and two flies buzzed round them. Qamar called Sakeena, who came, picked up the tray and left, closing the door again behind her. Uwayss puffed and said:

— What a nerve-racking secret!

A dog squealed in the Alley, as though hit by a stone or stick. A date-seller cried his wares in a loud, sing-song voice. An old woman cried out wretchedly: 'Oh God, deliver us from this life!' Zakaria turned to Uwayss and said:

— Mr Uwayss, you're the most important of us. Tell us what you think.

Uwayss looked from Zakaria to Qaasim and said:

— I tell you honestly, Qaasim's a real man — and what a man! But his story's made my head spin.

Saadiq had been bursting to speak for some time:

— He tells the truth. I challenge anybody to think of a lie he's told. He's to be trusted; I swear it to you by my mother's grave.

Hassan said enthusiastically:

— That goes for me too. He'll always find me by his side.

Qaasim smiled for the first time, gratefully, studying his well built cousin with admiration. But Zakaria gave his son a critical look, and said:

— This business is no game. Think of our lives and our safety.

Uwayss nodded his agreement.

— You're right. Nobody's ever heard anything like what we've heard today.

Qaasim said:

— They did. They heard as much and more from Gebel and Rifaa.

Uwayss was shocked and stared at him disapprovingly.

— Do you think you're like Gebel and Rifaa?

Qaasim looked down unhappily and Qamar gazed at him anxiously. She said:

— Uncle! Who knows how these things happen?

Uwayss fiddled with his moustache again. Zakaria said:

— What's the good of his thinking he's like Gebel and Rifaa? Rifaa died the worst of deaths, and Gebel would have been killed if his people hadn't united behind him. And who do you have, Qaasim? Have you forgotten that our sector is called the Desert Rats' and that most of its people are beggars or paupers?

Saadiq said forcefully:

— Don't forget that Gebelaawi has chosen him in preference to all others, including the strongmen. I don't suppose he'll abandon him when things get difficult.

Zakaria said angrily:

— That's what they said about Rifaa, and Rifaa was killed a few yards from Gebelaawi's house.

Qamar warned them:

— Don't talk too loud!

Uwayss stole a glance at Qaasim, thinking: 'How amazing, this shepherd that my niece has made into a lord! I admit he's truthful and trustworthy, but is that enough to make a Gebel or a Rifaa of him? Do great men come so easily? And what would happen if his dreams came true?' Out loud he said:

— It's plain that Qaasim won't listen to our warnings. I wonder what he wants. Is he worried that our sector alone remains without a share of the Trust? Qaasim, do you want to be the strongman and trustee of our sector?

Qaasim looked annoyed.

— He didn't tell me that. He just said all the people of the Alley are equally his children, that the Trust is equally their inheritance, and that strongmen are an evil.

Saadiq's eyes shone, as did Hassan's. Uwayss was taken aback, but Zakaria said:

— Do you know what that means?

Uwayss said furiously:

— Tell him!

— You're challenging the Trustee's power and the cudgels of Guzzler, Bruiser, Pilgrim Grim and Omnibus.

Qamar went pale. Qaasim said quietly:

— That's right.

Uwayss laughed, to the annoyance of Qaasim, Saadiq and Hassan. Zakaria took no notice but continued:

— It'll be the death of us all. We'll be trodden on like ants. Nobody will believe you. They didn't believe the man who met the Founder, nor the man who heard his voice and talked to him; how can they believe a man he's sent one of his servants to?

Uwayss said in a new tone:

— Never mind what the stories say. Nobody saw the meeting of Gebelaawi and Gebel, nor Gebelaawi and Rifaa. Those accounts are handed down, but there were no witnesses. And yet they brought benefits to the people concerned, and Gebel's sector became respectable, and so did Rifaa's. Our sector has a right to the same thing, and why not? We're all descended from that man who is hidden away in his Great House. But we must handle the thing sensibly and carefully. Think of your own sector, Qaasim; stop this talk of children and equality and what's right and what's wrong. It'll be easy to get Omnibus on our side as he's your relative. We could make an agreement with him to let us have a share of the revenue.

Qaasim scowled.

— Mr Uwayss, you're in a different world from us. I don't want any bargain or any share of the revenue. I've set my heart on carrying out our Ancestor's wishes as I was told them.

Zakaria groaned:

— Oh my God!

Qaasim went on frowning. He thought of his times of sadness and solitude, and of his conversations with his teacher

Yahiaa. He thought of how relief had come to him through a servant he had never met before, and of how new concerns were appearing on the horizon. He thought of how Zakaria was interested only in safety and Uwayss in the revenue. Life would be good only when the horizon was faced, with all its concerns. He sighed and said:

— Uncle, I had to begin by consulting you all, but I'm not going to ask anything of you.

Saadiq clasped him by the hand.

— I'm with you.

Hassan clenched his fist.

— I'm with you too, in good times and bad.

Zakaria spoke sadly:

— Don't be deceived by the words of these young men. When the cudgels are lifted the bolt-holes will be full of people like them. And for whose sake are you risking death? There are only animals and vermin in our Alley. You have the means to live in ease and luxury; be sensible and enjoy life.

Qaasim wondered what the man was saying; it was as if he were listening to some of his own thoughts: 'Your daughter, your wife, your home, yourself! But you've been chosen, as Gebel and Rifaa were; let your answer be like theirs.' He said:

— I thought for a long time, Uncle; then I chose my path.

Uwayss struck his hands together in dismay and exclaimed:

— God Almighty! The strong will kill you and the weak will mock you.

Qamar looked in dismay from her own uncle to her husband's, upset by Qaasim's disappointment, and at the same time afraid of the consequences if he persisted in his views. She said to Uwayss:

— Uncle, you're the most important man round here; you could use your influence to help him.

Uwayss was exasperated.

— What do you want, Qamar? You have your money and your daughter and your husband; why should you care whether

the Trust is shared out to everybody or kept by the strongmen? We reckon that a man who aims to be a strongman is mad; what do you think of somebody who aims to be trustee of the whole Alley?

Qaasim was deeply hurt. He jumped up and said:

— I am not aiming at any such thing; I only want the good that our Ancestor wants.

Uwaysss tried to appease him with a forced smile.

— Where is this Ancestor? Let him come out, even if his servants have to carry him, and let him put into effect the Clauses of his Trust Deed as he wishes. Do you think anybody in the Alley, however powerful, could look the Founder in the eye if he spoke, or could raise a finger against him?

Zakaria added to this:

— And if the strongmen attack us, will he move an inch to help us, or even care what happens to us?

Qaasim said miserably:

— I haven't insisted on anybody believing me or backing me.

Zakaria went over to him and put his hand affectionately on his shoulder.

— Qaasim, you've been touched by the Evil Eye. I know these things. People have talked so much about your sense and your good luck that the Evil Eye has got you. Pray to God to save you from Satan. Realize that today you are one of the big men in our sector; if you want, you can go into business with some of your wife's money and enjoy great wealth. Give up your ideas and be content with the goods and pleasures God has given you.

Qaasim bowed his head in sorrow, then looked up at his uncle and said with amazing conviction:

— I wouldn't give up my ideas even if I was put in sole charge of the whole Trust.

7 5 \*

‘What are you going to do? How long are you going to think and wait? And what are you waiting for? As long as your relatives don’t believe you, who ever will believe you? What’s the use of being sad? What’s the point of sitting alone at the foot of Hind’s Rock? The stars don’t answer, nor the darkness, nor the moon. It seems you hope to meet the servant again; but what do you expect from him that’s new? You wander in the dark around the spot where it is said that your Ancestor met Gebel. You stand for hours beneath the great wall in the place where he is said to have spoken to Rifaa. But you have neither seen him nor heard his voice, nor has his servant returned. What are you going to do? That question will pursue you, as the desert sun pursues the shepherd. All the time it will rob you of your peace of mind, of the pleasure of good things. Gebel was alone, like you, and yet he triumphed; and Rifaa knew his path and followed it till he was killed, and then he triumphed. What are you going to do?’

Qamar said to him reproachfully:

— You neglect your lovely baby badly. She cries and you don’t comfort her; she plays and you don’t play with her.

He smiled at the little face, and it consoled him for his raging thoughts. He murmured:

— How sweet she is!

— Even when you’re sitting with us, you’re far away, as if we no longer belonged to your world.

He moved closer to her on the sofa and kissed her cheek, then covered the baby’s face with kisses. He said:

— Don’t you see that I need your sympathy?

— You have my whole heart, with all the sympathy and love it contains. But you must be merciful to yourself.

She handed him the little girl and he hugged her and began rocking her and listening to her crooning. Suddenly he said:

— If God grants me victory, I shan't bar women from sharing the Trust's income.

— But the Trust is just for men, not women.

He gazed into the baby's dark eyes.

— Our Ancestor told me through his servant that the Trust belongs to everybody. Half the people are women; it's amazing that the Alley doesn't honor them; but it shall honor them on the day that it honors the ideas of justice and mercy.

Qamar's eyes showed both love and anxiety, and she said to herself: 'He talks of victory; but where is this victory!' She longed to advise him to do what was safe and secure, but her courage failed her. She wondered what tomorrow held in store for them. Would she have the good fortune of Shafeeqa, Gebel's wife, or would she suffer the fate of Abda, Rifaa's mother? She trembled, and looked away so that he would not see anything in her eyes to alarm him.

When Saadiq and Hassan came to take him to the cafe, he proposed that they visit Yahiaa, so that he could present them to him properly. When they reached his hut they found him smoking his hookah, and the rich fragrance of hashish filled the air. They all sat down in the hallway of the hut, with the full moon shining down auspiciously through a skylight. Yahiaa looked in amazement at the three faces as if wondering, were these really the people who were going to turn the Alley upside down? He told Qaasim, as he had already done several times before:

— Mind nobody knows your secret before you're ready.

The delicious hookah went round. The moonshine from the skylight fell on Qaasim's head and touched Saadiq's shoulder, while the charcoals in the brazier glowed in the darkness. Qaasim asked:

— How can I prepare?

The old man laughed and said playfully:

— It's not right for somebody chosen by Gebelaawi to ask advice from an old man like me.



Silence fell, broken only by the gurgle of the hookah. Then Yahiaa said:

— You have your uncle and your wife's uncle. Now your own uncle will be neither a help nor a hindrance, but you could bring the other one over to your side if you gave him something to hope for.

— What hope can I give him?

— Promise him the trusteeship of the Desert Rats.

Saadiq said candidly:

— Nobody is to have any special share of the Trust's revenue; it's everybody's inheritance equally, as Gebelaawi said.

Yahiaa laughed.

— What an amazing ancestor! With Gebel it was strength, with Rifaa mercy, and today it's something else.

Qaasim said:

— He's the master of the Trust; he has a right to make changes in the Ten Clauses.

— But you have a hard task, my son; it involves the whole Alley, not just one sector.

— That's how the Founder wants it.

Yahiaa was shaken by a fit of coughing that winded him, and Hassan took over the tending of the hookah from him. Yahiaa stretched out his legs, wheezing loudly, then asked:

— Will you rely on force, like Gebel, or will you choose love, like Rifaa?

Qaasim ran his hand over his turban.

— Force when necessary and love always.

Yahiaa nodded and smiled.

— Your only fault is your interest in the Trust; it will lead to endless troubles for you.

— How can people live without the Trust?

The old man said proudly:

— As Rifaa lived.

Qaasim said earnestly and politely:

— He lived with the help of his father and those who loved him, and he left behind followers who were none of them able to follow his example. The fact is that our miserable Alley needs purity and honor.

— Can that only come with the Trust?

— Oh yes, Yahiaa, with the Trust and the end of strongmen. Then we'll achieve the honor that Gebel gave to his people, and the love that Rifaa called for, as well as the happiness that Adham dreamed of.

Yahiaa laughed.

— What have you left for those who come after you?

Qaasim thought for a while, then said:

— If God gives me victory, the Alley won't need anybody after me.

The angelic hookah went round, and the water sang in its bulb. Yahiaa yawned contentedly and said:

— What will be left for any of you when the revenue of the Trust has been shared out equally?

Saadiq said:

— We only want the Trust in order to use it, so that the Alley will become an extension of the Great House.

— So what action have you prepared?

A passing cloud hid the moon, and the hallway was plunged in darkness, but in a minute the light returned. Yahiaa looked at Hassan's sturdy body and asked:

— Will your cousin be able to defeat the strongmen?

Qaasim said:

— I'm seriously thinking of consulting a lawyer.

Yahiaa raised his voice:

— What lawyer could challenge Rifaat the Trustee and his strongmen?

The oblivion of hashish combined with the silence of reflection. The three friends went home somewhat downcast.

Qaasim suffered bitter torment in his times of solitude.

Anxiety and grief so afflicted him that Qamar one day said:

— We mustn't be so concerned for other people's happiness that we make ourselves miserable.

— I must justify the faith that has been put in me.

'What are you going to do? Why don't you draw back from the brink of the abyss — this abyss of despair and silence and inaction — this ashen graveyard of dreams?'

One day he invited Saadiq and Hassan round and said to them:

— It's time for us to begin.

Their faces shone. Hassan said:

— What do you have in mind?

— After much thought I've decided to start a sports club.

They were tongue-tied. He smiled and went on:

— We shall have it in the courtyard of this house. Sport is something that goes on in all the sectors.

Hassan asked:

— And what does it have to do with our task?

Saadiq too was puzzled.

— A club for things like weight-lifting! What does that have to do with the Trust?

Qaasim's eyes shone.

— The young men will come to us because they love games of strength, and we'll be able to choose the ones who are sound and suitable.

Their eyes opened wide. Hassan exclaimed:

— We'll be a team, and what a team!

— Yes; and young men from Gebel and Rifaa's sectors will come to us.

Joy permeated them, and Qaasim seemed to dance along.

Qaasim sat by the window, watching the festivities — and how well our Alley celebrates festivals! The water-carriers had sprinkled the ground from their water-skins, and the necks and tails of the donkeys had been decorated with paper flowers. The whole place shone with the brilliant colors of children's new clothes and dancing balloons. Little flags fluttered on the barrows. Shouts and cries and cheers mingled with the music of bamboo flutes. Pony traps swayed along, carrying men and women dancers. The shops were shut, and the cafes and bars and hashish dens were packed. Everywhere people were smiling and exchanging festive greetings.

Qaasim sat wearing a new jellaba and holding Ihsaan, who stood on his lap. She explored his features with her little hands and dug her nails into his cheeks. A voice sang under the window:

When love did snare me, 'twas through these eyes-oh.

He at once remembered the happiness of his wedding and his heart melted. He loved music and song. How Adham had longed to sing in the luxuriant garden! And now what was the man singing on this festival? 'When love did snare me, 'twas through these eyes...' How true that was; since he had looked up at Qindeel in the darkness, he had been robbed of his heart and mind and will. And now the courtyard of his house had been turned into a club for building bodies and purifying minds, and he too was lifting weights and learning to fence with sticks. Saadiq added strong arm muscles to the strong leg muscles he had developed at the tinner's. As for Hassan, he was just a giant. The others too were very keen. Saadiq one day had the excellent idea of inviting the beggars and the jobless to the club. In no time they were taking a great interest in his sports and also in what he had to say. Of course, few of them came,

but because of their zeal they were a match for many times their number.

Ihsaan squeaked 'Da! Da!' and he kissed her several times. She wet the corner of his new jellaba. From the kitchen he could hear the pounding of mortar and pestle, the voices of Qamar and Sakeena, and the miaowing of the cat. A pony trap passed under the window and the people in it were singing:

Pray for the soldier who took off his fez!  
Now he's a holy man, everyone says.

Qaasim smiled, remembering the night that Yahiaa had sung this song, completely stoned. 'If only things were put straight, you would have nothing to do but sing, dear Alley. Tomorrow the club will be full of strong, reliable helpers. Tomorrow I shall challenge the Trustee and the strongmen and all our troubles, so that there will remain only a merciful ancestor and his loyal descendants. Poverty, filth, begging and tyranny will be wiped out. The vermin, the flies, the cudgels will disappear. All will be peaceful in the shade of luxuriant gardens.'

He was wakened from his dreams by Qamar's voice furiously scolding Sakeena. He listened in astonishment, then called his wife. She burst in, pushing the maid in front of her and saying:

— Look at this woman! She was born in this house, like her mother before her, and yet she spies on us!

He looked disapprovingly at Sakeena. She shouted in her husky voice:

— I'm not a traitor, master, but my mistress is unkind.

Qamar spoke, unable to hide her fear:

— I saw her smiling, and she said to me: 'The next time the feast comes, please God, Mr Qaasim will be master of the whole Alley, as Gebel was of Hamdaan's sector.' Ask her what she means.

Qaasim frowned anxiously and asked her:

— What do you mean, Sakeena?

— I mean what I say. I'm not an ordinary maid, here today and gone tomorrow. I've grown up in this house; it wasn't right to hide a secret from me.

Qaasim exchanged a quick glance with his wife and pointed at the child. She came and took her from him. He told the maid to sit down, and she sat at his feet, saying:

— Was it right for people outside to know your secret when I knew nothing?

— What secret do you mean?

The maid said boldly:

— What Qindeel said to you at Hind's Rock... (Qamar gasped, but Qaasim nodded to Sakeena to go on.) just as he spoke to Gebel and Rifaa before. You're not a lesser man than them, master, you're a lord — you were even when you were a shepherd. I was the go-between who brought you two together, you remember; I ought to have known before anybody else. How can you trust strangers and not trust your maid? God forgive you both! But I pray for your victory, yes, I pray for your victory over the Trustee and the strongmen — who wouldn't pray for that?

Qamar exclaimed, rocking the baby nervously:

— It wasn't right for you to spy on us. You won't live it down.

Sakeena spoke with righteous indignation:

— I didn't mean to eavesdrop, God knows, but I heard something through the door and couldn't help listening. It would have been more than anybody could do to close my ears to that. What breaks my heart, mistress, is that you don't trust me. I'm not a traitor, and you're the last person I would betray. For whose sake would I betray you? God forgive you, mistress!

Qaasim weighed her up carefully with his eyes and with his heart. When she had finished, he said gently:

— You're loyal, Sakeena; there's no doubt about that.

She looked up at him and murmured:

— Long may you live, master! I am that, by God.

He said quietly:

— I know who's loyal. Treachery isn't going to grow in my house as it did in that of my brother Rifaa. Qamar, this woman's as loyal as you are; don't think badly of her. She belongs to us as we belong to her, and I'll never forget that she was the messenger of happiness to me.

Qamar sounded somewhat appeased.

— But she eavesdropped.

Qaasim smiled.

— She didn't exactly eavesdrop; the voice reached her by the will of God, just as Rifaa heard our Ancestor's voice without making any effort to do so. You've been blessed, Sakeena.

The maid seized his hand and covered it with kisses.

— My soul is your ransom, master. By God, you'll triumph over your enemies and our enemies and rule over the whole Alley.

— Ruling isn't what we want, Sakeena.

She stretched out her arms in prayer.

— Oh, God, grant his wishes!

— Amen!

He looked at her and smiled.

— You shall be my messenger when I need one, and in that way you'll take part in our work.

Her face shone with joy, and her eyes were full of pride. He added:

— If fate allows the Trust to be shared out as we wish, it shall not be refused to any woman, whether lady or maid.

Sakeena was tongue-tied. He went on:

— The Founder said the Trust is for everybody, and you, Sakeena, are the Founder's daughter just as much as Qamar.

Her face was full of joy and she gazed up gratefully at her master. From the Alley came the notes of a bamboo flute. Someone shouted: 'Guzzler... a thousand greetings!' Qaasim turned towards the road and saw the strongmen going down it in procession on decked-out horses, and the people greeting

them with cheers and gifts. Then they went off into the desert for the usual festival racing and stick-fencing.

No sooner had their procession gone than 'Bullrush' appeared outside, staggering along drunk. Qaasim smiled to see the youth, whom he counted one of the most honest young men in the club. He watched him come to the middle of the Desert Rats' sector, where he stood and shouted:

— I'm a fine fellow.

A sneering voice called from the nearest tenement-house in Rifaa's sector:

— You handsome desert rat!

Bullrush raised two bloodshot eyes towards the window and yelled drunkenly:

— It's our turn, you bastards!

A crowd of urchins and drunks and men high on hashish gathered round him amid a great noise of singing and howling and drums and pipes. Someone shouted:

— Listen... It's the Desert Rats' turn... Don't you want to listen?

Bullrush yelled, reeling about:

— One Ancestor for everybody... One Trust for everybody... Goodbye strongmen!

Then he disappeared in the crowd. In a moment Qaasim was on his feet. He grabbed his cloak and rushed out of the room, saying:

— Damn alcohol and drunkenness!

7 7 \* \* \* \* \*

— Don't go amongst people drunk.

Qaasim spoke with a frown. He was sitting at the foot of Hind's Rock looking round the faces of his close friends from



the club: Saadiq, Hassan and Shaabaan, Bullrush, Hamroosh and 'Wagtail'. Behind them towered the Jebel, over which night was falling. The desert was empty, but for a shepherd leaning on his staff, far away to the south. Bullrush was downcast.

— I wish I'd died before that happened.

Qaasim spoke with resignation:

— There are mistakes it's no use being sorry for. I think the important thing now is to know the effect of your raving on our enemies.

Saadiq said:

— It's certainly been widely heard.

Hassan said gloomily:

— I found that myself in Gebel's cafe, where a friend had invited me. I heard a man telling the story about Bullrush in a loud voice. It's true he was laughing scornfully as he told it, but I shan't be surprised if the story rouses some people's suspicions, and I'm afraid it will go from mouth to mouth till one of the strongmen hears it.

Bullrush sighed.

— Don't exaggerate, Hassan!

Saadiq said:

— Better exaggerate than underrate! Otherwise we'll be caught off guard.

Bullrush exclaimed:

— We've sworn not to fear death.

Saadiq said angrily:

— Just as we've sworn to keep the secret.

Qaasim said:

— If we die now, all hope will be lost.

The silence and the darkness deepened. Qaasim spoke again:

— We must get organized.

Hassan said:

— In our plans we must assume the very worst.

Qaasim said sadly:

— That means a fight.

They exchanged glances in the dark. Above them the stars came out one by one, and a breeze blew, carrying sinister traces of the day's heat. Hamroosh said:

— We'll fight to the death.

Qaasim was annoyed.

— Then things would stay as they are.

Saadiq added:

— They'd finish us off so quickly.

Wagtail suggested to Qaasim:

— Luckily there are family links between you and Omnibus, and also between your wife and the Trustee's. Besides, Guzzler was one of your father's friends in his youth.

Qaasim spoke listlessly:

— That might perhaps put off the end, but it couldn't stop it from coming.

Saadiq asked hopefully:

— Do you remember you once thought of taking the matter to a lawyer?

— And we were told no lawyer would dare challenge the Trustee and the strongmen.

Trying to make up for his misbehavior, Bullrush said:

— There's a lawyer at Beit el Qadi known for his boldness.

But Saadiq backed down.

— What I'm most afraid of is declaring hostilities by bringing the case. It's too soon to be afraid of the consequences of Bullrush's words.

Bullrush said:

— Let's ask the lawyer's opinion, and agree with him not to bring the case till we're forced to; then we can find somebody to sponsor it for us, even if it's somebody from outside the Alley.

Qaasim and the others agreed to take this precaution. They got up straight away and went to the chambers of Shanafeeri,

the religious-court lawyer at Beit el Qadi. The learned man met them, and Qaasim explained their problem and told him that they meant to put off bringing the case till a later date, but that they wanted him to study the question and prepare the necessary measures. Contrary to what most of them expected, the lawyer accepted the case and took part of his fee in advance, and they went off delighted. They split up, and Qaasim went to Yahiaa's while his friends went back to the Alley. Qaasim and Yahiaa sat together in the doorway of the hut, smoking and exchanging views. The old man seemed sad at what had happened and told Qaasim to be on his guard.

After that Qaasim went home, and when Qamar opened the door to him the look in her face alarmed him. He asked what was wrong and she said:

— His Honor the Trustee has sent for you.

Qaasim's heart pounded.

— When?

— The last time was ten minutes ago.

— The last time?!

— He's sent for you three times in an hour.

Her eyes were full of tears. He said:

— This is not what I expect from you.

She wailed:

— Don't go!

He turned calmly to go.

— It's safer to go than to stay away. Don't forget that those brigands won't attack anybody in their own houses.

Inside the house Ihsaan cried and Sakeena hurried to her. Qamar said:

— Put off going till I've seen Lady Ameena.

He said with determination:

— That wouldn't be worthy of us. I'll go at once. There's nothing to be afraid of; none of them knows anything about me.

She clung to him.

— It's you he sent for, not Bullrush; I'm afraid one of them has given you away.

He broke away from her gently.

— I told you from the beginning the easy days are over. We all know we must face trouble sooner or later. Don't be so upset. Take care till I get back.

7 8 \*

The gatekeeper returned from Trustee's House and invited Qaasim in with casual distaste. He led the way, and Qaasim followed, exerting himself to the utmost to control his feelings. The pure scents of the garden wafted round him but he walked on unheeding till he found himself at the entrance to the drawing room. The gatekeeper stood to one side, and in went Qaasim, feeling a degree of determination he had not known in himself before. He looked ahead and at the far end of the room he saw the Trustee, seated on a divan. There were also two figures on chairs to his right and left, but Qaasim could not clearly distinguish them nor did he feel any need to pay attention to them. He went up and stood a few feet from the Trustee's seat, raised his hand in greeting and said politely:

— Good evening, your Honor!

He glanced at the man sitting on the right, and there was Guzzler. Looking at the other man, he could not help staring; the shock nearly shattered him. It was none other than Sheikh Shanafeeri, the lawyer. Qaasim realized the gravity of the situation; his secret was out, the despicable lawyer had betrayed his trust and he was trapped. Despair conflicted with fury and resentment in his heart. He knew that cunning and trickery could not save him, so he decided on frank defiance. It was impossible to retreat, so he had to advance or at least

stand firm. Looking back later he was to see this resolution of his as marking the birth of a new personality in him, whose existence he had never imagined.

He was snatched from his whirlpool of thought by the Trustee's harsh voice asking:

— You are Qaasim?

Qaasim's voice was natural.

— Yes, sir!

The Trustee went on without inviting him to sit down.

— Are you surprised to see this gentleman?

He answered in the same tone:

— Not at all, sir!

The Trustee asked contemptuously:

— You are the shepherd?

— I stopped being a shepherd more than two years ago.

— What do you do now?

— I manage my wife's property.

The Trustee nodded scornfully and motioned to the lawyer to speak. The sheikh addressed Qaasim:

— Perhaps you are surprised at my position, seeing that I'm your lawyer, but his Honor the Trustee is above all such considerations. My action gives you the chance to retract; that will be better than getting embroiled in hostilities that would lead to your destruction. His Honor has given me leave to tell you that I have interceded with him to grant you a pardon if you announce your retraction. I hope you'll appreciate my good intentions. Here is your advance payment, which I'm returning to you.

Qaasim eyed him coldly.

— Why didn't you tell me the truth when I was in your chambers?

The lawyer was taken aback by his boldness, but the Trustee came to his rescue.

— You are here to answer questions, not to ask them.

The lawyer stood up, excused himself and sidled out,

adjusting his gown to hide his embarrassment. Then the Trustee examined Qaasim with hard eyes and almost spat out the words:

— How did you persuade yourself to bring a case against me?

He was trapped; if he did not fight he would be finished, but he did not know how to answer. The Trustee said:

— Speak up; tell me what's got into you. Are you mad?

Qaasim said quietly:

— I'm sane, thank God!

— That's by no means certain. What set you off on your hateful action against me? You haven't been poor since that crazy woman took you for a husband. What did you hope to get from your action?

Qaasim sighed as if to prevent himself from getting angry.

— I don't want anything for myself.

The Trustee looked at Guzzler, seeming to need a witness to such strange words, then back at Qaasim, and shouted:

— Then why have you done what you have?

— I only wanted justice.

The Trustee's eyes narrowed hatefully.

— Do you fancy your wife's connection with her ladyship can protect you?

Qaasim looked down.

— Oh no, sir!

— Are you a strongman capable of taking on all the strongmen in the Alley?

— Not at all, sir.

The Trustee screamed:

— Admit you're mad and save me trouble!

— I'm sane, thank God!

— Why did you start an action against me?

— I wanted justice.

— Who for?

He thought hard as he said:

— For everybody.

The Trustee peered at him incredulously and said:

— What's that to do with you?

Qaasim replied as if drunk with courage:

— In that way the Founder's Clauses will be fulfilled.

The Trustee screamed:

— You desert rat! You talk of the Founder's Clauses?

Qaasim said calmly:

— He's our Ancestor — all of ours.

The Trustee leapt up in a fury and struck Qaasim in the face with his horsehair fly-whisk, using all his force. He yelled:

— 'Our Ancestor'! None of you even knows who his father was; yet you have the cheek to say 'our Ancestor'. Thieves! Desert rats! Scum! You only persist because you think this household will protect you and your wife, but a dog loses its protection when it bites the hand that feeds it.

Guzzler stood up to calm the Trustee's rage. He said:

— Sit down and take it easy! It's not right for you to be upset by a fly.

Rifaat sat down, his lips trembling. He shouted:

— Even the Desert Rats covet the Trust and say without any shame, 'our Ancestor'.

Guzzler sat down again, saying:

— It's plain that what people say about the Desert Rats is true. Unfortunately our Alley is racing towards destruction. (Then, turning to Qaasim:) Your father was one of my childhood friends; don't force me to kill you.

The Trustee bellowed:

— His action deserves worse than death. If it wasn't for her ladyship, he'd die right now.

Guzzler went on with the interrogation.

— Listen to me, young man; who's behind you?

Qaasim said, still feeling the sting of the fly-whisk:

— Who do you mean, sir?

— Who persuaded you to bring the case?

— Only myself.

— You were a shepherd and then fortune smiled on you; what more do you want?

— Justice, sir, justice.

The Trustee ground his teeth and shouted:

— Justice? Dogs! Vermin! That's your password when you're bent on stealing and looting. (Then, to Guzzler:) Force him to confess!

Guzzler spoke in a voice full of menace:

— Tell me who's behind you.

With mysterious defiance, Qaasim said:

— Our Ancestor.

— Our Ancestor?!

— Yes! Look at the Clauses governing his Trust; you will realize that he's the one who made me act.

Rifaat leapt up again, yelling:

— Get him out of my sight! Throw him out!

Guzzler stood up, seized Qaasim by the arm and marched him to the door. Qaasim bore his iron grip bravely. Then Guzzler hissed in his ear:

— For your own sake, be sensible! Don't force me to drink your blood.

7 9 \* \* \* \* \*

Qaasim went home to be met by Zakaria, Uwayss, Hassan, Saadiq, Bullrush, Shaabaan, Wagtail and Hamroosh. They looked up at him, anxious and silent. When he had sat down beside his wife, Uwayss said:

— Didn't I warn you?

Qamar reproached him:

— Wait, Uncle; let him rest a bit!



But he bellowed:

— The worst troubles are those a man brings on himself.

Zakaria studied Qaasim's face, then said:

— They insulted you, my boy; I know you as well as I know myself. You could have done without that.

Uwayss said:

— But for Lady Ameena you wouldn't have come back in one piece.

Qaasim looked round his friends' faces, and said:

— That vile lawyer betrayed us.

Their faces hardened and they looked at one another angrily. Uwayss was the first to speak:

— Give up peacefully now, all of you; and thank God for his escape!

Hassan said:

— What do you say, cousin?

Qaasim thought for a while, then said:

— I won't hide it from you that death threatens us. I'll release anybody who doesn't wish to help me any more.

Zakaria begged:

— Don't let things go any further.

Qaasim replied with calm determination:

— I'm not going to drop the matter, whatever the consequences. I shan't be less loyal than Gebel and Rifaa to our Ancestor and to the people of our Alley.

Uwayss got up in a rage and stalked out of the room, saying:

— The man's mad. God help you, my niece!

Saadiq leapt up and kissed Qaasim on the forehead, saying:

— You've revived my spirits with what you've said.

Hassan said enthusiastically:

— The people here kill for the sake of a piaster or for no reason at all. Why should we be afraid of dying, when we have a real reason?

They heard Omnibus's voice from the Alley calling Zakaria, who leaned out of the window and invited him in. In a moment

he was in the room and sat down scowling grimly. He looked at Qaasim and said:

— I didn't know there was another strongman in our sector besides me.

Zakaria said anxiously:

— Things are not as bad as you've heard.

— What I heard was even worse.

Zakaria moaned:

— Satan has been fooling about with the minds of our sons.

Omnibus spoke sternly:

— Guzzler gave me a long lecture about your nephew. I thought he was a sensible lad, but he turns out to be the craziest lunatic. Now look here; if I'm too easy on you all, Guzzler's going to come and deal with you himself. But I'm not letting any of you drag my good name in the dirt, so behave yourselves, and heaven help anybody who's obstinate.

Omnibus began keeping a watch on Qaasim's followers and not letting any of them near his house. In the course of doing so he humiliated Saadiq and beat up Wagtail. He asked Zakaria to tell Qaasim to stay at home till the storm had blown over. Qaasim found himself a prisoner in his own home, visited only by his cousin Hassan. But there is no power that can imprison news in the Alley. Whispers reached Gebel's sector and Rifaa's, telling what was stirring among the Desert Rats: the case that had nearly been brought against the Trustee, particular claims concerning the Ten Clauses, even the connection between Qindeel, Gebelaawi's servant, and Qaasim. There was great excitement and plenty of skepticism and scorn.

Hassan said to Qaasim one day:

— The news is being whispered around the Alley. They talk about nothing but you in all the hashish dens.

Qaasim looked up, his face, as usual of late, haggard from thought and worry. He said:

— We've become prisoners, and the days pass without action.

Qamar spoke with concern:

— Nobody is called on to do the impossible.

Hassan said:

— Our brothers are as keen as can be.

Qaasim asked:

— Is it true that Gebel's people and Rifaa's accuse me of being a liar and a madman?

Hassan looked down unhappily.

— Cowardice ruins men.

Qaasim nodded helplessly.

— Why do they call me a liar when one of them was the man who met Gebelaawi and another was the man he spoke to? Why do they call me a liar when they of all people should be the first to believe me and help me?

— Cowardice is the plague of our Alley; that's why they cringe before their strongmen.

From outside came the sound of Omnibus bellowing curses and insults. The family looked out of the window and saw Omnibus gripping Shaabaan by the collar and screaming at him:

— What brings you here, you bastard?

The young man tried in vain to free himself from his grip. Omnibus held his collar with his left hand and rained blows on his face and head with his right. Qaasim was furious and left the window and hurried to the door, ignoring Qamar's pleas. In a moment he was standing in front of Omnibus, saying firmly:

— Let him go, Omnibus!

But he went on punching his victim and shouted at Qaasim:

— Mind yourself or I'll make even your enemies cry for you.

Qaasim seized the fist he was doing the hitting and gripped it tightly, shouting furiously:

— I shan't let you kill him whatever you do.

Omnibus let go of Shaabaan, who fell to the ground uncon-

scious, then snatched a basket of earth off the head of a passing woman and emptied it over Qaasim. Hassan was about to spring at him, but Zakaria arrived just in time to throw an arm round him. Qaasim lifted off the basket, and his head emerged, covered with earth, which went all over his clothes too. He was seized with a fit of coughing. Qamar screamed and Sakeena howled. Uways hurried up, men, women and children rushed out from doorways on to the scene, and there was uproar. Zakaria held on to Hassan's arm with all his strength and looked imploringly into his bulging eyes. Uways went up to Omnibus and said:

— Forgive him for my sake, Omnibus, my dear sir.

Several voices cried: 'For God's sake, chief!' and Omnibus bawled:

— What with relatives and friends! It's as if Omnibus was a woman and not your strongman.

Zakaria shouted:

— God forbid, chief! You're our lord and our crowning glory.

Omnibus went off to the cafe, and some men lifted up Shaabaan, and Hassan began brushing the earth off Qaasim's head and clothes. With Omnibus out of the way, the onlookers were able to express their grief.

8 0 \* \* \* \* \*

That evening, one of the Desert Rats' tenement houses resounded with wails announcing a death. The cry was taken up by dozens of other voices in houses all around. Qaasim leaned out of his window and asked Fateen, the melon-seed vendor, about it. The man answered: 'Long may you live! Shaabaan is dead.' Qaasim was horrified and left the house to

go to Shaabaan's tenement, which was two doors away. He found the courtyard there in darkness and packed with the people who lived on the lower floors. They were talking together sadly and indignantly, while from upstairs came sobs and wails. Qaasim heard a woman saying bitterly:

— He didn't just die; Omnibus killed him.

A second said:

— May God strike your household, Omnibus!

A third protested:

— It was Qaasim that killed him; he tells lies and our men get killed for them.

Qaasim was deeply distressed. He made his way through the darkness up to the first floor where the dead man's home was. By the light of a lamp fixed to the wall of the corridor outside he saw his friends, among them Hassan, Saadiq, Bullrush, Wagtail and Hamroosh. Saadiq came to meet him, crying, and they embraced without a word. Hassan, whose face looked ghastly in the dim light, said:

— His blood won't have been spilt in vain.

Bullrush came up to Qaasim and whispered to him:

— His wife's in such a dreadful state she's even blamed us for his death.

Qaasim whispered back:

— God help her!

Hassan spoke vengefully:

— The murderer must be executed.

Wagtail growled:

— Who in the Alley would give evidence against him?

Hassan said:

— But we can kill like everybody else.

Qaasim punched him to silence him, and said:

— It'll be best if you people don't attend his funeral, but we'll meet afterwards in Qarafa graveyard.

He started to enter the dead man's home and Saadiq tried to bar his way, but he pushed him aside and went in. He called

Shaabaan's widow, and she came, her reddened eyes wide open in astonishment. Her look hardened, and she asked:

— What do you want?

— I've come with my condolences.

She said fiercely:

— You killed him. We can do without the Trust, and it was him we needed.

He said gently:

— May God give you strength to bear it, and may He destroy the criminals. We are your family whenever you need us. His blood isn't spilt in vain.

She looked askance at him, then turned and retreated. When she got back inside there was an outburst of wails and moans. He left the place grief-stricken.

Next morning the people saw Omnibus sitting in the doorway of Freewheeler's cafe watching the passers-by with a defiant, evil look on his face. They greeted him with extra servility to hide their anger and they stayed away from the wake, skulking in their shops or by their barrows or sitting on the ground. Later in the morning the bier was carried out, followed only by the family and close relatives, and by Qaasim, who ignored the strongman's furious looks. The widow's brother was angry and said to Qaasim:

— You kill the man and then attend his funeral!

He bore this in silence till someone else asked harshly:

— Why did you come?

He answered firmly:

— To fight on as my friend fought, God rest his soul! He was brave. You're not like him; you know who killed him but you vent your anger on me.

Most of them fell silent. The women gathered together behind the men, hurrying along with bare feet, dressed in black, pouring dust on their heads and beating their cheeks. The funeral passed through Gemalia towards Bab el-Nasr. When the burial ceremony was over the mourners all left,

except that Qaasim walked slowly till he was separated from them and then returned to the grave to find his friends waiting for him. His eyes swam with tears and they all began to cry. Qaasim wiped his eyes and said:

— Anybody who wants safety had better leave.

Hamroosh said:

— If we had wanted to be safe, you wouldn't have found us around you.

Qaasim put his hand on the tombstone.

— I'm very sad to lose him. He was brave and enthusiastic, and he's gone just when we need him most.

Saadiq said:

— He was killed by a treacherous strongman. Some of us will live to see the death of the last strongman in our Alley.

Hamroosh said:

— But we mustn't get caught by treachery as our friend was. We must think about tomorrow, and how we can win our victory, and how we can meet to exchange views.

Qaasim said:

— Thinking about that has been my only consolation in my imprisonment. I've come to a conclusion; not an easy one, but there is no escaping it.

They clamored to hear it. He went on:

— Leave our Alley! Each of us must make his arrangements and leave. We shall move out as Gebel did long ago, and as Yahiaa did more recently. We must set up in some safe place in the desert till we have built up our strength and our numbers.

Saadiq exclaimed:

— That's the answer.

— We can rid the Alley of strongmen only by force, and we can carry out the Founder's conditions only by force, and justice and mercy and peace can reign only by force. Our force won't be tyrannical; it will be the first just force.

They listened eagerly, gazing at Qaasim and at the tomb behind him, and it seemed to them as if Shaabaan were

listening too and giving them his blessing. Bullrush said with feeling:

— Yes! The problems will be solved by force; by just, not unjust force, Shaabaan was on his way to you when Omnibus met him; if we'd been with him the brute would have met a force he couldn't easily have overcome. Damn fear and division!

Qaasim heaved a sigh of relief and pleasure.

— Our Ancestor has put his trust in us, certainly believing that some of his children are worthy of it.

8 1 \* \* \* \* \*

Qaasim came home in the middle of the night, but he found Qamar awake waiting for him. Her concern and sympathy for him were even greater than usual. He was sorry that she had stayed awake till such an hour. Then he detected weakness in her eyes and the redness that follows weeping as twilight follows sunset. He asked anxiously:

— Have you been crying?

She did not answer, as though too busy with the mug of warm milk she was preparing for him. He spoke again:

— We're all unhappy about the death of Shaabaan, God rest his soul!

She immediately responded:

— I was crying for Shaabaan before, but then I cried at that man's hatred for you; you're the last man to deserve to have dirt poured over his head.

— That's nothing compared to what happened to our poor friend.

She sat down beside him, handed him the mug of milk, and murmured:



— And I'm upset by what they say about you.

He smiled, pretending to make little of it, and raised the mug to his lips. She went on indignantly:

— Bruiser tells Gebel's people you want the Trust all to yourself, and Pilgrim Grim says the same to Rifaa's people, and they spread it around that you're beneath Gebel and Rifaa.

He did not hide his grief.

— I know; and I also know that but for you I wouldn't be alive today.

She caressed his shoulder tenderly, and began for no reason thinking of bygone days of endless conversation and happiness, the luminous nights of joy after Ihsaan was born. And now she did not possess any of him; indeed, he did not possess himself. She even concealed from him the pains of illness, which troubled her from time to time; he did not think about himself, so how could she trouble him with her problems? She was afraid of adding to his burden and helping his enemies without meaning to. Who could assure her of him when life might soon be over just as the easy days were over? God forgive you, old Alley! Qaasim said:

— I haven't lost hope, even at this dark hour. What a lot of good friends I have, even if I seem alone! One of them defied Omnibus; and who would have dared do that before? The others are like him, and courage is what our Alley needs most if it isn't to live for ever under tyranny. Don't advise me to play safe; the dead man was killed on his way to my house, and you wouldn't want your husband to be a mean coward.

Qamar smiled, taking back the empty mug. She said:

— The strongmen's wives screech with joy over battles, which are evil; how could I rejoice less over what is good?

He realized that she was more unhappy than she seemed. He stroked her cheek and comforted her.

— You're everything in the world to me, you're the best companion in life.

She smiled, inviting back the peace of mind needed for sleep.

Shantah the tinner was amazed by the disappearance of Saadiq. He visited his home but found no trace of him or his family. In the same way Abdul Fattaah, the dried-fish merchant, could find no sign of his man Bullrush. Wagtail stopped going to Hamdoon's nut stall without giving any notice. And where was Hamroosh? Hasoona the baker said he had disappeared as if the flames of the oven had devoured him. Others vanished too. The news was all over the Desert Rats' sector and its echo reached the rest of the Alley. People in Gebel's sector and Rifaa's said scornfully that the Desert Rats were all leaving and that Omnibus would soon find no one to pay him protection money. Omnibus summoned Zakaria to Freewheeler's cafe and said menacingly:

— Your nephew would be the best person to tell us the secret of the disappearances.

— Omnibus, my dear sir, don't blame him. The man hasn't left his house for days... weeks... months!

The strongman roared:

— Child's play! But I've sent for you to warn you what may happen to your nephew.

— Qaasim is your own flesh and blood. Don't do anything that will please his enemies!

— He's his own enemy as well as mine. He thinks he's the Gebel of today. This damned nonsense is the quickest way to a grave at Bab al-Nasr.

— Steady on, my dear Omnibus; we're all under your protection.

When Zakaria returned home he met Hassan coming back from Qaasim's house, and he vented on him the fury with which Omnibus had filled him, but Hassan cut him short, saying:

— Calm down, Father! Qamar is ill, very ill.

All the Alley learnt of Qamar's illness, even Trustee's House. Qaasim stayed beside her, overcome with sorrow. He kept shaking his head hopelessly and saying:

— All of a sudden you lie down helpless.

She said in a weak voice:

— I was hiding my state of health from you to spare you, with all your other worries.

— I should have shared your suffering from the beginning.

Her pale lips parted in a faded smile.

— My health will come back.

That was what he was praying for. But what was this mist that covered her eyes? Why was her face so drained? What was this power of concealing pain? 'All this is because of you. Oh God watch over her with your mercy! Preserve her for me, and have pity on the baby's constant tears.'

— Your forgiveness for me makes it that I can't forgive myself.

She smiled again, almost reproachfully.

Um Saalim was brought to burn incense for her, and Um Atia to mix her some ointments, and Ibrahim the barber to cup her, but Qamar seemed to resist all remedies. Qaasim told her:

— I wish I could bear your pain for you.

Her reply was hardly audible:

— May no harm touch you! Dearest of men!

He said to himself: 'The sight of her makes the whole world look dark in my eyes.' She spoke again:

— Thinking people like you are the hardest to comfort.

Some men and women came to visit her, but he felt oppressed and retreated to the roof. He could hear the women's voices from the windows of the tenement-houses, and the curses and street-cries from the road. He heard crying too, and thought at first that it was Ihsaan, till he saw a child rolling in the dust on the next roof. Darkness was falling slowly, and a flock of pigeons flew back to their loft. A solitary star twinkled on the horizon. He wondered about the meaning of the

strange look in Qamar's eyes, as if she could not see, of the twitching at the corner of her mouth, of the blueness of her lips, and of his own feelings of depression. He stayed several hours and then went down. He met Sakeena carrying Ihsaan in the hall, and she whispered to him: 'Go in quietly so as not to wake her.' He threw himself down on the sofa opposite the bed, in the feeble light of the lamp on the window ledge. The only sound from outside was the wail of the rebec. Then Taza the bard began:

His grandfather said quietly:

— I've decided to give you a chance that has not been offered to anybody else from outside. It is that you should live in this house and marry in it and begin a new life here.

Humaam's heart raced, drunk with joy. He said:

— Thank you for your kindness.

— You deserve it.

The boy looked from his grandfather to the carpet, then asked anxiously:

— And my family?

Gebelaawi said reproachfully:

— I've said quite clearly what I want.

Humaam implored him:

— They deserve your mercy and forgiveness.

The sleeping woman started and woke. Qaasim jumped over the sofa to reach her. He saw a new brilliance in her eyes in place of the misty look. He asked what was wrong and she called out in a loud voice:

— Ihsaan! Where's Ihsaan?

He hurried out and came back followed by Sakeena carrying the sleeping baby. Qamar pointed at Ihsaan and Sakeena brought her so that she could kiss the child's cheek, while Qaasim sat on the edge of the bed. She looked at him and whispered:

— It's even worse.

— What do you mean?

— I've caused you much pain, but it's even worse.

He bit his lip, then said:

— Qamar, I'm so sad not being able to take away your pain.

— I'm afraid for you after I'm gone.

— Don't talk about me.

— Qaasim, go and join your friends; they'll kill you if you stay.

— We shall go together.

She struggled to say:

— It's not the same road.

— Don't you want to have pity on me as you used to?

— Oh, that was in the past.

She seemed to be struggling against some terrible force. She made a sign with her hand. He leaned still closer to her. She writhed and stretched out her neck. Her chest collapsed and her breath rasped out. Sakeena urged:

— Help her to sit up! She wants to sit up!

He put his arms round her to help her up, but she let out a moan like a wordless farewell, and her head toppled on to his chest. Sakeena hurried out with the baby. From outside, her wailing broke the silence.

8 2 \* \* \* \* \*

In the morning Qaasim's house and the road in front of it were thronged with people offering their condolences. The Alley had a deep respect for the ties of kinship, without enjoying any of their advantages. Omnibus had to come, and in no time all the Desert Rats were following him. Even Trustee Rifaat had to come, followed by Guzzler, Bruiser, and Pilgrim

Grim, and soon everyone trooped along. The funeral procession was joined by huge crowds such as had never been seen before except at the funerals of strongmen. Qaasim showed a philosophical fortitude, despite his hidden sorrows. Even during the burial he wept with all his faculties except his eyes.

The mourners went, leaving only Qaasim, Zakaria, Uwayss and Hassan at the grave. Zakaria patted Qaasim on the arm, and said:

— Courage, my boy! And may God help you!

He hunched forward a little, sighing deeply, and murmured:

— My heart has been buried, Uncle.

Hassan's face was contorted. There was deep silence in the graveyard. Zakaria took a step away, saying:

— Time we went!

But Qaasim stayed where he was. He said resentfully:

— What made them come?

Zakaria saw what he meant.

— Let's be thankful to them anyway.

Uwayss plucked up his courage and said:

— Make a fresh start with them. Their gesture calls for a response from you. Luckily what they say about you outside our sector is not to be taken seriously.

Qaasim remained sunk in silence rather than argue with him. Then up came a party led by Saadiq. It seemed that they had been waiting for the mourners to disappear. There were many of them, and not one of them a stranger. They embraced Qaasim, and his eyes filled with tears. Uwayss looked at them angrily, but no one took any notice of him. Saadiq said to Qaasim:

— There's no longer anything to keep you in the Alley.

But Zakaria retorted hotly:

— His little girl and his house and his property are there.

Qaasim said meaningfully:

— My staying in the Alley was a necessity, and thanks to it

your numbers have built up as time passed.

He looked at the faces that gazed up at him as if to reassure himself of the truth of his remark. Most of them were those he had urged during his nocturnal prowls to leave and join his friends. He had been creeping out each night after the Alley had fallen asleep, to visit those in whose affection he trusted and who seemed ready to be convinced by his words. Bullrush asked him:

— Shall we have to wait long?

— Till there are enough of you.

Saadiq leaned over, embraced him and whispered:

— I'm heart-broken for you. I know better than anybody how hard your misfortune has been.

His feelings welled up again and he whispered:

— You're right; the pain is terrible.

— Hurry up and join us, now that you're alone.

— All in good time.

Uwayss said loudly:

— We must get back.

The friends embraced, and Qaasim went back with his companions. He passed his days sad and lonely in his house, and Sakeena began to be afraid of what his sorrow might lead to. But he kept up his secret, night-time prowls with a determination that knew no weakness. The number of those who had vanished went on growing, and people wondered anxiously about them. Still more fun was made of the Desert Rats and their strongman in the rest of the Alley; they said it would be Omnibus's turn to run away any day now. Zakaria said to Qaasim one day:

— This is the most alarming business and it will lead to something dreadful.

But he had to wait. Those were days full of activity and danger, and only Ihsaan could bring a smile to his troubled face. She was learning to stand, holding on to the edge of chairs, and she would peer up at him with her innocent face

and twitter like a little bird. He used to enjoy looking at her face and would say to himself: 'She'll be beautiful, but it matters more to me that she should be good and loving like her mother.' He rejoiced in the dark eyes gazing up at him out of the round face of a little Qamar — a lasting symbol of the bond that fate had broken. He wondered whether he would live to see her a lovely bride, or was she fated to have only painful memories of the house where she was born?

One day there was a knock at the door and Sakeena went to answer it. A young voice said:

— Open up, Sakeena!

She opened the door and found a girl of twelve or so, wrapped for some reason in a woman's chador and with a veil over her face. Sakeena was surprised and asked what she wanted, but she hurried into Qaasim's room and said breathlessly:

— Good evening, sir!

She took off the veil, revealing a face round as the moon, golden as wheat, its singular features radiating liveliness. Qaasim was astonished.

— Hello! Sit down! Welcome!

She sat down on the edge of the sofa.

— I'm Badria. My brother Saadiq has sent me to you.

— Saadiq?!

— Yes!

He looked at her inquisitively.

— What makes him take such a risk?

She replied with an anxiety that added to her charm:

— Nobody could know me in this chador.

He realized that she looked older than she was. He nodded and she went on, still more anxiously:

— He says you must leave at once, and that Guzzler and Bruiser and Pilgrim Grim and Omnibus have plotted together to kill you tonight.

He frowned uneasily. Sakeena moaned. He asked:



— How does he know this?

— Mr Yahiaa told him.

— But how did Yahiaa find out?

— A drunken man gave the secret away in a bar where there was a friend of Mr Yahiaa's; that's what my brother said.

He gazed at her silently till she stood up and began wrapping the chador round her delicious body. He stood up too, saying:

— Thank you, Badria! Keep well covered up, and my greetings to your brother. Take care!

She drew the veil over her face and asked:

— What shall I say to him?

— Tell him we'll meet before the morning.

They shook hands, and she left.

8 3 \* \* \* \* \*

Sakeena was pale and her eyes spoke of terror. She burst out:

— Let's leave the house without delay.

She jumped up to get busy. He said:

— Wrap up Ihsaan and hide her under your chador and go out as if you were on some errand. Go to Qamar's grave and wait there.

— And you, sir?

— I shall join you when the time comes.

Her eyes wandered between confusion and terror. He said calmly:

— Hassan will take you to the place where we're going to stay.

In a few moments she was ready to go. He kissed Ihsaan several times. Sakeena said as she went towards the door:

— May the living God protect you!

He stood by the window overlooking the road, and watched the maid walking towards Gemalia, till she was hidden by the bend. His heart pounded at the sight of her arms folded round her precious burden. He looked around the sector and saw followers of the strongmen, some sitting at Freewheeler's cafe and others hanging about here and there. Their features were indistinct in the gathering darkness. They showed every sign of getting ready, but would they lie in wait for him to set out on his night-time wanderings — if they had found out about them — or would they besiege his house later in the night? Now they were beginning to split up to prevent their secret being discovered. There they were, creeping about in the darkness like vermin, their breath reeking of crime. Would he meet the fate of Rifaa or that of Gebel? Rifaa had found himself in this position one dark night. He had hidden in his house, his heart full of good intentions, while downstairs trod the heavy feet of blood-thirsty enemies. When will you have had your fill of blood, unhappy Alley?

Qaasim paced up and down in his room till there was a knock at the door and he heard the voice of Hassan calling. Hassan came in with his massive body. His eyes were anxious as he spoke:

— Something strange is going on in our sector, something suspicious...

Qaasim showed no outward concern at this remark.

— Is my uncle home from his evening out?

— No! But I tell you, something suspicious is going on. Take a look through the shutters.

— I've seen what's worrying you, and I know what's behind it. Saadiq warned me in good time by sending me his little sister. If his message is correct, the strongmen are going to try and kill me tonight; so Sakeena has fled with Ihsaan, and they are waiting for you at Qamar's grave. Go to them and take them to our friends' hideout.

— And you?

— I'll escape in my turn and meet you.

Hassan said with determination:

— I'm not leaving you alone.

Qaasim urged him, with a touch of displeasure:

— Do as I say and don't hesitate. I'll use cunning, not strength, to escape, and your strength would be no use to me if I was forced to fight. But by going you will protect my daughter and you may be able to post some of our men on the roads from Gemalia to the Jebel, where they can help me if I need them during my flight.

Hassan gave way and shook his hand vigorously:

— There's nothing like your intelligence, so perhaps what you've prepared is best.

Qaasim answered with a calm smile and Hassan set off frowning. Not long after, Zakaria came in panting, and Qaasim was sure he had come from Yahiaa with the news, so he got in first:

— Saadiq sent me the news.

— I heard it a short time ago when I passed by Yahiaa's place and I was afraid it wouldn't have reached you.

Qaasim sat him down and said apologetically:

— Forgive me the trouble I'm causing you!

— I've been expecting this for a long time. I found Omnibus was behaving differently towards me, and I began asking myself questions. Today I see the devils swarming like locusts, and here you are alone, and it's almost impossible for you to flee.

Qaasim looked still more determined.

— I shall try, and if I fail there are men in the Jebel who won't be defeated.

Zakaria said angrily:

— What's the use of that compared with your life and your child?

Qaasim said reproachfully:

— I'm surprised you're not at the head of my men.

Zakaria spoke as if he hadn't heard him:

— Come with me to Omnibus! We'll strike a bargain with him and agree to what he wants.

Qaasim mocked his uncle's proposal with a short laugh. Zakaria went over to the shutters and peered into the Alley, where all was dark and sinister. He was roused by Qaasim's voice asking:

— Why did they choose this particular night?

— The day before yesterday one of Gebel's men proclaimed that your cause is for everybody's good, and the same is said of one of Rifaa's men. Perhaps that's what made them hurry.

Qaasim beamed.

— You see, Uncle? I'm the enemy of the Trustee and the strongmen but I'm the friend of the Alley, and everybody will know that soon.

— Think now about the fate that is waiting for you.

— I'll tell you my plan; I'll escape across the roofs to your house, leaving my lamp lit to mislead them.

— Somebody may see you.

— I shan't start till people have stopped sitting out on the roofs for the evening.

— And if they attack your house first?

— It won't happen till the Alley is asleep.

— Perhaps they'll be more reckless than you think.

He smiled.

— In that case I'll die; and who can put off the hour fixed for his death?

Zakaria looked imploringly at him, but he met with a calm and steady smile, the very embodiment of determination. He said in despair:

— They may search my house.

— Luckily they don't know we've heard of their scheme, and so, by God's grace, I'll get away before they can stop me.

They gave each other a long look, which said more than tears could: have done. Then they embraced. When he was

alone again, Qaasim mastered his feelings and went to the window overlooking the road. Life in the sector seemed to be going on as usual. Urchins were playing round the lamp-lit barrows, the cafe was thronged with men chatting, the roofs were noisy with women's gossip, the coughs of hashish smokers mingled with their jokes and curses, and the rebec wailed; but Omnibus lurked on the doorstep of the cafe, and the messengers of death skulked in every corner. 'Tracherous brood! Killers of joy! Since Idrees laughed his cruel laugh, you have been inheriting wickedness and plunging the Alley into a sea of darkness. Isn't it time for the caged bird to be set free?'

The time passed slowly and oppressively, but it brought the end of the evening for the gossips. The roofs fell silent and the Alley was deserted by barrows and urchins. The cafes emptied, and for a while there were the sounds of men going home. The drunks reeled back from Gemalia, and even the hashish dens put out their braziers. Only the companions of death remained in the darkness. Qaasim said to himself: 'Time to get moving!' He hurried to the stairs, climbed to the roof and went to the wall that divided his roof from the neighboring one. He crossed it without difficulty and was about to hasten on when a figure blocked his way, saying 'Halt!' He realized that killers were posted on the roofs and that the siege was more complete than he had thought. He turned to go back, but the man jumped after him and grabbed him with strong arms.

Qaasim summoned up all his strength, which was redoubled by fear. He surprised the man with a sudden blow in the stomach and broke free from his grip. For good measure he kicked him in the stomach, and he fell down moaning and stayed down. There was a muffled cough from a roof three or four houses away, which made Qaasim change his mind about going on. He went back to his own roof in great alarm. He stood by the stairs listening and heard footsteps coming up. Several men gathered outside his door and burst it open, almost smashing it. They rushed in and Qaasim did not waste

another second before hurrying down to the courtyard. He ran to the gate and saw a figure moving outside. He sprang at the man and seized him round the neck, then butted him and kned him in the stomach. The man fell to the ground and lay there motionless.

Qaasim hurried towards Gemalia, his heart racing. By now they would have seen that the house was empty and some would perhaps have gone on to the roof and found their companion laid out. Others might already have come down after him. He passed his uncle's tenement-house without stopping, and when he reached the end of the Alley he started running. But at the entrance to Gemalia a figure sprang into his path and shouted, very loud so as to warn the others: 'Stop, you bastard!' He lifted his cudgel before Qaasim could swerve out of his way, but another figure appeared from round the corner and clubbed the man over the head so that he fell down with a scream. Hassan's voice spoke: 'We must run for all we're worth.' Away they ran through the darkness, not caring what stones or potholes they might meet.

8 4 \*

At the entry to Watawit Alley Saadiq joined them, and at the other end they found Bullrush, Wagtail and Hamroosh with a four-wheeled carriage. They jumped in and the horse made off at great speed through the darkness, urged on by the driver's whip, shattering the silence of the night with a sound like continuous gunshots. They kept turning to look back fearfully. Saadiq reassured them:

— They'll go to Bab el Nasr, thinking you'll hide in the wasteland round the graveyards.

Qaasim said doubtfully:

— But they know you're not living near the graveyards.

However, the speed of the carriage seemed decisive, and they began to feel they were really out of danger. Qaasim sounded more relaxed as he said:

— You've managed things very well. Thank you, Saadiq! But for your warning I'd be dead by now.

Saadiq pressed his hand silently. The carriage hurried on till Muqattam Bazaar appeared in the starlight, wrapped in darkness and desolation, except for the lamp shining in Yahiaa's hut. As a precaution they left the carriage in the middle of the market place and walked to the hut. It was not long before they heard Yahiaa asking who was there. When Qaasim answered, his voice was raised again in thanksgiving. The two embraced warmly and Qaasim said:

— I owe you my life.

The old man laughed.

— It was sheer chance, but it saved the man who most deserves to live. Hurry now to the Jebel. The Jebel is your best defence.

Qaasim pressed his hand and looked lovingly and gratefully at his face in the lamplight. Yahiaa said:

— Today you are like Rifaa or Gebel. I shall go back to the Alley when victory is granted to you.

They headed eastward from the hut, making their way through the desert to the Jebel. Saadiq went in front as he knew the path best. A lightening of the darkness announced the approach of dawn, and there was dampness in the air. From far off the crow of a cock announced the birth of a new day. They reached the foot of the Jebel and followed it southward till they reached the difficult path leading up to their new home. They followed Saadiq up, going in single file because the way was so narrow. Saadiq said to Qaasim:

— We've made you a hut in the middle of ours; Ihsaan is sleeping there now.

Bullrush explained:

— Our huts are built of tins and sacking.

Hassan remarked gaily:

— Not much worse than our tenements in the Alley!

Qaasim said:

— It's enough that we don't have a trustee or a strongman.

They heard voices from above and Saadiq said:

— Our new alley is awake and waiting for you.

They looked up and saw the first light of day. Saadiq shouted at the top of his voice: 'He's here!' and men's and women's heads popped up. There were shouts and cheers, and they started singing: 'Put some henna on the sparrow's tail!' Qaasim was overjoyed.

— What a lot of them!

Saadiq said proudly:

— A new alley on the Jebel, whose numbers increase with every passing day. With the guidance of Yahiaa, all the emigrants have joined us.

Hamroosh said:

— The only trouble is that we have to make our living in far-off places for fear of meeting somebody from our Alley.

When Qaasim reach the top the men embraced him and the women shook his hand, and there was a hubbub of greetings and cheers and shouts of praise. Sakeena was among those who greeted him and she told him that Ihsaan was asleep in the hut that had been put up for them. They all went together, cheering and singing, to the 'New Alley', which was in the form of a square of huts on a plateau at the top of the Jebel. The horizon was filled with the rosy light of dawn. A man called out:

— Welcome to Qaasim, our strongman!

Qaasim's expression changed, and he shouted angrily:

— Damn all strongmen! There's no peace and no safety where they are.

The new faces were all turned to him. He continued:

— We shall raise our cudgels as Gebel did, but in the cause of the mercy that Rifaa called for. Then we'll set the Trust to



work for the common good to fulfill Adham's dream. Our task is to do that — not to be strongmen.

Hassan led him gently towards his hut saying to the crowd: — He hasn't slept a wink all night; let him get the sleep he's earned.

Qaasim threw himself down on the straw-filled sack beside his daughter, and in no time he was fast asleep. He woke in the early afternoon with a heavy head and a weary body. Sakeena brought Ihsaan and put her in his lap, and he kissed her adoringly. She handed him a mug of water, saying:

— They fetch us this water from the public pump, just as Gebel's wife used to fetch it.

He smiled, for he liked anything that connected him with the memory of Gebel or Rifaa. He examined the hut and saw walls of sacking. He hugged Ihsaan still more affectionately, then stood up and handed the child to Sakeena and left the hut. He found Saadiq and Hassan waiting for him, greeted them and sat down. He surveyed the encampment and saw only one or two women and children. Saadiq explained:

— The men have gone off to Sayida Zaynab and Zaynhum to earn a living. We've stayed behind to put you at your ease.

His eyes followed the women, who were at work cooking or washing in front of the huts, and the children who were playing here and there. He thought aloud:

— I wonder whether these women are happy.

Saadiq said:

— They are dreaming of possessing the Trust and the good things that Lady Ameena enjoys.

He smiled broadly, then looked slowly from one to the other and asked:

— What do you two have in mind for the next step?

Hassan's head nodded on his broad shoulders.

— We know just what we want.

— But how do we get it?

— We seize our chance to attack when they're off their guard.

But Saadiq protested:

— No! We hold out till more people have joined us from the Alley, and only then do we attack. That way we'll be sure of victory and there will be less casualties.

Qaasim exclaimed:

— Splendid!

They fell into a dreamy silence. A voice said shyly:

— Some food?

Qaasim looked up and saw Badria holding a dish of stewed beans and a flat loaf, and looking at him with her merry eyes. He could not help smiling as he said:

— Welcome to my messenger of life!

She put the dish down in front of him, saying:

— Long life to you!

And away she went to Saadiq's hut, which was next to his own. He was filled with tenderness and happiness and ate with relish, explaining meanwhile:

— I have a fair amount of money which will come in useful. We must hunt out all the friends who may be ready to join us. There are plenty of poor people who long for our victory, and only fear holds them back.

Hassan and Saadiq soon went off after the other men and he found himself alone. He rose and set off on a sort of tour of inspection. The children he passed were playing and not one of them paid attention to him, but the women called out their greetings. A very old woman caught his eye. Her hair was purest white, her eyes were clouded with age and her chin trembled. He went up and they exchanged greetings. He asked:

— Who are you, mother?

Her voice crackled like dry leaves.

— Hamroosh's mother.

Welcome, mother of us all. How could you think of leaving our Alley?

— Where my son is, there's my place; and it's good to be far away from the strongmen. (Then, taking courage from his smile:) I saw Rifaa when I was young.

— Really?

— Yes, upon your life. He was gentle and handsome, but I never thought he'd give his name to a sector, or that his story would be told to the music of the rebec.

He asked with growing eagerness:

— Didn't you go to him like everybody else?

— Oh no! Nobody knew us in our sector; we didn't even know ourselves. But for you, the Desert Rats would never have been talked of.

He looked at her curiously and wondered: 'How is our Ancestor today?' He went on smiling gently at her, and she blessed him profusely till he left. He walked on till he came to the top of the path down the precipitous side of the Jebel. He looked down at the desert below and then towards the horizon. In the distance he could see the domes and roofs of Cairo like the features of a single organism.

'Only one thing is needed, and from up here it looks so small. Trustee Rifaat and Strongman Guzzler seem so unimportant. From here there's no difference between Rifaat and Uncle Zakaria. It would be difficult to find your way from this place back to the Alley that has caused so much trouble if it wasn't for the Founder's house, which seems cut off from time and place — our Ancestor's house, with its amazing wall and its tall trees. But he is old, and his prestige has gone down like this sinking sun. Where are you and how are you and why do you seem as though you no longer exist? Those who pervert your will are a few yards from your house, but these women and children — far away from you on the Jebel — aren't they the closest to your heart? You will regain your proper place when the Clauses governing our Trust are carried out, just as the sun

will rise tomorrow to its zenith. Without you we should be fatherless and homeless, with no Trust and no hope.'

A sweet voice roused him:

— Coffee, Mr Qasim?

He turned and saw Badria holding out the cup to him. He took it, saying:

— Why the trouble?

— It's a pleasure to take trouble for you, sir.

He said a mental prayer for Qamar's soul and began sipping the coffee appreciatively. Between sips his eyes met hers in a smile. How good coffee tasted on the brink of the precipice, looking down on the desert!

— How old are you, Badria?

She bit her lips and murmured:

— I don't know.

But you know what has brought us to the Jebel?

She hesitated shyly.

— You!

— Me?

— You want to beat the Trustee and the strongmen and get the Trust for us; that's what my father says.

He smiled. Then he realized that he had emptied the cup and forgotten to give it back. He handed it to her.

— I wish I could thank you as you deserve.

She smiled as she turned away blushing and left. He murmured his goodbye.

8 5 \* \* \* \* \*

Late afternoon was stick-fencing time, and the men practiced difficult strokes. This began when both men and women had come back with a little money and some plain food after

a gruelling day's work. Qaasim himself was the keenest fencer. He was very happy to see the enthusiasm of his men, and their eagerness for the crucial day. There were strong men among them, but they felt towards him such love as their hate-riven Alley had never known. The cudgels rose and fell and met in terrible clashes, while the boys watched and copied, and the women rested or made the supper.

The row of huts grew longer as more people joined them. Saadiq and Hassan and Wagtail proved skilful hunters. They would lie in wait in likely places for men from the Alley and would not rest till they had persuaded them to join up and to leave the Alley secretly, inspired by hopes they had not known before. Saadiq used to say to Qaasim:

— With all this movement there's no guarantee that our enemies won't find their way to our camp.

— The only way to reach us is that narrow path; they're doomed if they come up it.

Ihsaan was his lasting joy when he played with her or rocked her or talked to her. But it was not the same when she reminded him of his lost wife; then loneliness oppressed him and he longed for her. She had been snatched from him at the beginning of the road and had left him prey to melancholy whenever he was left by himself — and sometimes to remorse, as had happened on the brink of the precipice the day of the coffee, or on the day he was carressed by a glance as gentle as an afternoon breeze. One night he could not sleep and was tormented by loneliness in the dark hut. He got up and went out to walk in the space between the huts under the starlight, enjoying the refreshing air of the summer night on the Jebel.

A voice called to him:

— Where are you going at this hour of the night?

He turned and, seeing Saadiq approaching, asked:

— Aren't you going to sleep yet?

— I caught sight of you as I was lying in front of my hut. You are dearer to me than sleep.

They walked side by side to the brink of the precipice and stood there. Qaasim said:

— Loneliness is sometimes too much to bear.

Saadiq laughed.

— It's damnable.

They looked towards the horizon. The world seemed reduced to a sparkling sky above an earth plunged in darkness.

Saadiq said:

— Most of your men are husbands or have families; they don't feel lonely.

Qaasim tried to sound disapproving.

— Whatever do you mean?

— A man like you can't do without a wife.

Feeling how right Saadiq was, Qaasim spoke in a tone of protest:

— How could I marry again after Qamar?

— If she could speak to you, she'd say the same as me.

Confused emotions raged in Qaasim's heart. He said as if talking to himself:

— It'd be like a betrayal of her love and tenderness.

— The dead don't need our loyalty.

Qaasim thought: 'Is this true, or just what I want to hear? Truth can sometimes taste bitter. You have never faced up to yourself as frankly as you have faced up to the condition of the Alley. He who fixed these things in your world is He who fixed the stars in the sky. The simple truth is that your heart beats still, just as it has always done.' He sighed audibly. Saadiq said:

— You, more than anybody, need a companion.

When he got back to his hut he found Sakeena standing at the door. She looked up at him anxiously.

— I saw that you'd gone out when I thought you were fast asleep.

Qaasim was so much troubled by his thoughts that he said without any preliminaries:

— Look at the way Saadiq is urging me to get married!

She seized on this heaven-sent opportunity.

— I wish I'd been the first to say it.

— You?!

— Yes, sir! It wounds my heart to see you sitting there so lonely and full of thoughts.

He pointed at the sleeping huts.

— All those people are with me.

— Yes, but you have nobody with you at home. I'm an old woman with one foot in the grave.

He felt that his hesitation was a proof that he accepted her idea. Still he did not go into his hut but said mournfully:

— I shan't find a wife like her.

— That's true, but there are promising girls.

They exchanged glances in the darkness. She was silent for a while, then murmured:

— Badria! What a sweet girl!

His heart pounded.

— That little girl!

Sakeena suppressed a crafty smile.

— She's a ripe little thing when she brings a meal or some coffee.

He turned away.

— You devil! A curse on your brood!

The news was joyfully received throughout the encampment on the Jebel. Saadiq almost danced, and his mother's whoops of joy could be heard in the desert below. Qaasim received many congratulations. They celebrated the wedding without bringing in any professionals. Some of the women danced, including Badria's mother, and Wagtail sang in a sweet voice:

Here I go a-fishing.

Better than just wishing!

The bridegroom's procession wound round the huts, lit by the lamps of heaven. Sakeena moved with Ihsaan to Hassan's hut, leaving Qaasim's hut for the bridal pair.

8 6 \*

It was with real pleasure that Qaasim sat on a skin in front of the hut watching Badria knead dough. She was, to be sure, very young but what woman was more energetic or efficient? She stopped to stretch and pushed the hair back from her brow with the back of her hand. Her charm invaded the inmost recesses of his heart. A blush showed that she could feel his eyes on her and she stopped flirtatiously. He laughed and leaned across to her, took her plait and kissed it repeatedly, then sat back again. He was happy and carefree, as he usually was in the brief moments when he escaped from his companions and his thoughts. Not far off, Ihsaan was toddling about, watched by Sakeena who was resting on a rock.

There was a commotion at the top of the path, and he saw Saadiq, Hassan and some other friends coming towards him, clustered round a man whom he recognized as 'Trinket' the garbage man from Rifaa's sector. Qaasim stood up at once to meet them and the women whooped with joy, as they did whenever a new man came to the Jebel from the Alley. The man embraced Qaasim, saying:

— I'm with you, and I've brought my cudgel.

Qaasim said happily:

— Welcome Trinket! We don't make any difference between one sector and another; it's all one Alley, and the Trust belongs to everybody.

The Rifaaite laughed as he said:

— They're wondering where your hideout is, and they



expect trouble from you, but many hearts long for your victory.

Trinket looked around, taking in the huts and the people, and exclaimed in amazement:

— All these people are with you!

Saadiq said:

— Trinket has brought important news.

Qaasim looked at him curiously and Trinket told him:

— Omnibus is marrying today for the fifth time; the bridegroom's procession will take place this evening.

Hassan said eagerly:

— There won't be another chance like this to destroy him.

The men were all enthusiastic and Saadiq said:

— One day we shall attack the Alley, and every strongman we can get out of the way before then will make the fight easier and the outcome more certain.

Qaasim thought for a while, then said:

— We'll attack the procession just as the strongmen do; but remember, we are attacking to put an end to strongman methods.

A little before midnight the men gathered on the brink of the precipice. They followed Qaasim down one by one, gripping their cudgels. The sky was clear, and the full moon was at the zenith, giving a dreamy quality to the world. They reached the desert and headed north, behind Muqattam Bazaar, keeping to the foot of the Jebel so as not to lose the way. When they were near Hind's Rock a figure came towards them. He had been sent to scout for them and he told Qaasim:

— The procession will go towards Bab el Nasr.

— But our bridegrooms' processions usually go towards Gemalia.

— Perhaps they are keeping away from where they think you are.

Qaasim thought rapidly, and said:

— Saadiq will take a party to Bab el-Fotouh. Bullrush and another party will go to the desert beside Bab el-Nasr. Hassan

and I will wait with the rest outside Bab el-Nasr Gate. You will attack when I give the signal.

The men split up into three parties. Before they set off, Qaasim said:

— Keep your blows for Omnibus and his men; the rest will be your brothers tomorrow.

The parties went their different ways, and he and Hassan with their party followed the Jebel northwards, then turned left to the cemetery road and hid behind the gateway. He and his men watched the road, while Saadiq lay in wait to the right and Bullrush to the left. Hassan said:

— The procession will stop at Falaki Cafe.

Qaasim said:

— We must attack before they get to it, so as not to harm anybody who has nothing to do with us.

They waited tensely in the dark. Hassan said suddenly:

— I can't stop thinking how Shaabaan was killed.

Qaasim replied:

— The strongmen have had countless victims.

Saadiq whistled and Bullrush followed suit. They became still more determined. Hassan said:

— If Omnibus killed the people of our sector will soon join us.

— And if the rest come to destroy us, we'll kill them on the path up the Jebel.

These dreams were like the moonlight. Within the hour either they would have won their victory or their hopes would have been lost with their lives. Qaasim seemed to see the figure of Qindeel and to hear the voice of Qamar. It was as if an age had passed since he had watched the flocks. He gripped his cudgel tighter and said to himself: 'We can't possibly be beaten.' Hassan asked:

— Do you hear?

He pricked up his ears and heard faint music.

— Get ready! The procession is coming.

The sounds drew nearer and clearer. Then they heard the pipes and the drums and 'Ohs' and 'Ahs' and there were cheers and shouts. Then by the light of its torches, the procession appeared and they saw Omnibus surrounded by a ring of dancers juggling with sticks. Hassan asked:

— Shall I whistle to Bullrush?

— When the front of the procession reaches the garlic stall.

The procession came closer and the dancing and juggling grew wilder. One dancer in a frenzy began leaping in the air and rushing round in circles in front of the procession at fantastic speed, spinning his stick like a fan round his upheld arm. After each circle he moved forward a step till he passed the garlic stall. The procession followed him very slowly, till its head reached the stall. At that moment Hassan whistled three times, and Bullrush and his men swept down from Tamma'in Alley on the tail end of the procession, brandishing their cudgels and breaking its ranks. There were howls of rage and confusion. Hassan whistled three more times and Saadiq and his men fell on the middle of the procession from el-Samakein before it had recovered from the first attack. At once, Qaasim and his men rushed out as one man from under the gateway and attacked the front of the procession.

Omnibus and his men recovered from the shock, raised their cudgels and joined battle. It was a bitter fight and many peaceable people fled and took refuge in the alleyways. The cudgels fell still more savagely and blood spurted from heads and faces. The lanterns were smashed and the flowers were scattered and trampled underfoot. Screams went up from windows round about and the cafes locked their doors. Omnibus hit out cruelly and deftly, and his stick flew about like a mad thing, now here, now there. The violence increased, and the men were filled with hatred black as night.

Suddenly Omnibus found himself face to face with Saadiq. With a scream of 'Bastard!', he aimed a blow at him which met the counter-blow of Saadiq, who quaked and staggered. Om-

nibus raised his cudgel and brought it down a second time. Saadiq took it on his cudgel, which he gripped with both hands, but the power of the blow forced him to his knees. Omnibus was about to land the third and fatal blow when he saw Hassan bearing down on him like a wild beast to save his friend, and he turned towards him in fury, yelling: 'You too, son of Zakaria, son of a bitch!' and aimed a terrible blow at him, which would have killed him if he had not dodged it with a sideways leap. As he jumped he jabbed Omnibus in the neck with the end of his stick. The blow prevented Omnibus for a few moments from hitting again. Hassan recovered his balance and struck Omnibus on the forehead with terrible force. The blood spurted, and in a moment the cudgel had slipped from his hand. He staggered back a few steps and fell motionless on his back. A man shouted above the noise of the cudgels: 'Omnibus is dead.' Bullrush caught him on the nose with his cudgel and he retreated and fell over a prostrate body. Qaasim's men grew still bolder and their blows fiercer, while Omnibus's men flagged, frightened to see how many had fallen. They withdrew and then fled.

Qaasim's men gathered round him, panting. Some of them were bleeding, others were carrying the wounded. By the light from the cafe windows they looked at the bodies lying on the ground. Some were dead, others just unconscious. Hamroosh stood over Omnibus and shouted:

— Your body can rest in peace, Shaabaan.

Qaasim drew him to his side and said:

— The day of victory is near, the day when the other strongmen will meet their fate, and we'll become the masters of the Alley and sharers in our Trust and loyal children to Gebelaawi.

When they came back to the Jebel, the women greeted them with whoops of joy, and news of the victory flew round. Qaasim went to his hut, and Badria said to him:

— You are covered with dust and blood; you must wash before you go to sleep.

When he lay down after his wash he moaned with pain. She brought him some food and waited for him to sit up and eat, but he was in a state between sleeping and waking. He felt relief that was almost happiness but tinged with anxious feelings close to grief. Badria said:

— Eat your food!

He looked up at her with heavy, dreamy eyes.

— Soon you'll see my victory, Qamar.

He realized at once that his tongue had slipped and he saw her face fall. He sat up in bed and said with a mixture of affection and embarrassment:

— Your food is so tasty.

But she frowned and did not respond. He took a mouthful of the hummus and said:

— It's my turn to invite you to eat.

She turned her face away, muttering:

— She was old and she wasn't beautiful.

He slumped as if broken and reproached her sadly:

— Don't speak ill of her! A woman like her deserves to be remembered with mercy.

She looked back at him hopefully but saw terrible sadness in his face and she turned away again and took refuge in silence.

8 7 \* \* \* \* \*

The losers of the battle slunk back, bowed by shame. They kept as far away as they could from the lights of Omnibus' home, which sparkled with rejoicing and merry-making. Each man went to ground in his own home. The black news spread like fire, accompanied by howls on all sides, and the wedding

feast was snuffed out as if heaped over with earth. There were wails of grief for Omnibus and for those of his men who had been killed. The calamity had also involved some Rifaaites and Gebelites, who had been in the procession.

Who was the culprit? Qaasim, the shepherd — Qaasim, who would have had to stay a pauper all his life but for Qamar! One man said he had followed Qaasim's party back to their hide-out. People wondered whether they would remain in their stronghold on the Jebel till they had destroyed all the men of the Alley. Those who were asleep woke up and went out into the road or the courtyards. One Gebelite shouted angrily:

— Kill all the Desert Rats!

But Bruiser silenced him.

— They've done nothing wrong; their strongman and many of their men have been killed.

— Set Muqattam on fire!

— Bring Qaasim's body for the dogs to eat!

— I'll drink his blood or divorce my wife.

— The rat! The vermin! The coward!

— He thinks the Jebel will protect him.

— Nothing but his tomb will protect him.

— He used to accept a millieme from me and kiss the ground.

— He used to pretend to be so nice and friendly to us; now he betrays us and kills our men.

Next day the whole Alley turned out for a mass funeral. The day after that the strongmen held a meeting in the house of Trustee Rifaat, who was beside himself with anger and resentment. He said with bitter sarcasm:

— We'd better barricade ourselves into the Alley, so as to be safe from death.

Guzzler was more upset than any of them, but he wanted to play things down to lessen his responsibility. He said:

— It was only a fight between one strongman and some men from his sector.

Bruiser protested:

— One man in our sector was killed and three wounded.

Pilgrim Grim added:

— And one of our men was killed.

Rifaat said craftily to Guzzler:

— It's a blow to your reputation, Strongman of the Alley.

His face puckered up with rage:

— A shepherd! God! You must be joking!

The Trustee was not going to be put off.

— A shepherd, maybe; but he's become a menace. We didn't take his ravings seriously for a while and turned a blind eye, in honor of his wife, but his wickedness knows no limits. He pretended to be humble till he was powerful and could destroy a strongman and his friends. Now he's in his stronghold on the Jebel and his ambition will stop at nothing.

They exchanged angry glances. The Trustee went on:

— He's luring people out. It's disastrous — a disaster for the whole Alley. We needn't pretend not to know that. He promises the Trust to the people. The Trust won't be enough even for his friends, but nobody will believe that. The beggars won't believe it — and what a lot of them there are in this alley of beggars! He promises to put an end to strongmen, and the cowards are delighted — and what a lot of them there are in this alley of cowards! You always find people here on the winning side, so we'll be lost if we don't move.

Guzzler bellowed:

— He's surrounded by rats. It'll be easy to kill them.

Pilgrim Grim asked:

— But they have their stronghold on the Jebel, don't they?

Bruiser said:

— We must study the Jebel till we find a way to them.

Rifaat urged them on:

— Do that! As I said, we're lost if we don't move.

Guzzler grew still angrier and said to the Trustee meaningfully:

— You remember how I planned to kill him while his wife was alive, and her ladyship objected?

The Trustee avoided the eyes that were fixed on him and said almost apologetically:

— It's no use dwelling on our mistakes. (Then, after a brief silence:) These bonds of kinship have been respected in our Alley for a very long time.

There was unusual uproar outside, seeming to indicate some fresh disaster. They were in a tense state of nerves, and the Trustee called the gatekeeper and asked him what was going on. The man reported:

— They say the shepherd has joined Qaasim, taking all the Alley's flock with him.

Guzzler jumped up, shouting:

— The dog — Alley of dogs — damn him!

The Trustee asked:

— What sector does the shepherd come from?

The gatekeeper answered:

— The Desert Rats. He's called 'Crookstaff'.

8 8 \* \* \* \* \*

— Welcome, Crookstaff!

Qaasim embraced him and the shepherd said enthusiastically:

— I was never against you; my heart was always with you. If I hadn't been afraid I'd have been one of the first to join you. As soon as I heard of the death of Omnibus, damn him, I hurried to you bringing your enemies' sheep.

Qaasim glanced at the flock in the space between the huts. The women had collected round them and there was a tumult of joy. He laughed.



— It's fair game after all the property of ours that they've stolen in the Alley.

That day more people than ever rallied to Qaasim. Their determination grew stronger and their hopes higher. However, Qaasim was awakened very early next morning by a strange commotion. He left his hut at once and saw his men hurrying towards him in confusion. Saadiq said:

— The Alley has come out to get its revenge, and they're gathering at the foot of the path.

Trinket said:

— I was the first to go off to work and I saw them when I was a few steps from the desert. I hurried back and some of them chased me and caught me in the back with a stone. I called Saadiq and Hassan, and a lot of our people came to the top of the path, realized the danger and threw stones at the attackers till they backed off.

Qaasim looked towards the top of the path and saw Hassan and others standing there with stones in their hands. He said:

— We can hold them off there with ten men.

Hamroosh said:

— If they come up now it'll be suicide; let them come if they want!

The men and women gathered round Qaasim, leaving the huts empty. The men brought their cudgels, and the women baskets of stones that had been prepared for such a day. The first rays of the sun shone from a clear sky. Qaasim said:

— Is there another path to the town?

Saadiq said gloomily:

— There's a path further south, two hours' walk along the Jebel.

Bullrush said:

— I don't think we have enough water for more than two days.

There were murmurs of anxiety, especially among the women. Qaasim said:

— They've come for revenge, not for a siege. If they besiege us we'll rely on the other path to break through the blockade.

He was thinking hard, but only calm showed in his face, at which they were all gazing. If they were besieged they would have the greatest difficulty in fetching water by the southern path. And if he and his men attacked, could they be sure of victory against men led by Guzzler, Bruiser and Pilgrim Grim? What fate lay in wait for them at the end of this day? He went back to his hut and came out clutching his cudgel, then joined Hassan and his men at the top of the path. Hassan told him:

— None of them dares come close.

Qaasim went to the brink of the precipice and saw his enemies in a crescent formation in the desert, far out of range of any stones. He was horrified at their numbers, but he could not pick out the strongmen among them. He looked out across the waste at the Great House, the home of Gebelaawi, who was sunk in silence as though he did not care that his children were fighting for his sake. How they needed his tremendous strength, which had subdued these places in times gone by! Qaasim would perhaps not have been so anxious had it not been for the memory of the death of Rifaa near to his Ancestor's house.

He felt an urge to shout at the top of his voice 'Gebelaawi!' as the people of the Alleys sometimes do, but he heard women's voices nearby and turned to look. He saw his men strung out along the brink of the precipice looking at their enemies, and the women approaching the same places. He shouted to them to go back, and when they hesitated he shouted still louder that they must get some food ready and carry on work as usual. He kept on at the women till they obeyed his orders. Saadiq came over, and said:

— Well done! What I'm most afraid of is the effect of Guzzler's name on us.

Hassan said:

— There's nothing for it but to strike. (He waved his cudgel). It'd be impossible for us to go about getting a living,

now that they know our hiding place. There's nothing for it but to attack.

Qaasim turned his head and looked at the Great House.

— You're right. What do you say Saadiq?

— Let's wait till night comes.

Hassan protested:

— Waiting would only harm us, and night would be no use to us in a battle.

Qaasim mused:

— What can their plan be?

Saadiq said:

— To force us to come down to them.

Qaasim thought for a while, then said:

— If Guzzler is killed, victory is ours. (He looked at the two of them and added:) If he falls, Bruiser and Pilgrim Grim will fight for his place.

The sun climbed higher and the stones gleamed, promising a scorching day. Hassan asked:

— Can you two tell me what's to be done?

His question clearly referred to the siege, but there was not time for either of them to answer before there came a woman's scream from the direction of the encampment followed immediately by more screams. They heard a voice shouting:

— We've been attacked from the other side.

The men pulled back from the brink and rushed to the southern end of the encampment. Qaasim told those who stayed to defend the path to be still more watchful. He ordered Trinket to fetch the able-bodied women to join the guard on the path. Then he ran with Hassan and Saadiq towards the encampment to join his men there. They could all see Guzzler leading a large company of men from the southern end of the Jebel. Qaasim said angrily:

— He sent the others to distract us so that he could make his way round the Jebel and reach us by the southern path.

Hassan's gigantic body was pulsing with energy. He roared:

— He's walking to his death.

Qaasim bellowed:

— We must win and we shall win.

His men spread out on either side like two strong arms. The enemy came on, their cudgels bristling like thorns in a thicket, till every detail was clearly visible. Saadiq said:

— Neither Bruiser nor Pilgrim Grim is with them.

Qaasim realized that Bruiser and Pilgrim Grim must be leading the party at the foot of the Jebel. He guessed the two of them would attack whatever the cost, but he told no one his thoughts. He went a few steps forward, brandishing his cudgel, and his men gripped theirs. They heard Guzzler's harsh voice shouting:

— You shan't have a decent burial, you bastards!

Qaasim rushed in to the attack, surrounded by his men. The enemy hurled themselves forward like an avalanche, and the onslaught began with a great roaring and a banging of cudgels. At the same time the women defending the path pelted stones at an attack beginning from below. Every one of Qaasim's men was locked in combat with one of the enemy. Qaasim and Freewheeler were fencing violently and skillfully. Guzzler's cudgel broke Hamroosh's collar-bone. Saadiq fought repeatedly against Zaynhum till Hassan knocked him out with a furious blow. Guzzler felled Crookstaff with a thump on the neck. Qaasim managed to hit Freewheeler on the ear and he screamed and retreated, then collapsed. Zaynhum charged fiercely at Saadiq, who was too quick for him and jabbed him in the stomach twice, bringing him down. Trinket got the better of Hafnaawi, but Guzzler put his arm out of action before he could enjoy his victory. Hassan took a swing at Guzzler, but he dodged it nimbly and lifted his cudgel to strike back. Before he could do so, Qaasim aimed a blow at him, but he took it on his cudgel. Wagtail rushed across to give him a third blow, but Guzzler butted him in the face, breaking his nose. Guzzler seemed to be an irresistible force.

The battle grew fiercer and the cudgels banged together mercilessly and there was a stream of curses and insults. The blood flowed under the burning sun, and on each side one man after another fell. Guzzler was burning with rage at this unexpectedly brave resistance, and he grew ever fiercer in his attacks, his blows and his cruelty. On his side, Qaasim told Hassan and Bullrush to seize the next opportunity to join him in an attack on Guzzler to break the bond that held the attackers together. At that moment one of the women defending the path rushed over to scream a warning:

— They're coming up under cover of pastry boards.

The men of the Jebel were terrified. Guzzler yelled:

— You shan't have a decent burial, you bastards!

Qaasim called to his men:

— Win your victory before the criminals get to the top!

He charged at Guzzler, flanked by Hassan and Bullrush. The strongman lashed out at him, but he took the blow on his cudgel. Bullrush tried to get in a quick smash, but the brute caught him on the chin and he fell flat on his face. Hassan leapt towards Guzzler and they exchanged a couple of blows. Then Hassan threw himself on him for a fight to the death. The women at the top of the path were screaming and some of them began running away. The position was critical. Qaasim hastily sent Saadiq with reinforcements to the brink of the precipice, then he rushed at Guzzler, but 'Tortoise' lumbered into his path and a fierce battle ensued between them.

Hassan pushed Guzzler with all his might, forcing him to retreat one step, then spat in his eyes, bellowing, kicked him on the knee, then charged with terrific speed and butted him in the stomach like a mad bull. The tyrant lost his balance and fell on his back. Hassan knelt on top of him and pressed his cudgel on the man's neck with all the strength of both his hands. Men came up to defend their strongman, but Qaasim and some of his men kept them off. Guzzler's legs thrashed, his eyes bulged, his face went crimson and he began to choke.

Suddenly Hassan jumped up to stand over his weakened enemy, brought his cudgel down with wild fury and smashed his skull. He shouted in a thunderous voice:

— Guzzler is dead. Your Strongman is dead. See his body!

The unexpected death of Guzzler had a powerful effect, bringing new hope to one side, despair to the other. Hassan joined Qaasim in his struggle, and every blow he struck hit its mark. All over the battlefield men were crouching and pouncing, cudgels rising and falling. A cloud of dust was rising, and the fighters were crowned with blood. There were groans, shouts, curses, screams, roars. Every few minutes a man staggered and fell, or drew back and fled. The fallen lay strewn on the ground and blood glistened in the sun.

Qaasim went aside and looked towards the top of the path where the situation worried him. He saw Saadiq and his men sending down basketfuls of stones with an urgency that showed how near was the danger from below. He heard the women, among them his wife, screaming for help. He saw some of Saadiq's men grasping their cudgels, ready to meet those who persisted in coming up under the hail of stones. He realized how critical the position was and at once went over to Guzzler's body, which was now some way from the fighting because the men from the Alley had retreated. He began dragging it towards the path and called Saadiq, who hurried over and helped him to carry the body to the top of the path. They threw it over and it plunged down and rolled to the feet of the attackers under their pastry boards. There was consternation; Pilgrim Grim's angry voice rang out:

— On! Up! Damn the criminals!

Qaasim shouted scornfully, with amazing cool:

— Come on up! That's your strongman's body, and behind me are the bodies of the rest of your people. Come on up! We're waiting for you.

He gave a sign to the men and women and they rained down stones till the vanguard of the attackers halted and began to

retreat slowly, in spite of the urging of Pilgrim Grim and Bruiser. Qaasim heard a buzz of rebellion and argument and complaint, and he shouted:

— Bruiser! Pilgrim Grim! Come on! Don't run away!

Bruiser's voice was heard, full of hatred:

— Come down if you're men! Come down you women, you bastards!

Pilgrim Grim stood still amid the wave of retreating men and yelled:

— May I die if I don't drink your blood, you filthy shepherd.

Qaasim picked up a stone and hurled it with all his might. The shower of stones went on, and the retreat grew faster till it was almost a rout. Then Hassan came across, wiping away the blood that flowed from his forehead, and said:

— The battle is over. Those of them that are alive are running away towards the south.

Qaasim shouted:

— Call the men to pursue them.

But Saadiq said:

— Your mouth and chin are bleeding.

He wiped his mouth with his hand, looked at it and saw that it was bright red. Hassan said sadly:

— Eight of us have been killed, and those who are still alive have too many injuries to do anything.

He looked down through the shower of stones and saw his enemies rushing down the path. Saadiq said:

— If they'd finished their climb they wouldn't have found a single man able to stand against them. (He kissed Qaasim's bleeding chin.) Your cleverness has saved us.

Qaasim ordered two men to stay on guard at the top of the path and sent two others after the fleeing enemy to obtain news. Then he, Saadiq and Hassan limped their painful and weary way back to the battlefield, where only the corpses of the dead remained. It had been a bloodbath — and what a bloodbath! Eight of his men had been killed and ten of the

enemy, besides Guzzler. Not one of his surviving men was without a fracture or a wound. They retired to their huts and the women began tending their injuries, while the huts of the dead resounded with crying and wailing. Badria came up sadly and invited them to go to the hut for their wounds to be washed. Then Sakeena came, carrying Ihsaan who was crying loudly. The sun was pouring down its heat from the zenith, and in the sky kites and crows circled or hovered and swooped. The air was heavy with the smell of blood and dust. Ihsaan could not stop crying, but no one took any notice of her. Even the gigantic Hassan seemed to be reeling. Saadiq murmured:

— May God have mercy on our dead!

Qaasim said:

— May God have mercy on both the living and the dead!

Hassan's spirits began to revive and he said:

— Soon we shall win our victory, and the Alley will say goodbye to the age of blood and terror.

Qaasim said:

To hell with terror and blood!

8 9 \*

Never before had the Alley witnessed such a disaster. The men came back silent, dazed, exhausted and with eyes down-cast behind leaden eyelids. They found that news of the defeat had gone before them and the tenements throbbed with the sound of wailing and breast-beating. The story spread round neighboring alleys, and the terrible reputation of our Alley became the talk of malicious tongues. It became clear that all the Desert Rat families had fled their sector, fearing reprisals. Their houses and shops were empty, and no one doubted that they would join the victorious son of their sector, adding to his



numbers and his strength. Grief hung over the mourning Alley, but it was a grief that breathed out hatred and resentment and a longing for revenge.

Some men from Gebel's sector began talking about who should be Strongman of the Alley, and soon the same question was being asked in Rifaa's sector. Bad feeling spread like dust in a sandstorm. Trustee Rifaat heard what ideas were spawning and sent for Pilgrim Grim and Bruiser to meet him. They arrived, each surrounded by his strongest men, so that the Trustee's drawing room was packed. Each party occupied one side of the room, as if it were no longer safe for them to mix with their neighbors. The Trustee saw the meaning of this and grew still more worried. He said:

— You know a disaster has struck us, but we're not dead yet, we're not finished yet. We still have the strength to win, as long as we stay united. Otherwise it's goodbye to us.

One of the Gebelite men said:

— We shall strike the last blow, as sure as day follows night.

Pilgrim Grim complained:

— If they weren't in their stronghold on the Jebel they'd all be dead.

A third man spoke:

— Guzzler faced them after a long, hard march that was enough to bring a camel to its knees.

The Trustee asked impatiently:

— Tell me how united you are.

Bruiser replied:

— We're brothers, thank God, and we'll stay that way.

— That's what you say, but if you come in such numbers it shows how you mistrust each other.

Pilgrim Grim said:

— No, it's because of everybody's thirst for revenge.

The Trustee stood tensely, his eyes darting from face to grim face, and said:

— Be honest! You have one eye on each other and one eye

on Guzzler's vacant post of Chief Strongman. The Alley will know no peace as long as this lasts. What I'm most afraid of is that cudgels will come into it and you'll all be destroyed — a tasty morsel for Qaasim to gobble up.

Several voices exclaimed together:

— God forbid!

The Trustee said in a loud, clear voice:

— There are now only two sectors: Gebel's and Rifaa's. There's no need for one strongman over both. Let us agree on that and be one force against the emigrants.

For a few moments there was an awed silence; then several voices said without enthusiasm:

— Yes! Yes!

Bruiser said:

— We'll be content with that, though we have always been the lords of the Alley.

Pilgrim Grim said truculently:

— Let's accept but without any thanks. There are no lords and commoners here, especially since the Desert Rats went away. Who can deny that Rifaa was the noblest man our Alley has known?

Bruiser retorted furiously:

— Pilgrim Grim! I know what's going on in your mind.

One of the Rifaaites was about to speak, but the Trustee thundered:

— Tell me whether or not you're going to be men. If any news of your weakness gets out, the Desert Rats will sweep down from the Jebel like wolves. Tell me, can you stand united, or must I look somewhere else?

Several men, scattered about the room, shouted:

— Quiet! Shame on you all! Our Alley is on the brink of losing everything!

They looked submissively at the Trustee. He said:

— You're still superior in numbers and strength, but don't attack the Jebel again. (They looked puzzled. He went on:) We

must besiege them on the Jebel. We'll mount a guard on the two paths leading up, and either they'll die of hunger or they'll be forced to come down to you and you'll destroy them.

Bruiser said:

— That's the answer. That's what I told poor Guzzler but he thought a siege would be cowardice and refused to do anything but attack.

Pilgrim Grim said:

— That's the answer all right. But we must put it off till our men have rested.

The Trustee called on them to make a pact of brotherhood and cooperation and they shook hands and swore oaths.

It was plain to everyone in the following days that Bruiser and Pilgrim Grim were treating their followers more harshly, to cover up the traces of their defeat. They spread the word in the Alley that, but for Guzzler's stupidity, Qaasim would have been destroyed without difficulty; Guzzler's insistence on climbing the Jebel had upset his men and sapped their strength and courage, so that they had met the enemy in the worst possible condition. People believed what they were told, and anyone who showed any doubt was insulted and cursed and beaten. As for who should be Strongman of the Alley, no one was allowed to talk about it at all, at least not openly; but many discussed in the hashish dens who would succeed Guzzler after victory.

In spite of the agreement and the oath, an atmosphere of mistrust developed. Each strongman was on his guard, and neither would move from his headquarters without a crowd of followers. However, preparations for the day of vengeance did not stop for a single moment. They agreed that Bruiser and his men should camp by the path from Muqattam Bazaar and that Pilgrim Grim should camp with his men by the Citadel path. They would stick to their positions — a lifetime if need be! The women would do all the buying and selling and would bring them food.

The evening before they were to set out, they gathered in the various hashish dens, bringing jugs of ale and wine, and they went on smoking hashish and getting drunk till late in the night. Pilgrim Grim's men said goodnight to him in front of his tenement-house in Rifaa's sector, leaving him in a high state of merriment and exultation. He pushed open the door and staggered down the passage humming: 'What is my first-oh...' But he did not finish. A figure leapt at him from behind, put one hand over his mouth, and plunged a knife into his heart with the other. The body shuddered in his arms and he lowered it without a sound and laid it out gently on the ground, motionless in the pitch darkness.

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A terrible uproar woke the Alley very early next morning. Windows opened and heads appeared, turning quickly towards the tenement-house in which lived Pilgrim Grim, strongman of Rifaa's people. A large crowd had gathered, shouting and wailing. The entry passage of the house was packed with men and women. There was much asking of questions and giving of explanations, but from the many eyes red with crying it was clear that the news was very bad. People hurried over from every tenement-house and every hovel, and soon Bruiser arrived with his retinue. The crowd parted for them and they reached the passageway. Bruiser shouted:

— What a disaster! Oh Pilgrim Grim! If only I could have been your ransom!

The crying and the wailing and the questions stopped, but he didn't hear a single friendly word. He spoke again:

— A foul plot! No strongman would be guilty of such treachery, but Qaasim, the shepherd, he's a beggar, not a

strongman. I shan't be happy till I've thrown his body to the dogs.

A woman shouted sarcastically:

— Congratulations, Bruiser, Strongman of the Alley!

He scowled. Those nearest to him were silent, but there was a murmuring from further back. He bellowed:

— Women had better keep their mouths shut on this dark day.

The woman spoke again:

— Let those who have ears hear!

There was uproar. When it had died down Bruiser said:

— A cunning plot! Hatched in the dark to drive a wedge between us!

Another woman shouted:

— Plot indeed! Qaasim and his Desert Rats are on the Jebel, and Pilgrim Grim was murdered here in the midst of his own people and his ambitious neighbors.

Bruiser yelled:

— A mad woman! Anybody who listens to her is mad. If you go on like this we'll soon be killing each other as Qaasim has planned.

Ajug smashed at Bruiser's feet. As he and his men retreated, he said:

— The bastard knew how to spoil things between us.

He went off at once to Trustee's House. The uproar grew worse after he had gone. Two men — a Rifaaites and a Gebelite — started a violent quarrel, two women followed suit, and urchins from the two sectors began fighting. A war of words broke out, with torrents of abuse pouring from the windows. Confusion ruled the Alley till the men of each sector had regrouped, brandishing their cudgels. The Trustee left his house, surrounded by servants and henchmen, and made his way to the point between the two sectors. He shouted at the top of his voice:

— Come to your senses! Anger is going to blind you to your real enemy, Pilgrim Grim's murderer.

One of the Rifaaites shouted:

— How do you know that? Which of the Desert Rats would have dared come into the Alley?

Rifaat yelled:

— Why would the Gebelites have killed Pilgrim Grim today when they most need him?

— Ask the culprits, don't ask us.

— The Rifaaites will never submit to a Gebelite strongman.

— They'll pay dearly for his blood.

The Trustee shouted again:

— Don't fit in with the plot, or you'll see Qaasim descending on you like the plague.

— Let Qaasim come if he wants to, but Bruiser isn't going to be strongman over us.

The Trustee was in despair.

— We're finished. We'll be ruined.

There were shouts of:

— Ruin is better than Bruiser.

A stone was flung from Rifaa's sector and landed among the men of Gebel's sector, who replied in kind. The Trustee retreated hastily. Stones flew in both directions. In no time the two sectors were involved in a bloody battle, extending even to the rooftops, where women pelted each other with bits of brick and stone and clay and wood. The battle lasted a long time, although the Rifaaites were fighting without their strongman and many of them fell before Bruiser's unerring blows.

Women began shouting from the windows, but their cries were lost in the noise of the battle. However, they could be seen pointing in horror, now to the east and now to the west. People turned to look, and saw Qaasim in front of the Great House bearing down with a party of his men brandishing their cudgels, while Hassan approached from the opposite direction with another party. Warning shouts rang out, and events

followed one another quickly. The fighting stopped. Instinctively they drew together, those who were winning and those who were losing, and divided into two parties to meet the attackers. Bruiser shouted furiously:

— I said it was a trick, and you didn't believe me.

They got ready for battle in a terrible state of exhaustion and despair. But Qaasim suddenly stopped his approach and so did Hassan, seeming to act on one plan. Qaasim shouted at the top of his voice.

— We don't want to harm anybody. There is no victor and no vanquished. We are all children of one Alley and one Ancestor, and the Trust belongs to everybody.

Bruiser shouted:

— A new trick!

Qaasim said angrily:

— Don't force them to fight to defend your position as strongman. Defend it by yourself if you like.

Bruiser screamed:

— Attack!

He rushed at Qaasim's party, and a number of men followed him while others attacked Hassan and his men. But many hung back. The wounded and the exhausted slipped away to their houses, and the hesitant followed them. Only Bruiser and his gang were left. Nevertheless they put up a savage fight, lashing out desperately with cudgels, fists, feet and heads. Bruiser concentrated his attack on Qaasim with blind hatred. They fought fiercely, and Qaasim took his opponent's blows nimbly and warily on his cudgel. Meanwhile Qaasim's men overcame Bruiser's gang by sheer numbers and they went down under dozens of cudgels. Hassan and Saadiq leapt on Bruiser, who was still battling with Qaasim. Saadiq thumped his cudgel and Hassan brought his stick down on his head, once, twice, three times. Bruiser dropped his cudgel and leapt away, then fell flat on his face like a slaughtered ox. The battle was over and the sounds of cudgels and screams stopped. The victors stood

panting and wiping the blood from their faces and hands, in spite of which they were grinning at the thought of triumph and peace. There were howls from many windows. Bruiser's men lay scattered over the ground under the scorching sun. Saadiq said to Qaasim:

— You've won. God has given you victory. Our Ancestor doesn't get his choices wrong. The Alley will hear no howls of sorrow after today.

Qaasim smiled calmly, then turned with determination and looked at Trustee's House. All eyes were fixed on him.

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Qaasim led his men to Trustee's House. They found the door and windows locked, and all was wrapped in gloomy silence. Hassan knocked hard on the door but no one answered. Several men banded together to heave at the door till it burst open. Qaasim went in, followed by his men, but they found no trace of the gatekeeper or any servants. They hurried to the drawing room, then went over the rooms on all three floors. It was plain that the Trustee, his family and his servants had fled. Qaasim indeed was not sorry about this, for deep down he had not wanted the Trustee harmed, for the sake of his wife, without whom he himself would have been destroyed at the outset. But Hassan and the others were furious at the escape of this man who had made people taste poverty and humiliation all his life.

Thus Qaasim completed his victory and became the undisputed headman of the Alley. He took over the duties of the trusteeship, for the Trust had to have a trustee. The Desert Rats returned to their sector and with them came all those who had left for fear of the strongmen, led by Yahiaa. Forty days passed



peacefully, wounds healed, minds were steadied and hearts were calmed.

Then one day Qaasim stood in front of the Great House and called everyone to him, both men and women. They came, nervous and curious, imagining all kinds of things. The place was packed with Desert Rats, Rifaaites and Gebelites, all mixed up together. Qaasim looked at once smiling, modest and awe-inspiring. He pointed up towards the Great House and said:

— There lives Gebelaawi, the Ancestor of us all. No sector is more closely related to him than any other, nor is any individual, man or woman.

Their faces were filled with surprise and relief, especially the faces of those who had expected to hear the speech of a conqueror. Qaasim went on:

— Around you is the property of his Trust. It will belong to you all equally as he promised Adham when he said to him: 'The Trust will belong to your descendants.' We must use it properly so that we all get our share and live as Adham wanted to, in plenty and peace and happiness.

The people looked at one another as if they were in a dream as he continued:

— The Trustee has gone, never to return. The strongmen have been wiped out, and from now on there will be no strongman in our Alley. You won't pay protection money to a tyrant or bow down to a drunken brute. Your lives can be spent in love and mercy and peace.

His eyes roved over their radiant faces.

— It is in your own hands for things not to go back to what they were. Watch your Trustee, and if he betrays you, dismiss him. If one of you is greedy for power, beat him; and if any person or any sector claim to be lords, punish them. Only in this way will you insure that things don't go back to what they were. God be with you!

That day some people were consoled for their dead, others for their defeat. They looked to the future as hopefully as they

would watch the full moon rising on a spring night. Qaasim shared the income of the Trust out fairly after keeping back a sum for construction and repairs. Of course, each person got only a small share, but the feeling of justice and honor was boundless. Qaasim's life was spent in building and renovation and peace. The Alley had never known such unity, harmony and happiness as it enjoyed in his time. Of course, there were a few of Gebel's people who harbored feelings they did not show and who whispered to one another: 'Are we, children of Gebel, to be ruled by a Desert Rat?' The same was true of some of Rifaa's people. Indeed, certain Desert Rats did become proud and haughty; but not a voice was raised to disturb the harmony while Qaasim was alive.

The Desert Rats saw in him a model man such as had never been before nor would ever be again. He combined strength with gentleness, wisdom with simplicity, warmth with dignity, lordliness with humility, and efficiency with honesty. Moreover he was lively, cheerful and good-mannered and it was a pleasure to smoke hashish with him. He was an affectionate companion, not to mention his good taste, his sense of humor and his love of music. Nothing changed about him, except of course his further marriages. It was as if he were following the same course there as he did in his renewal and expansion of the Trust. In spite of his love for Badria, he married a beautiful woman from Gebel's sector and another from Rifaa's, and he also wooed and won a woman from among the Desert Rats. Some people said he was looking for something he had lost with his first wife, Qamar. His uncle Zakaria said he wanted to strengthen his ties with all three sectors. But the Alley did not need any explanation or justification of what happened; the truth was that much as they admired his character, they admired his virility and love of women far more. In our Alley the capacity to love women is a thing men boast of, and it gives a man a prestige as great as or greater than that of a strongman.

Be that as it may, the people had never before felt that they

were their own masters, responsible for their affairs without a trustee who robbed them or a strongman who humiliated them. Never before had they known the brotherhood, love and peace they knew in his day. People said that if the Alley had been plagued with forgetfulness, the time had come to be rid of that plague, and we would be rid of it for ever.

That is what they said.

That is what they said, old Alley!



# ARAF

9 2 \*

No one who looks at the state of our Alley will believe what the rebec tells in the cafes. Who was Gebel? Who was Rifaa? Who was Qaasim? Where, outside the world of the cafe, are the good works that are referred to? All that the eye sees is an alley sunk in darkness and bards singing of dreams. How did our affairs come to such a pass? What became of Qaasim and his united people and the Trust used for the common good? Where did this greedy Trustee and these crazy strongmen come from?

You will hear it said, as the hookah goes round in the hashish dens amid laughter and sighs, that Saadiq succeeded Qaasim in the trusteeship and followed in his footsteps, but that there was a faction that thought Hassan had more right to the post because of his close relationship to Qaasim and because it was he who had killed the strongmen. They urged Hassan to take up his invincible cudgel, but he refused to lead them back to the age of violence. However, the Alley was divided against itself, and some of Gebel's and Rifaa's people came out into

the open with their secret grudges. When Saadiq died the ugly face of frustrated wishes was revealed, the cudgels came back into action and there was bloodshed within each sector and between the sectors, till the Trustee himself was killed in a battle. With no one holding the reins, peace and security were destroyed and the people found no way to avoid recalling the last of Trustee Rifaat's descendants to occupy the position that greedy hands were fighting for.

Thus Qadri became Trustee, and the sectors went back to their old clannishness, with a strongman ruling over each. There was a series of battles over who should be Strongman of the Alley, till Saadallah was victorious. He took over Strongman's House and became the Trustee's right-hand man. Yoosuf became master of Gebel's sector, 'Fisticuff' of Rifaa's and 'Harpstrings' of Qaasim's. The Trustee shared out the Trust's income fairly at first, and the program of building and renovation went on. But soon greed got the better of the Trustee and the strongmen, as was to be expected, and they went back to the old system, the Trustee taking half the revenue for himself and dividing the remaining half between the other four, who kept it for themselves to the detriment of the beneficiaries. Not content with that, they had the cheek to extort protection money from their poor followers. Building stopped and houses were left half finished or worse.

Nothing seemed to have changed, except that the Desert Rats' sector was now Qaasim's sector, with a strongman just like any other, and it had tenement-houses on either side instead of hovels and ruins. The people of the Alley had reverted to what they had been in the bad old days, without honor or dignity, worn out by poverty, terrorized by cudgels, battered with blows. Filth and flies and lice were everywhere, and the place swarmed with beggars and cripples and swindlers. Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim were only names — songs chanted by drugged bards in the cafes. Each faction was proud of its hero, of whom no trace remained, and they quarrelled

and fought about them. Various phrases went around the hashish dens: 'What's the use?' (of the world, not of drugs) or 'It all ends in death; let's die at the hand of God and not under a strongman's cudgel. The best we can do is get drunk or take hashish.' They wailed sad songs about treachery, poverty and degradation, or chanted bawdy ones in the ears of any man or woman who was seeking consolation, however terrible their misfortune. At times of particular misery people would say: 'What is written is written. Gebel can't help, nor Rifaa nor Qaasim. Our fate is flies in this world and dust in the next.'

It's amazing that, after all this, our Alley kept its high reputation in other alleys. Neighbors would point it out and say with admiration: 'Gebelaawi Alley!', while we squatted in our corners, grave and silent as if content with our precious memories, or straining to catch the soft murmuring of a voice deep inside us: 'It's not impossible that what happened yesterday will happen tomorrow, and the dreams of the rebec will come true again, and the darkness will be lifted from our world.'

9 3 \*

Early one afternoon, the Alley saw a strange young man arrive from the direction of the desert, followed by another who was little taller than a dwarf. He wore a gray jellaba next to the skin, fastened with a belt, above which it bulged with the things inside. His shoes were worn and torn and his head was bare, with thick, disheveled hair. He was brown and had restless, piercing eyes with a haunted look, and he moved with poise and confidence. He stopped for a moment in front of the Great House, then came on unhurriedly, followed by his companion. People stared as if to say: 'A stranger in our Alley!

What a cheek!' He read it in the eyes of the peddlers and shopkeepers and of the people sitting in the cafes or looking down from their windows, and even in the eyes of the dogs and cats. He almost imagined the very flies might avoid him contemptuously. Urchins scrutinised him aggressively, and some of them advanced on him while others loaded their catapults or searched the ground for stones. He gave them a friendly smile, put his hand inside his jellaba, pulled out some peppermints, and began handing them out. They came up happily and stood chewing the peppermints and looking up at him in admiration. He spoke to them, still smiling:

— Is there an empty basement to let? I'll give a bag of peppermints to whoever shows me.

A woman sitting on the ground in front of a tenement-house asked:

— A thousand curses on you! Who are you to live in our Alley?

He laughed:

— I'm Arafa; at your service: a son of this Alley as much as anybody, just back after a long absence.

The woman eyed him sharply.

— Whose son are you, mother's boy?

He roared with laughter.

— The son of 'She-Mule'. Did you know her?

— She-Mule? The fortune-teller?

— The very one!

A woman spoke from where she leaned against a wall, following the conversation as she deloused a boy's head:

— In those days you were a little boy running about after your mother; I remember you. But everything about you's changed except your eyes.

The first woman said:

— Yes! And where's your mother? Dead? God rest her soul! I often sat by her basket asking about the unknown and



whispering prayers, with her casting shells and telling the answers. God rest your soul, She-Mule!

— Long life to you! Perhaps you can tell me of an empty basement.

The woman stared at him with bleary eyes and asked:

— What's brought you back after all this time?

He said with mock wisdom:

— A man's steps lead back to his own alley and his own people.

She pointed to a tenement-house in Rifaa's sector.

— There's a basement there for you; it's been empty since the woman who lived there died in a fire, God rest her soul! Doesn't that frighten you?

A woman looking out of her window laughed and said:

— This is a man devils will be scared of.

He looked up, his face full of laughter.

— Delightful Alley! What charming, witty people! Now I know why my mother told me to come back! (Then, looking at the seated woman:) We must all die, whether by fire or water, devils or cudgels.

He said goodbye to her and went towards the tenement-house she had pointed out. Many pairs of eyes followed him. One man said mockingly:

— We know who his mother was, but who was his father?

An old woman said:

— God alone knows!

Someone else said:

— He can claim to be the son of a father from Gebel's sector or Rifaa's or Qaasim's, just as it suits him. God rest his mother's soul!

Arafa's companion whispered angrily to him:

— Why did you bring us back to this place?

Arafa went on smiling.

— I hear this sort of talk everywhere, and anyway this is our Alley. It's the only one we can live in, and we've had enough of

wandering round the bazaars and sleeping in the desert or in ruins. Besides, these people are good, in spite of their foul tongues, and stupid, in spite of their cudgels. Here we can easily earn our living; remember that, Hanash, you old snake!

Hanash shrugged his narrow shoulders as if to say: 'God knows.' A drugged man stopped them and asked Arafa:

— What do we call you?

— Arafa.

— Arafa what?

— Arafa son of She-Mule.

The bystanders roared with laughter at his humiliation. The man said:

— We wondered a lot when your mother was pregnant who the father was. Did she tell you?

Arafa laughed louder to hide his discomfort and said:

— She herself died without knowing.

He went off, leaving them laughing. The news of his return spread fast. Before he had taken over the basement, the boy from the Riffaite cafe came and said:

— Our strongman, Fisticuff, wants to see you.

He went to the nearby cafe. His eye was first caught by the paintings on the wall above the bard's bench. At the bottom was a picture of Fisticuff mounted on his horse, above it one of Trustee Qadri, with his magnificent moustache and his splendid robe, and at the top was a picture of Gebelaawi lifting Riffa's body out of the grave to take it to his house. He looked at these with interest as he went into the cafe. He found Fisticuff sitting on a bench on the right-hand side surrounded by his cronies and supporters. Arafa went over to him, and the strongman gave him a long look of contempt, as if to hypnotize him before attacking. Arafa said, raising a hand:

— Greetings to our strongman, our protector and helper! Fisticuff's narrow eyes were full of scorn.

— Pretty words, young man, but words are not enough around here.

Arafa smiled.

— Other things will soon follow, I hope.

— We have more beggars than we need.

— I'm not a beggar, sir; I'm a magician known to millions.

They exchanged glances. Fisticuff said with a frown:

— What do you mean, you son of a crazy mother!?

Arafa put his hand in the breast of his jellaba and pulled out an exquisite little box the size of a jujube. He went up to the strongman meekly and held it out to him. Fisticuff took it without interest, opened it and saw some dark substance. He looked up inquiringly. Arafa said with boundless confidence:

— A grain of that in a cup of tea two hours before you-know-what and afterwards either you'll be pleased with Arafa or you can chase him away with your curses.

They all craned their necks with a new eagerness. Even Fisticuff could not hide his interest, but he asked with feigned contempt:

— Is that your magic?

— I also have precious incenses and wonderful medicines and potions and amulets. My real power is seen when people are sick or infertile or feeling weak.

Fisticuff said threateningly:

— Well, well! We look forward to getting your protection money.

Arafa was alarmed but his face grew still merrier as he said:

— All I possess is at your disposal, sir.

The strongman laughed suddenly and said:

— But you haven't told us who your father was.

He answered good-humoredly:

— Perhaps you know better than I do!

They rocked with laughter, and there were plenty of sarcastic comments. When Arafa got away from the smoke-filled cafe he said to himself: 'Nobody knows who his own father was, and nor do you, Fisticuff. Sons of bitches!'

Arafa and Hanash went over the basement happily. He said:

— Bigger than I expected; very suitable, Hanash. This will do as the consulting room, and we can live in the room at the back. The other one will be the workshop.

Hanash asked anxiously:

— Which room do you think the woman was burned to death in?

Arafa's hearty laughter echoed round the empty rooms. He asked:

— Are you afraid of spirits, Hanash? We'll work with them, as Gebel worked with snakes. (He looked round happily.) We have only one window, in the room next to the Alley; we shall look up at the road between iron bars. This tomb has one excellent feature, it can't be robbed.

— It might be broken into.

— It *might*. (Then, with a sigh:) Everything I do is for people's good, but all my life I've met with nothing but insults.

— Success will make up for all the harm that's been done to you — or to your poor mother.

9 4 \* \* \* \* \*

In his spare time Arafa used to enjoy sitting on an old sofa and watching what went on in the Alley through the basement window, his head resting against the bars. His eye was at ground level and he could see the passing of feet and barrows, of dogs and cats, of insects and urchins. But he could not see people's heads and shoulders except by crouching down and craning his neck. A naked urchin stopped in front of him, playing with a dead mouse. A blind old man passed carrying in his left hand a tray of fly-covered beans, melon seeds and sweets, and leaning with his right hand on a thick walking stick. From another basement window came the snarls of two men

quarrelling till they drew blood. Arafa smiled at the naked child and asked gently:

— What's your name, clever boy?

— Oona.

— You mean Hasoona. Do you like that dead mouse, Hasoona?

The urchin threw it at him. But for the bar it would have hit him in the face. The boy scuttled away. Arafa turned to Hanash who was dozing at his feet.

— In every inch of this Alley you see the marks of the strongmen, but you find no sign of people like Gebel or Rifaa or Qaasim.

Hanash yawned as he said:

— All we see is men like Saadallah, Fisticuff, Yoosuf and Harpstrings, and all we hear about is Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim.

— But they did exist, didn't they?

Hanash pointed at the stone floor with his finger.

— Our tenement-house is Rifaaites. The people in it are all followers of Rifaa, and the bard tells every night how he lived and died for the sake of love and happiness; and yet the first thing we hear every morning is their quarrels and curses. That's what they're like, the women as well as the men.

Arafa grimaced.

— But they did exist, didn't they?

— Insults are the least of what happens in Rifaa's sector. Those fights! God help us! Only yesterday a man lost an eye.

Arafa stood up angrily.

— What an alley! God rest your soul, Mother! Look at us, for example; everybody uses us and nobody respects us.

— They don't respect anybody.

Arafa ground his teeth.

— Except the strongmen!

Hanash said with a laugh:

— At least you're the only person in the Alley who has dealings with everybody, Gebelites and Rifaaites and Qaasimites.

— Damn them all! (He was silent for a while, his eyes flashing in the gloom of the basement, then went on:) They all boast stupidly about their own man, though all that's left is the name, and they never try to go one step beyond lying boasts. Cowards! Sons of bitches!

His first client was a Rifaait woman who came to him during his first week in his new home and asked in a low voice:

— How can a woman be got rid of without anybody knowing?

He looked at her in alarm and astonishment and said:

— That's not my job, madam. If you want medicine for body or mind, I'm at your service.

She was incredulous.

— Aren't you a magician then?

— Yes, for things that do good to people. As for killing, there are other people for that.

— You're afraid, perhaps? But we'll be two conspirators with a single secret.

He said with gentle irony:

— Rifaa wasn't like that.

She exclaimed:

— Rifaa! Lord have mercy on him! We're in an alley where mercy is no use; otherwise, Rifaa himself wouldn't have died.

To his relief she left in disgust. Rifaa himself, the best of men, had not been safe here, so how could any one hope for safety if he started work with a crime? And his mother! How she had suffered, without having harmed anyone! No, he must be on the best terms with everyone, as befitted any sensible tradesman. He took to visiting all the cafes, always finding a client he knew. He listened to the bards' tales in the various sectors till they were all mixed up in his head.

His first client from Qaasim's sector was an old man who whispered to him with a grin:

— We've heard of the present you gave Fisticuff, the Rifaait strongman.

Smiling, Arafa studied the wrinkled face. The man said:

— Let's have one, and don't be surprised! There's life in me still; my goodness!

They exchanged conspiratorial smiles. The old man took courage.

— You're a Qaasimite, aren't you? That's how people in our sector see you.

Arafa asked sarcastically:

— Do your people know my father?

— A Qaasimite is known by his looks; and you're a Qaasimite. It was us that raised the Alley up to its high point in justice and happiness. But what an unlucky place! (Then, remembering the point:) Please may I have my present?

The old man left holding the little jar up to his bleary eye and walking with new hope and vigor.

The latest visitor was someone unexpected. Arafa was sitting in the consulting room on a cushion in front of an incense burner, which was giving off a delicious smoke, when in came Hanash with an old Nubian.

— Mr Yoonus, his Honor the Trustee's gatekeeper.

Arafa jumped up and stretched out his arms in greeting.

— Hello! Welcome! This is a great honor. Please sit down, sir!

They sat down side by side. The gatekeeper said without any preliminaries:

— Her Ladyship, Lady Nazeera, the Trustee's wife, has been having such dreadful nightmares that she can hardly sleep.

Arafa's eyes lit up with interest and his heart beat more strongly with hope and ambition, but he simply said:

— Just a phase! It will pass.

— But her Ladyship is very upset and sent me to you for something suitable.

Arafa felt important in a way he had never known in his life tramping around with his mother.

— I'd better speak to her myself.

— Impossible! She won't come to you, and you can't visit her.

Arafa overcame his disappointment and fought hard not to lose this golden chance.

— I must have her handkerchief or some personal possession of hers.

The gatekeeper bowed his turbaned head and stood up to go. When they got to the door he hesitated for a moment, then leaned over and whispered in Arafa's ear:

— We've heard about your present to Fisticuff, the Rifaait strongman.

When the gatekeeper had gone off with the present, Arafa and Hanash had a good laugh. Hanash asked:

— Who do you think he's taken the present for: himself or the Trustee or her Ladyship?

Arafa exclaimed scornfully:

— What an alley for presents and cudgels!

He went over to the window to look at the Alley by night. The wall opposite was silver in the moonlight, and crickets were chirping. From the cafe came the voice of the Rifaait bard:

Adham said:

— When will you realize that we're no longer joined by any tie?

Idrees said:

— Merciful heavens! Aren't you my brother? That's a tie that cannot be broken.

— Idrees! You've tormented me enough.

— Grief is ugly, but we're both afflicted. You've lost Humaam and Qadri, and I've lost Hind. The great Gebelaawi's got a fornicating granddaughter and a killer grandson.

Adham roared:

— If your punishment is not as bad as your deeds, the world is done for.



Arafa turned away from the window in disgust. ‘When will the Alley stop telling its stories? When will the world be done for? My mother once repeated this phrase: “If your punishment is not as bad as your deeds, the world is done for.” My poor mother, living in the desert! But what have you gained from these stories, old alley?’

9 5 \*

Arafa and Hanash were working with determination in the back room of the basement by the light of a gas lamp fixed to the wall. The room was not habitable because it was so damp and dark and was situated at the back, so Arafa had made it his workshop. The floor and every corner were cluttered with paper talismans, earths and limes, plants and spices, dried animals and insects — mice, frogs and scorpions — pieces of glass, bottles, tinctures in cans, strange liquids with pungent smells, charcoal, a stove... Round the walls, shelves were fixed, crowded with all kinds of vessels and containers and bags.

Arafa was busy working several substances into a paste in a big earthenware vessel. Sweat was dripping from his face and he wiped it on the sleeve of his jellaba from time to time. Hanash was stretched out nearby watching with interest, ready to follow any instructions Arafa might give. Seeming to want to console him or display friendship, Hanash said:

— The hardest worker in this wretched Alley doesn’t take anything like this trouble, and what’s the reward? A millieme or at best a piaster!

Arafa spoke with satisfaction:

— God bless my mother! Only I know how good she was. The day she handed me over to that wonderful magician who can read all your thoughts, my life changed completely. But for

her I'd have been at best a pickpocket or a beggar.

Hanash persisted in his grumbling:

— A millieme!

— With patience money mounts up. Don't give up hope! Being a strongman isn't the only way to get rich. Don't forget how highly I'm regarded. The people who come to me rely on me completely and put their happiness in my hands; that's no small matter. And don't forget the pleasure of magic itself: the pleasure of drawing something useful out of impure substances; the pleasure of healing people when your instructions are obeyed. And then there are the unknown powers you long to master if only you could.

Hanash looked at the stove. Cutting abruptly across his companion's train of thought, he said:

— I'd better light the stove in the light-shaft, or we'll suffocate.

— Light it in hell, but don't interrupt my thoughts! None of the idiots in this Alley who think themselves so grand can understand the importance of the things that are made in this dark, dirty room with its strange smells. They understand the usefulness of 'the present', but the present isn't everything. Unimaginable wonders can come out of this room. Those crazy people don't realize the true value of Arafa. Perhaps they will some day, and then they'll have to ask God's mercy for my mother and not insult her as they do now.

Hanash half stood up, then squatted down again, saying resentfully:

— Some stupid strongman may sweep all these good things away with his cudgel.

— We don't harm anybody, and we pay our protection money; how can we come to harm, you alarm bell!

Hanash laughed.

— What did Rifaa do wrong?

Arafa glared at him.

— Why annoy me with such thoughts?

— You're hoping to get rich, but here nobody gets rich except strongmen. You hope to become powerful, but here nobody's allowed power except them. Work that one out!

Arafa said nothing till he was sure he had mixed the substances properly. Then he glanced at Hanash and saw that he still looked anxious. He laughed.

— My mother warned me before you. Thank you, Hanash Alarm Bell! But I've come back to the Alley with a plan in my head.

— It seems nothing interests you any more except magic. Arafa was quite carried away.

— Magic is truly wonderful. There's no limit to its power. Nobody knows where it'll end. For somebody who possesses it, even cudgels are children's toys. Learn that Hanash, you old snake, and don't be a fool; imagine if all the people in the Alley were magicians.

— If they were, they'd all starve to death!

Arafa laughed loudly, revealing his fine teeth.

— Don't be a fool, Hanash. Ask yourself what they'd be able to do. My God! The miracles would flow as plentifully as curses and insults do now.

— Yes, provided they didn't starve to death first.

— Yes, and they wouldn't die as long as they didn't...

But he did not finish his sentence. He was thinking so hard that his hands stopped their work. Then he said:

— The Qaasimite bard says Qaasim wanted to use the Trust so that everybody would get what they needed without work and would be free to enjoy the blissful ease that Adham dreamed of.

— That's what Qaasim said.

Arafa's eyes sparkled.

— But ease isn't the final goal. Imagine it if life was spent in leisure! It's a beautiful dream, but a laughable one, Hanash. What would be really beautiful would be to do away with work in order to work miracles.

Hanash shook his great head, which seemed to rest directly on his body, showing his disagreement with meaningless talk. Then he spoke again in a serious, business-like tone:

— Now let me light the stove under the light shaft.

— Do that, and throw yourself in the flames! You only deserve to be burnt.

Arafa left the workshop after an hour, went to the sofa and sat staring up through the window. After the silence he was deafened by the hubbub of life — the peddlers' cries, the women's gossip, the shouted jokes and the choice insults that accompanied the ceaseless coming and going. He noticed that something new had appeared against the wall facing his window — a makeshift cafe. It was just an old sheet thrown over a frame, in which were ranged boxes of coffee beans, tea leaves and cinnamon, a stove, coffee pots, cups, mugs and spoons. An old man sat on the ground fanning the stove to boil water, while behind the frame stood a young girl calling in a warm voice: 'Lovely coffee, my masters!'

The cafe was at the point where the Qaasimite and Rifaait sectors met. Most of its customers seemed to be street traders and poor people. Arafa took a long look at the girl from behind the bars. That brown face framed by a black head-scarf was so pretty! That coffee-colored jellaba, covering her from neck to ankle, its hem brushing the ground when she went to take an order or brought back an empty cup, was so modest and tasteful! And that slim figure and those honey-colored eyes were so lovely! Except that the left eyelid was red from some infection or speck of dirt. From their faces she and the old man were clearly father and daughter. He must have fathered her at an advanced age, as often happens in the Alley. Arafa called out without delay:

— Young lady! A cup of tea, please!

She looked across at him, then quickly filled a cup from a pot half buried in the ashes. She brought it over to him and he smiled as he took it and said:

— Bless you! How much?

— Two milliemes.

— That's a lot. But no price would be too high for you.

— In the big cafe it costs five, and it's no different from what you have in your hand.

She went off without waiting for him to speak. He sipped his tea before it could get cold, not taking his eyes off her. How happy he would be to have a young girl like that! She was perfect, except for the one inflamed eye, which he could easily cure. But he would need more money than he had as yet. The basement was ready; all that was needed was for Hanash to sleep in the hall, or in the consulting room if he wanted, provided he got rid of the bedbugs one by one.

He heard a strange murmuring and saw that people were looking towards the top of the Alley. Some were saying: 'Harpstrings... Harpstrings!' He leaned forward as far as the bars of the window would let him, and saw the strongman approaching, surrounded by a gang of his men. As he passed the makeshift cafe, he noticed the girl and asked one of his men:

— Who's the girl?

— Awaatif, daughter of Shakroon.

Harpstrings raised his eyebrows in interest and went on to his own sector. Arafa felt angry and upset. He waved the empty cup and the girl came over daintily and collected it, taking the two milliemes. He asked, jerking his head in the direction Harpstrings had gone:

— Aren't you worried?

Turning to leave, she said with a laugh:

— I'll ask for your help when I need it; but will you help?

He was hurt by her scorn, a scorn that saddened rather than provoked. Then he heard Hanash calling him and he jumped down and hurried inside.

Arafa's clients grew in numbers as the days passed, but none of them pleased him as much as Awaatif, the day he saw her come into his consulting room. He forgot the dignified air he put on for his clients and jumped up to welcome her. He seated her on a cushion in front of him and himself sat down cross-legged, and the world was not wide enough for his joy. He looked her up and down, but his attention came to rest on her left eye, almost closed by its swollen and inflamed eyelids. He said:

— You've neglected it, my girl; it was already red the first day I saw you.

— I thought it was enough to bathe it in warm water. Busy people like me forget.

— It's not right for you to neglect your health, especially if it's for something as precious as your lovely eyes.

She smiled, touched by the compliment, while he reached back to a shelf for a mug. From it he took a small package.

— Tie the contents in a handkerchief, steam it over boiling water, then bind it over your eye, every night till it's as beautiful as its fellow.

She took the package and brought out her purse, glancing at him inquiringly with her right eye. He laughed.

— Forget it! We're neighbors — and friends.

— But you pay for the tea you drink.

— In fact I'm paying your father. What a grand old man! How I'd love to know him! I'm so sorry he's forced to go on working at his age.

She said proudly:

— But his health is good and he refuses to stay at home. His age is one of the things that make him sad about life, for he was one of those who saw the events of Qaasim's time.

Arafa's face lit up with interest.

— Really! Was he one of his helpers?

— Oh no; but he tasted the happiness of those days and still sighs for them.

— I'd like to get to know him and hear him talk.

— Don't get him on to that subject. I'd rather he forgot about it, for his own good. He was once in a bar, drinking with some of his friends, and when he was drunk he stood up and shouted at the top of his voice that things should go back to what they were in Qaasim's day. As soon as he got back to the Alley, he found Harpstrings in front of him and was punched and hit till he passed out.

Arafa reflected angrily, then looked craftily at Awaatif and said:

— There's no safety for anybody with these strongmen.

She stole a glance at him, wondering what was behind his words. She said:

— That's true, there's no safety for anybody.

He hesitated, biting his lips, then said:

— I saw Harpstrings giving you such a look.

She looked down to hide a smile and said:

— Damn him!

— Doesn't it give a girl some pleasure to be admired by a strongman like him?

— He has four wives.

His heart sank.

— And supposing he made room for another?

— I've hated him ever since he attacked my father, and the same goes for all those heartless strongmen. They take their protection money so haughtily you'd think they were doing you a favor.

— Well said, Awaatif! And well done Qaasim when he destroyed them! But they come back like a mysterious disease.

— That's why my father sighs for the days of Qaasim.

He shook his head in sudden disillusion.

— And others sigh for the days of Gebel or Rifaa; but the past won't come back.

She said with charming indignation:

— You say that because you didn't see Qaasim like my father did.

— Did you see him?

— My father told me.

— My mother told me. But what's the good of that? It won't deliver us from strongmen. My mother herself was one of their victims, and see how they talk about her now she's dead.

— Really?

His expression darkened as when clear water is muddied.

— That's why I'm afraid for you, Awaatif. They threaten livelihood, honor, love and peace. I tell you, since I saw that brute leering at you I've been convinced of the need to destroy them.

She spoke with enthusiasm:

— They say that's the will of our Ancestor.

— And where's our Ancestor?

— In his Great House.

He said solemnly:

— Oh yes, your father talks about Qaasim, and Qaasim talked about our Ancestor; that's what we hear; but all we see is Qadri and Saadallah and Fisticuff and Harpstrings and Yoosuf. We need strength to deliver us from the torment; what use are memories?

He became aware that the drift of the conversation had almost spoilt the meeting for him, so he changed his tone:

— The Alley needs strength just as I need you.

She stared at him disapprovingly, and he smiled with a boldness that seemed natural in his piercing eyes. He said seriously, to ward off the anger visible in her frown:

— A beautiful girl, who works so hard she forgets about her eye till it's swollen, comes to me thinking she needs me and finds that in fact I'm the one who needs her.

She made to get up.

— It's time I went.



— Don't be annoyed, please. Remember, I haven't said anything new; you must have noticed my admiration these past days, for my eyes are always on your cafe. A bachelor like me can't live alone for ever. His untidy house needs looking after, and he earns more than he needs; somebody must share with him.

She went out of the room, and he stood at the end of the hall to see her off. She seemed unwilling to leave without any salutation, and said goodbye.

He stayed where he was and sang quietly to himself:

Lovely creature hear my tune:  
You're as radiant as the moon.  
Fill my cup of joy up soon!

He almost bounced his way to the workshop and found Hanash engrossed in his work. He asked:

— What are you doing?

Hanash showed him a bottle.

— Full, and firmly sealed. But it must be tested in the desert.

Arafa took it and examined the cork.

— Yes, in the desert; otherwise we'll give ourselves away.

Hanash said anxiously:

— We're beginning to earn a living, and life's smiling on us. Don't throw away the happiness God has given you.

Hanash was beginning to value life now that it tasted sweeter to him. Arafa smiled at this thought and looked at him for a while, then said:

— She was your mother as well as mine.

— Yes, but she begged you not to think of revenge.

— You used to think differently.

— We'd be killed before we could get revenge.

Arafa laughed.

— I won't hide it from you that I stopped thinking of revenge long ago.

Hanash's face shone.

— Give me the bottle and we'll empty it, my brother.

But Arafa held it tight, saying:

— No! We'll test it till it's perfect.

Hanash frowned at this teasing. Arafa went on:

— I mean what I say, Hanash, you old snake; believe me, I've given up the idea of revenge, not because of our mother's pleading but because I'm convinced that the strongmen must be destroyed irrespective of any revenge.

— Because you love this girl.

Arafa laughed heartily.

— Love for the girl, love for life; call it what you like. Qaasim was right.

— What has Qaasim to do with you? Qaasim was carrying out our Ancestor's wishes.

He pulled a face.

— Who knows? Our Alley tells these stories, but we in this room are doing something decisive and certain. What security is there in our life? Fisticuff will come tomorrow to steal our earnings. If I lift a hand to marry Awaatif, Harpstrings' cudgel will be in my way. It's the same for everybody, even the beggars. What spoils my happiness is what spoils the Alley's, and what will make me safe is what will make it safe. I am not a strongman nor one of Gebelaawi's men, but I possess wonderful things in this room, and they give me ten times as much power as Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim put together.

He lifted the bottle as if to throw it, then gave it back to Hanash.

— We'll test it tonight on the Jebel. Cheer up and try to get your enthusiasm back.

He left the workshop, went to the window and squatted on the sofa, looking across at the makeshift cafe. Night was falling slowly, and she was crying her wares. She avoided looking at his window, which showed how much he was on her mind. A smile played faintly on her lips. Arafa smiled, his whole world smiled.

He was so pleased that he swore he would comb his hair every morning. From Gemalia came the noise of people chasing a thief. The drone of the rebec started in the cafe, and the bard began his evening by chanting:

What is my one-oh?  
 Trustee Qadri, bravo!  
 What is my two-oh?  
 Strongman Saadallah, bravo!  
 What is my three-oh?  
 Mighty Fisticuff, bravo!

Arafa was torn mercilessly out of his dream. He said to himself wearily: 'The stories are beginning again; when will they end? What's the use of listening to them all night? The bard sings, and the hashish dens wake up. Miserable Alley!'

9 7 \*

A strange confusion came into Shakroon's life. Sometimes he would speak in a very loud voice, as if he were making a speech. People used to say sympathetically: 'Age! It's just age!'. He would get very angry for the slightest reason or for no reason at all; 'Age!' they said. He would lapse into silence for long periods, till circumstances forced him to speak; 'Age!' they said again. He would say things that were counted as heresy in the Alley, and people said anxiously: 'It's age! May we be spared!'. From behind his bars, Arafa often watched him with tender concern. One day as he was studying him he said to himself: 'An impressive old man, in spite of his tattered clothes and his dirtiness! His face is ravaged; on it is written the decline that the Alley has suffered since Qaasim's day. It's his

misfortune to have been a contemporary of Qaasim's and to have enjoyed justice and peace, received his share of the Trust's revenue and watched the new buildings go up, and then to have seen all this stop by order of Qadri. He's altogether an unlucky man whose life has lasted longer than it should have done.'

Arafa saw Awaatif coming, her face without blemish now that her eye was cured. He turned his attention to her and called out:

— Tea please, young lady!

She brought him a cup and he spoke before he took it, to make sure she stayed:

— Congratulations on your recovery, flower of the Alley!

She smiled.

— Thanks be to God — and to you!

He took the cup, and their fingertips touched. She went away, and her springy step showed her pleasure and acceptance. He should really take the decisive step now, and he did not lack courage, but Harpstrings would make him pay a thousand times over. It was Shakroon's fault for having placed his daughter in Harpstrings's path, but he was a poor man, worn out by pushing around his barrow till he had been forced to stop and open this unlucky cafe.

There was a great commotion in the distance. People craned their necks in the direction of Gemalia. Soon a carriage appeared, full of women singing and clapping. In the midst of them was a bride returning from the baths. Urchins ran towards the carriage cheering and hung on to its sides as it made its way towards Gebel's sector. For a while the air throbbed with whoops of joy and shouts of congratulation and whispered obscenities. Shakroon stood up furiously and thundered:

— Hit! Hit!

Awaatif hurried over to him and sat him down, rubbing his back gently. Arafa wondered whether the man was dreaming

or hallucinating. What a curse old age was! And if it was like this, how could Gebelaawi now be living? He watched the old man and, when he had calmed down, asked him:

— Dear old Shakroon, have you ever seen Gebelaawi?

He answered without looking at him:

— Fool! Don't you know Gebelaawi's been shut up in his house since before Gebel's time?

Awaatif smiled, and Arafa laughed and said:

— May God grant you a long life, Shakroon!

— A prayer that meant something when life meant something.

Awaatif came to take the cup. She whispered:

— Let him be! He hasn't been sleeping at all at night.

— My heart is with you, Awaatif. (Then, quickly before she could go:) I'd like to talk to him about us.

She raised a warning finger and went. He watched some urchins playing leapfrog. Suddenly Harpstrings appeared, coming from Qaasim's sector. Arafa drew his head back instinctively from the bars. What had brought him? It was lucky he lived in Rifaa's sector and had Fisticuff as a protector, Fisticuff who was so taken with his 'presents'. The strongman came up and stopped in front of Shakroon's cafe. He examined Awaatif's face as he said:

— One coffee without sugar.

A woman at her window burst out laughing and another called:

— What makes the Qaasimite strongman ask for coffee at the beggar's cafe?

Harpstrings seemed unconcerned. Awaatif brought him the cup and Arafa's heart turned over. The strongman waited for his coffee to cool, grinning lewdly at her with flashing gold teeth. Arafa mentally promised him a dreadful beating. Harpstrings took a sip and said:

— Bless your lovely hand!

She was as afraid to smile as she was to frown. Shakroon

looked at them in alarm. Harpstrings gave her a five piaster piece and she put her hand in her pocket for the change, but he did not seem to expect any and went back to the Qaasimite cafe. Awaatif was unsure what to do, and Arafa called to her in a low voice:

— Don't go to him!

— And his change?

Shakroon rose in spite of his weakness, took the change and went to the cafe. A little later the old man came back to his seat and was soon laughing helplessly. His daughter begged him to stop. He stood up again, faced the Great House and shouted:

— Gebelaawi! Gebelaawi!

In windows and doorways, cafes and basements all eyes were on him. Urchins hurried towards him. Even the dogs were watching him. He shouted:

— Gebelaawi! How long are you going to stay silent and hidden. Your commandments are ignored and your money's wasted. In fact you're being robbed, just like your children, Gebelaawi.

The urchins cheered and many people guffawed. The old man went on yelling:

— Gebelaawi can't you hear me? Don't you know what's happened to us? Why did you punish Idrees, who was a thousand times better than our strongmen? Gebelaawi!

At that, Harpstrings came out of the cafe, bellowing:

— Watch it, you old fool!

Shakroon screamed at him:

— Damn you, you rotten crook!

People murmured anxiously: 'He's had it.' Harpstrings came at him, blind with rage, and punched him on the head. He staggered and would have fallen if Awaatif had not caught him. Harpstrings saw her and retreated to his place. She spoke through her tears:

— Let's go home, Father.

Arafa joined her to help hold him up, but the old man tried

feebly to push them away, breathing heavily. The bystanders were silent. A woman called from a window:

— It's your fault, Awaatif, he should have stayed at home.

Awaatif sobbed:

— What could I do?

Shakroon murmured feebly:

— Gebelaawi! Gebelaawi!

9 8 \*

A little before dawn, wailing shattered the stillness. People realized that Shakroon must be dead. It was not a strange event for the Alley. Harpstrings' cronies said: 'To hell with him! He had bad manners, and that was the death of him.' Arafa said to Hanash:

— Shakroon has been killed, like so many others in our Alley. The murderers don't even try to hide their crimes, and nobody dares complain or bring a single witness.

— What a disaster! Why did we ever come here?

— It's our Alley.

— Our mother left it broken-hearted. Damn it and its people!

Arafa persisted:

— But it is ours.

— It's as if we were making up for sins we didn't commit.

— The worst sin of all is to give up.

Hanash said despairingly:

— The experiment with the bottle failed on the Jebel.

— But it'll succeed next time.

When Shakroon's bier was carried out, only Awaatif and Arafa followed it out of the tenement-house. Everyone was astonished at Arafa's taking part in the funeral. They whis-

pered about the amazing boldness of that mad magician. Still more astonishing, Harpstrings joined the funeral procession when it was in the middle of Qaasim's sector. What cheek! How shameless! He showed no embarrassment and even said to Awaatif:

— Long may you live, Awaatif!

Arafa realized that this was an introduction to the coming proposition. Meanwhile in the twinkling of an eye an important change came over the funeral procession; the friends and neighbors who had hung back out of fear hurried to join in and soon filled the road. Harpstrings said again:

— Long may you live, Awaatif!

She looked at him defiantly and said:

— You kill the man and then attend his funeral.

Harpstrings retorted, loudly enough for many to hear:

— That was once said to Qaasim.

Several voices said:

— For God's sake! The hour of our death is in the hand of God!

Awaatif shouted:

— My father was killed by a blow from your hand.

Harpstrings replied:

— God forgive you, Awaatif! If I'd really hit him he'd have died on the spot; but in fact I didn't hit him, I just gave him a fright; everybody will bear witness to that.

People said hastily:

— He gave him a fright. His hand didn't touch him. God blind us if we lie!

Awaatif cried out:

— God of vengeance!

With a forbearance that was to become proverbial, Harpstrings said:

— God forgive you, Awaatif!

Arafa leaned over and half whispered to her:

— Let the funeral carry on peacefully.



Before Arafa knew what was happening, one of Harpstrings's men called 'Snapsnout' hit him in the face and shouted:

— You son of a crazy bitch! Who told you to stick your nose in between her and the chief?

Arafa turned in amazement and was hit again harder than the first time. Another man punched him; a third spat in his face; a fourth seized his collar; a fifth pushed him over so that he fell on his back. A sixth said as he kicked him:

— You'll be buried at Qarafa if you go near her.

He lay on the ground for a while, dazed, then gathered his strength and stood up in considerable pain, wiping the dirt from his face and his jellaba. A crowd of urchins had surrounded him and began chanting: 'The calf is down — fetch the knife.' He limped back to his basement, mad with rage. Hanash looked at him sadly and said:

— I told you not to go.

He screamed furiously:

— Shut up! Damn them!

Hanash said gently but firmly:

— Take your eyes off that girl, or it's goodbye to us.

Arafa thought for a while, staring at the ground, then looked up with a determined expression and said:

— You'll see me married to her sooner than you think.

— That's sheer madness.

— And Fisticuff will lead the wedding procession.

— You might as well soak your clothes in alcohol and throw yourself in the fire.

— I'm going to try the experiment with the bottle again tonight in the desert.

He was confined to his basement for several days, but kept in touch with Awaatif through the barred window. Then he met her secretly, after the period of mourning was over, in the entry passage of her tenement-house. He said bluntly:

— We'd better get married straight away.

She was not surprised at his proposal but said sadly:

— If I say yes to you, it will cause unbearable trouble.

— Fisticuff has agreed to take charge of the ceremony, and you can see what that means.

Preparations were made with great secrecy till everything was ready. The Alley learned without any warning that Awaatif, daughter of Shakroon, had married the magician and moved to his home, and that Fisticuff, the Rifaaites strongman, had witnessed the wedding. Many people were astounded, and others asked how it had come about; how had Arafa dared to do it, and how had he persuaded Fisticuff to give it his blessing? As for the old and wise, they said: 'There will be trouble.'

9 9 \* \* \* \* \*

Harpstrings and his men gathered in the Qaasimite cafe, and Fisticuff heard of this and met his men in the Rifaaites cafe. The rest of the Alley knew of the two gatherings, and the air became tense, and very soon out went the peddlers and beggars and urchins from the area between the two sectors, and down came the shutters on shops and windows. Harpstrings led his men into the Alley, and Fisticuff did likewise. The coals of evil poured out their hateful fumes and one poke would be enough to make them burst into flame.

One good man shouted from a rooftop:

— What's made you men angry? Think, before there's bloodshed!

Looking Harpstrings in the eye, Fisticuff bellowed in the fearful silence:

— We aren't angry. There's nothing for us to get angry about.

Harpstrings retorted furiously:

— You've acted as no colleague should, sir. No strongman can approve of what you've done.

— And what have I done?

Harpstrings spoke as much with his eyes as with his mouth:

— You've protected a man who was defying me.

— All he did was marry a lonely girl after her father's death, and I attend the wedding of every Rifaaites.

— He's not a Rifaaites, and nobody knows who his father was; not even he does. Perhaps you are his father, or maybe I am — or any beggar in the Alley.

— But now he's living in my sector.

— Only because he found a basement.

— So what?

Harpstrings yelled:

— Don't you know you've acted as no colleague should?

Fisticuff shouted:

— There's no need to yell, sir. It's not worth a cock fight.

— Perhaps it's worth just that.

In a tone of voice that commanded readiness, Fisticuff roared:

— God give me patience!

— Fisticuff, watch out for yourself!

— Damned bastard!

— Damned bastard!

The cudgels would have been raised but for a voice that bellowed:

— Shame on you, men!

They turned to see Saadallah, Strongman of the Alley, making his way through the Rifaaites till he stood in the space cleared between the two sectors. He commanded:

— Put down your cudgels!

Down went the cudgels like heads in prayer. Saadallah looked first at Harpstrings, then at Fisticuff, and said:

— I don't want to hear a word. Break up peacefully. A blood-bath for the sake of a woman? How unmanly!

The men broke up in silence. Saadallah went back to his house. Arafa and Awaatif in their basement could not believe that the night would pass peacefully. They had watched what went on outside with pounding hearts and pale faces. Their throats had stayed dry until they heard Saadallah's voice with its unanswerable authority. Awaatif sighed deeply, and said:

— What a cruel life!

He wanted to reassure her a little, and said, tapping his head:

— I work with this, like Gebel — and like Qaasim, the crafty schemer.

She swallowed — with difficulty — and asked:

— Do you think there can be any lasting safety?

He hugged her, making a show of cheerfulness.

— If only every couple was as happy as us!

She buried her head in his shoulder, catching her breath, and whispered:

— Can things stop there?

He puffed.

— It's never safe beside a strongman.

She raised her head.

— I know that, but I have a wound that won't heal till I see him dead.

He knew who she meant and he looked thoughtfully into her eyes and said:

— In a case like yours, there has to be revenge, but that won't be the end. Our safety is threatened not just because Harpstrings wants to attack us, but because the whole Alley is at the mercy of the strongmen. If we defeat Harpstrings, who can say that Fisticuff won't start a quarrel with us tomorrow, or Yoosuf the day after? Either everybody's safe or nobody is.

She smiled faintly.

— Do you want to be like Gebel or Rifaa or Qaasim?

He kissed her hair, savoring its scent of cloves, and made no answer. She spoke again:

— They were given their task by our Ancestor the Founder.

— Our Ancestor the Founder! Everybody who's in trouble shouts 'Gebelaawi!' just as your poor father did. But did you ever hear of a people like us, never seeing their ancestor although they live round his locked house? And have you ever heard of the founder of a trust letting men play havoc with it and not making any move at all?

She said candidly:

— It's old age.

— I've never heard of anybody living as long as this.

— They say there's a man over a hundred and fifty in Muqattam Bazaar. God is all-powerful!

After a silence, he murmured:

— It's the same with magic; it's all-powerful.

She laughed at his delusion, pressing her fingers into his chest.

— Your magic is powerful enough to cure an eye.

— And to do countless other things.

She sighed.

— We're behaving like dope-heads, talking as though nothing threatened us.

He took no notice of her interruption but went on:

— Magic may one day be able to put an end to the strong men and build houses and feed all the children of our Alley.

— Can that happen before the Last Judgement?

A dreamy look softened his sharp eyes.

— If only we were all magicians!

— If only! It didn't take Qaasim long to achieve justice without your magic.

— And how quickly it was undone! But with magic, the effect will last. Don't look down on magic, my darling, it's no less important than our love; like love it can create a new life. But it can only work properly if more of us are magicians.

She asked playfully:

— And how will that come about?

He thought for a long time before answering:

— When justice is achieved, when the Founder's Clauses are put into effect, and when most of us are freed from toil and rely on magic.

— Do you want it to be an Alley of magicians? (She laughed sweetly, and went on:) How can the Ten Clauses be put into effect when our Ancestor is bedridden and seems no longer able to give the job to one of his children?

He looked at her strangely.

— Why don't *we* go to *him*?

She laughed again.

— Could you get into Trustee's House?

— No! But perhaps I can get into the Great House.

She slapped his hand and said:

— That's enough joking till we're sure of our lives.

He smiled mysteriously.

— If I was a joker I wouldn't have come back to the Alley.

Something in his tone alarmed her. She stared at him in amazement and exclaimed:

— You mean what you say!

He gazed at her without a word. She went on:

— Imagine if they caught you in the Great House!

— What's so strange about a man being in his grandfather's house?

— Say you're joking. God! Why are you looking so serious? Unbelievable! Why do you want to go to him?

— Isn't a meeting with him worth the risk?

— Those were only words that slipped off your tongue; how have they become so terribly real?

He stroked her hand soothingly.

— Since I came back to the Alley I've been thinking to myself about things that haven't occurred to anybody.

— Why can't we live as we are?

— If only we could! They won't let us live as we are; and everybody needs security in life.

— Then let's run away.

— I shan't run away while I have my magic.

He drew her gently to him and began stroking her shoulder, whispering in her ear:

— We'll find plenty of time to talk, but now just let your heart be at peace.

1 0 0 \*

Was the man crazy or deluded, wondered Awaatif as she watched Arafa working and thinking. From her point of view the only thing that marred those happy days was her desire for revenge on Harpstrings, her father's murderer. Revenge is a time-honored tradition in the Alley, but she could have forgotten even this sacred tradition — though reluctantly — for the sake of the happiness marriage had given her. However, Arafa believed revenge on Harpstrings was only part of a great task that he had sworn to perform, or so she imagined. She did not understand him. Did he think he was one of the men of whom the rebec sings? But Gebelaawi had not charged him to do anything, and he clearly did not have much faith in Gebelaawi or in the rebec's tales. One thing was certain; that he gave far, far more of his time and energy to magic than was needed for a living. When he thought, his ideas went beyond himself and his household to general problems that no one was interested in, such as the Alley, the strongmen and the trusteeship, the Trust and its revenue and magic. He dreamed vast dreams of a magical future, though he was the one man in the Alley who did not take hashish because his work in the back room needed wakefulness and attention. But all this was nothing beside his crazy desire to get into the Great House.

— Why, my husband?

— To ask his advice about the way things should go in the Alley.

— But you know the way things should be, we all know; so what need is there to risk death?

— I want to know the Ten Clauses governing the Trust.

— The important thing is not knowledge but action; and what can you do?

— The truth is I want to look at the book that caused Adham to be thrown out, if the stories are true.

— What interests you in that book?

— I don't know what makes me sure it's a book of magic. Gebelaawi's exploits in the desert can only be explained if he used magic, not muscle and a cudgel as people imagine.

— What need is there for these risks when you're happy and you're earning plenty?

— Don't imagine Harpstrings has forgotten us. Whenever I go out I'm almost knocked down by the hateful looks of his men.

— Your magic is quite enough; leave the Great House alone.

— There is the book, the greatest book of magic, the secret of Gebelaawi's power, which he kept even from his son.

— Perhaps it isn't anything like what you imagine.

— And perhaps it is, and the risks are worthwhile.

Then one time he took the final step in his explanation and said to her:

— That's how I am, Awaatif, my passion-flower; what's to be done? I'm just the lowly son of a wretched woman and an unknown father; everybody knows that and jokes about it. But the one thing in the world that still interests me is the Great House. It's not strange for a fatherless child to long with all his strength for his Ancestor. My back room has taught me not to believe in anything till I've seen it with my own eyes and tested it with my own hands. There's no avoiding it: I must get into the Great House. I may find the power I am seeking for and I may find nothing at all, but I'll reach some certainty, which will be



better than my present confusion. I'm not the first man in our Alley to choose difficulty. Gebel could have stayed in his job with the Trustee; Rifaa could have become the Alley's carpenter; Qaasim could have been content with Qamar and her property and could have lived as an important man. But they chose the other path.

Hanash said sadly:

— What a lot of people in our Alley hurry to destruction!

Arafa said:

— And what a small number of them have good reasons!

Hanash did not give up helping his brother though. Late one night they set off together for the desert. When Awaatif had given up opposing Arafa, she had raised her hands in prayer for him. It was a dark night; the new moon had set an hour after the sun. The two brothers followed the wall of the Great House round to the back where it met the desert. Hanash whispered:

— Rifaa was standing in this very place when he heard Gebelaawi's voice.

Peering around attentively, Arafa said:

— That's what is told to the music of the rebec. I'm going to know the truth about everything.

Hanash pointed towards the desert and said with awe:

— And in this desert he himself spoke to Gebel, and here he sent his servant to Qaasim.

— And here too Rifaa was killed, and our mother was raped and beaten, and our Ancestor didn't move an inch.

Hanash put down a basket of tools on the ground, and the two began to dig at the foot of the wall, lifting the soil out in the basket. They worked hard and steadily till they were permeated by the smell of earth. Hanash seemed no less keen than Arafa, as if driven on by the same longing, though he was very frightened. Arafa's head was only a little above ground level when he said:

— That'll do for tonight. (Then, after hoisting himself up on to the surface:) We must cover the mouth of the hole with planks and put earth over them to prevent it being discovered.

Then they hurried back, pursued by the dawn. He was thinking of tomorrow, that wonderful day when he would walk in the unknown Great House. Who could tell? He might meet Gebelaawi, might talk to him, might ask him to explain events past and present, and the Clauses governing the Trust and the secret of the book. That was the dream that came true only amid clouds of hashish smoke. Who could tell? He might find that he had gone senile and lost his memory, or that he had died long ago, unknown to anyone but the Trustee. Only their hazardous undertaking would answer these questions.

In the basement he found Awaatif still awake, waiting for him. She gave him a tired look of reproach and muttered:

— You look as though you've been in a tomb.

He hid his anxiety, saying cheerfully:

— How sweet you are!

He threw himself down beside her. She said:

— If I was anything to you, you wouldn't ignore my views.

He spoke playfully:

— You'll change your views when you see what happens tomorrow.

— It's a thousand to one against my finding happiness instead of destruction.

Arafa laughed.

— If you'd seen the looks I get, you'd realize that the peace we're enjoying is an illusion.

The early morning silence was shattered by a piercing cry followed by wailing. Awaatif frowned and murmured:

— A bad omen!

He shrugged his shoulders.

— Don't blame me, Awaatif, when you're partly responsible for my position.

— Me?

— I came back to the Alley driven by a secret longing to avenge my mother. When your father was attacked I began to want to take this revenge on the strongmen, but my love for you has added a new idea, which has almost destroyed the old one: I want to put an end to them not for revenge but for people to enjoy life. I've only decided to go to our Ancestor's house to find out the secret of his power.

She gave him a long look, in which by the light of the candle he could clearly read her fear of losing him as she had lost her father. He smiled at her affectionately. Outside, the wailing was becoming unbearable.

1 0 1 \*

Hanash gave a farewell squeeze to the hand of Arafa who stood at the bottom of the hole. Then Arafa bent forward and crawled through the tunnel, which was heavy with the smell of earth, not stopping till his head emerged in the garden of the Great House. A wonderful fragrance filled his nose, like the very essence of roses and jasmine and henna distilled in the moist night air. The scent intoxicated him, in spite of his deep feeling of danger. Here he was, smelling the garden for which Adham had died of grief. Nothing could be seen of it, only a dreadful darkness under the unsleeping stars. Over it lay a terrible silence, disturbed now and then by the whisper of leaves in the breeze. He found the ground was soft and damp, and he decided he must take his shoes off when he reached the house, so as not to leave tracks on the floor. Now, where could the gatekeeper and the gardener and the other servants be sleeping?

He crept along on all fours, taking great care not to make any noise, heading for the house, whose huge square form

loomed out of the darkness. As he made his way towards it, he experienced worse fear than he had ever known in his life, although he had been used to going through darkness and spending nights in the desert or in ruins. He crawled along, keeping close to the wall till his hand touched the foot of the steps which, if the rebec spoke true, led up to the veranda. Here Gebelaawi had marched Idrees out of the house. That had been his fate for defying his father's orders. What then might Gebelaawi do to someone who broke into his house to steal the secret of his power? But steady on! No one could expect that a thief would get into this house which had been safe all these years, protected by Gebelaawi's terrible reputation.

He crept round the balustrade and climbed the steps on his hands and knees. He reached the veranda, took off his shoes and tucked them under his arm, then stole towards the side door which, according to the bards, led to the bedroom. Suddenly he heard a cough. It came from the garden. He froze on the doorstep and peered into the garden. He saw a figure approaching the veranda. He held his breath, imagining that his pounding heart would be heard. The figure came on and began walking up the steps. Perhaps it was Gebelaawi himself. Perhaps he would catch Arafa red-handed just as he had once caught Adham at about the same time of the morning. The figure reached the veranda only a couple of paces from his hiding place, but it went to the other end and lay down on what seemed to be a bed. The tension eased, leaving exhaustion in its train. The figure was probably just a servant who had gone out to relieve himself and then come back to bed. Now he was snoring!

Some of Arafa's courage returned and he raised his hand to feel for the handle. He turned it carefully and pushed the door gently till it was wide enough open for him to slip through. He closed the door behind him and found himself in total darkness. He groped around till he found the first stair, and began

climbing, light as air. He came out on a long gallery lit by a lamp in a niche. To the right it bent round towards the interior; but to the left it ran the breadth of the house, and half way along was the closed door of the bedroom. At that bend Umayma had waited, and from where he stood Adham had set off; and here was he setting off after the very same thing.

Fear filled his heart and he summoned his will and his courage. It would be contemptible to turn back now. A servant might appear at any moment. He might be roused from his madness by a hand on his shoulder. He had better hurry. He tiptoed to the door and turned its shiny handle. He pushed it gently open and slipped in, closing it behind him. He leaned his back against the door, unable to make out anything in the darkness. He was taking small, controlled breaths, and trying in vain to see. After a little while he smelt a pure scent of incense, which filled his heart with a strange unease and sadness for no good reason. He no longer doubted that he was in Gebelaawi's bedroom. When would he get used to the darkness? How could he gather his scattered wits? Who had stood in this place before? Why did he feel that all was lost unless he took complete hold of his strength and determination and courage? He was in danger of destruction if he did not calculate every movement precisely. He thought of clouds scudding along and changing into strange shapes — now a jebel, now a tomb.

He felt the wall with his fingers and took it as his guide, crawling forward till his shoulder touched a chair. A sudden movement in the far corner of the room made his flesh creep. He crouched behind the chair, straining his eyes towards the door by which he had come in. He heard the pad of feet and the rustle of clothes and expected that the room would be flooded with light and that he would see Gebelaawi standing in front of him. He would prostrate himself at his feet and plead for mercy; he would say: 'I am your descendant. I have no father. I only meant to do good. Do what you like to me.' In

spite of the darkness he saw a figure approaching the door, which opened gently, letting light from the corridor filter through. The figure went out, leaving the door ajar. As it turned to the right, by the light of the lamp outside he glimpsed an old woman with a long, thin, black face — an unforgettable image. Could she be a servant? Could this room be in the servants' quarters?

He peered out from behind the chair, picking out by the faint light from the door the outlines of the chairs and the sofas. At the back he could see the shape of a large four-poster bed with a mosquito net. At its foot was a small bed, perhaps the one the old woman had left. This big bed could belong to none other than Gebelaawi. He was sleeping there now, unaware of Arafah's crime. How he longed to peep at him, if only from a distance. But the open door warned him that the woman was going to come back. He looked to the left and saw the outline of the door of the private chamber, closed on its terrible secret. This was how Adham had seen it long ago, God rest his soul! He crept round behind the chairs, forgetting even Gebelaawi, till he reached the foot of the little door.

He could not resist the temptation. He stretched his hand up, put his finger on the latch, pressed it down and pulled the door. It opened. He closed it again hastily, his heart fluttering with excitement and feelings of triumph. Then the faint light disappeared and the room was plunged in darkness again. Once more he heard the pad of feet. Then the bed creaked as the old woman lay down, and there was silence. He waited patiently for her to go to sleep and tried hard to glimpse the big bed but could not see a thing. He convinced himself that it would be madness to try making contact with the old man, for the woman would wake up before he could do so and would fill the air with screams, and all would be over. Anyway, the mighty book would be enough for him, with the Clauses governing the Trust and the magic spells by which the young Gebelaawi had subdued the desert and its people. No one

before him had imagined that the book was a book of magic, because no one before him had practiced the art.

He stretched his hand up again, put his finger on the latch and pulled the door open. He crept in and closed it behind him. He stood up cautiously and breathed deeply to steady his taut nerves a little. Why had Gebelaawi withheld the secret of the book from his children, even Adham, the one dearest to his heart? There was a real secret, and in a few seconds he would discover it, as soon as his candle was lit. Adham had lit his long ago, and now here was he, the son without a father, lighting one again in the very same place. This would be told for ever to the music of the rebec.

He lit the candle and saw a pair of eyes looking at him. In spite of his shock and fear, he realized that the eyes belonged to an old black man, who was lying on a bed opposite the entrance, and that he was struggling to emerge from the state between sleeping and waking. He had been disturbed perhaps by the scraping of the match. In a movement that was neither voluntary nor conscious, Arafa leapt at him and put his right hand on his throat, pressing with all his might. The old man writhed and grabbed his hand. Arafa kicked him in the stomach and tightened his grip on his throat. The candle fell from his left hand and went out. The old man made a last convulsive movement in the darkness and then lay still. Arafa's crazy hand did not loosen its grip till his fingers went numb.

Then he drew back, panting, till his back touched the door. As the seconds passed he suffered a hell of silent torment. He felt his strength ebbing. Time hung heavier than sin. He might fall down on the ground or on his victim's corpse if he could not master this weakness. Flight called him like an irresistible force. He would not be able to step over the body to get to the ancient book, the accursed book. He had no courage to light the candle again; he would rather go blind. His arms were sore, perhaps where the man had scratched him in his desperate struggle. He trembled to think that, while Adham's crime had

been disobedience, his own was murder. He had killed a man he did not know, and whom he had no reason to kill. He had come in quest of power to use against evildoers and had turned unawares into an evildoer.

He turned in the darkness towards the corner where he thought the book was fastened, then pushed the door open and slipped out, closing it behind him. He crept along the wall towards the way out, hesitating behind the last chair. There were only servants to be seen in this house; where was the master? This crime would come between him and Gebelaawi for ever. He felt defeat and failure to the very depths of his soul. He opened the door gently. The light assailed him with what he imagined was a deafening roar as well as a blinding brilliance. He shut the door, tiptoed away, descended the stairs in pitch darkness, and crossed the veranda to the garden.

Because of his exhaustion and unhappiness he was less cautious. The man on the veranda woke up and asked: 'Who goes there?' Arafa crouched against the wall at the end of the veranda, his strength renewed by fear. The voice called out again and a cat answered with a miaow. Arafa stayed in his hiding place, terrified of being driven to a fresh crime. When all was quiet again he crept through the garden to the wall. He felt for the hole till he found it and crept away as he had come. When he had almost got to the end of the tunnel he bumped into a foot. The foot kicked him on the head before he knew what was happening.

1 0 2 \*

Arafa leapt on the owner of the foot and for a short time they struggled. Then the other man let out a cry of rage that told Arafa who it was. He exclaimed in surprise:



— Hanash, you old snake!

They helped each other to climb out, and Hanash said:

— You were away so long. I went in to sniff out some news.

Breathing hard, Arafa said:

— You made a mistake, as usual; but let's go.

They went back to the sleeping Alley. When she saw him, Awaatif shouted:

— Go and wash! Oh God! What's this blood on your hand and your neck?

He trembled, but did not answer. He went to wash himself, but a moment later fainted. He recovered after a while and, with the help of Awaatif and Hanash, sat down between them on the sofa. He felt as if sleep was further away from him than Gebelaawi was. He could no longer bear the burden of his secret alone and told them what had happened to him on his strange expedition. When he finished they were staring at him, their eyes full of terror and despair. Awaatif murmured:

— I was against the idea from the beginning.

But Hanash tried to lighten the blow.

— There's no way a crime like this can be avoided.

Arafa said:

— But it's worse than the crimes of Harpstrings and the other strongmen.

Hanash said:

— Mind you don't call suspicion on yourself.

— But I've killed an old man who'd done no wrong. Who knows, perhaps he was the servant Gebelaawi sent to Qaasim.

For a while they were plunged in a black silence like that of insomnia. Then Awaatif said:

— Hadn't we better sleep?

Arafa said:

— You two sleep. I shan't sleep tonight.

They fell silent again. Then Hanash asked:

— Didn't you glimpse Gebelaawi or hear his voice?

He shook his head sadly.

— Not at all.

— But you saw his bed?

— Just as we see his house.

Hanash sighed.

— With you so long gone, I thought you were talking to him.

— It's easy to imagine things outside the house.

Awaatif said anxiously:

— You seem feverish. You'd better sleep.

— How can I sleep?

But he felt the truth of her words in his hot and dazed state.

Hanash spoke again:

— You were within reach of the Testament and you didn't look at it!

His face screwed up with pain. Hanash went on:

— What a disastrous journey!

— Yes! (Then, in a new tone of determination:) But it's taught me we mustn't rely on anything but the magic we already have. Haven't I risked a crazy expedition running after something that may be as far as possible from what I thought?

— Yes! Nobody but you ever said the famous book was a book of magic.

Arafa seemed to be fighting more than ever against the confusion in his mind and spirit as he said:

— The experiment with the bottle will succeed sooner than you imagine and it'll be very useful when we have to defend ourselves.

The dreadful silence fell again. Hanash said:

— If only you'd known some magic to enable you to reach the Great House and its master without that escapade.

Arafa spoke with feeling:

— Magic has no limits. All I have now is a few cures and a plan for a bottle that could be used in defence or attack. As for what might be, it's beyond imagining.

Awaatif said angrily:

— You should never have thought of that crazy plan at all.

Our Ancestor belongs to one world and we belong to another. You couldn't have got anything out of talking to him even if you'd managed to. He's probably forgotten all about the Trust and the Trustee and the strongmen and his children and the Alley.

Arafa was angry for no apparent reason, though his unusual state excused any strange behavior. He said:

— This stupid, ignorant Alley! What do they know? Nothing! All they have is the rebec and its stories, but they would never do the things they hear about. They think their Alley is the center of the world, but it's just the refuge of idlers and beggars. In the beginning it was a desolate breedingground of insects, till the most terrible of bandits, your Ancestor the Founder settled there.

Hanash started. Awaatif moistened a rag and tried to put it to Arafa's forehead, but he pushed her hand away roughly and said:

— I have something nobody else has, not even Gebelaawi: I have magic, which can give our Alley things that would have been beyond Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim put together.

Awaatif implored him:

— When are you going to sleep?

— When the fire stops burning in my head.

Hanash murmured:

— It will soon be morning.

Arafa bellowed:

— Let morning come! It won't really come till magic has put an end to strongmen and rid people of demons and brought far more wealth than the Trust could ever give. Magic will become the ease that Adham dreamed of.

He heaved a deep sigh and leaned his head against the wall, exhausted. Awaatif hoped sleep would follow. Suddenly a dreadful voice rang out in the stillness. It was followed by screams and wails. Arafa leapt up in panic:

— The servant's body has been found.

Awaatif's mouth was dry as she said:

— How do you know the voices come from the Great House?

Arafa ran out and they followed him. They stood in front of their tenement-house, craning their necks in the direction of the Great House. The darkness was fading and giving way to morning. Windows opened and heads poked out, all looking towards the Great House. A man came from the end of the Alley, hurrying towards Gemalia. When he passed them Arafa asked him:

— What's happened?

He answered without stopping:

— God's will be done! After his long life Gebelaawi is dead.

1 0 3 \*

The three of them turned to go to the basement. Arafa's feet would hardly carry him. He sank down on the sofa, saying:

— The man I killed was a miserable looking black servant. He was sleeping in the private chamber.

Neither of them said a word. They looked hard at the floor to avoid his darting eyes. He said:

— I can see you don't believe me. I swear I didn't go near his bed.

Hanash hesitated a while and then spoke, feeling that it was in any case better to speak than to inflict silence on him:

— Perhaps you couldn't see his face clearly because of the shock.

He shouted in despair:

— Never! You weren't with me.

Awaatif whispered:

— Talk quietly!

He left them and hurried away to the back room where he

sat in the dark, trembling and confused. What madness had led him into that damnable exploit? Yes it was damnable. The earth itself seemed to sway with him, breathing out its sorrows. He had no hope left save this wonderful room.

At the first rays of sunlight the people all gathered in the Alley outside the Great House. The news spread fast, especially after the Trustee had paid a short visit to the house and then returned to his own. The word was passed around that burglars had broken into the Great House through a tunnel they had dug under the wall at the back. They had killed a faithful servant, and when Gebelaawi heard the news the shock had been more than his frail heart and great age could stand. People were too furious for tears or cries of rage. When he heard the news from his wife and Hanash, Arafa exclaimed:

— There you are! The reports bear me out.

Then he at once remembered that in any case he had been the cause of his death and he lapsed into a silence of shame and grief. Awaatif could think of nothing to say. She murmured:

— God rest his soul!

Hanash said:

— He didn't die before his time.

Arafa moaned:

— But I was the cause of his death — I, of all his children — I, and not one of the many wicked ones.

Awaatif wept as she said:

— You went without a trace of malice.

Hanash asked anxiously:

— Isn't it possible they'll find us out?

Awaatif cried out:

— Let's run away.

Arafa waved the idea aside impatiently.

— And give them the clearest proof of our guilt!

From the crowded Alley came a babble of voices:

— The culprit must be killed before we bury Gebelaawi.

— Accursed generation! Even the wickedest men respected

this house all through the past, even Idrees. We're damned till the Last Day.

— The murderers can't be from our Alley; who could imagine that?

— Everything will soon be known.

— We're damned till the Last Day.

The wailing and breast-beating grew louder till Hanash lost his nerve and said:

— How can we stay in the Alley after today?

Gebel's people proposed that Gebelaawi be buried in Gebel's tomb, partly because of their conviction that they were more closely related to him than anyone else, and partly because they would hate him to be buried in the tomb that included the mortal remains of Idrees with those of other members of the Founder's family. Rifaa's people called for him to be buried in the grave he had dug for Rifaa with his own hands. Qaasim's people said Qaasim was the best of the Founder's children and his tomb was the one most suitable for the body of their glorious Ancestor. It almost came to blows, with the man not yet under the ground, but Trustee Qadri decreed that Gebelaawi would be buried in the little mosque that had been set up in the old Trust office in the Great House. Remarkably, this solution met with general approval, though people were sorry they would be denied the sight of his funeral, just as in his lifetime they had been denied the sight of the man. The Rifaaites whispered to one another that Gebelaawi would be buried in the grave in which he had buried Rifaa with his own hands; but no one else believed that old story and they were jeered at till Fisticuff, their strongman, was furious and almost fell to blows with Harpstrings. At that point Saadallah bellowed a warning to everyone:

— I'll break the head of any stuck-up fool who spoils the solemnity of this sad day.

Only Gebelaawi's trusted servants witnessed the washing of

the body, and it was they who wound it in its pall and laid it on the bier and carried it through the great drawing room that had seen the family's most important events: the giving of the trusteeship to Adham and the rebellion of Idrees. Then the Trustee and the heads of the three sectors were summoned to the funeral prayers. After that the body was laid to rest as the sun went down. In the evening all the people of the Alley repaired to the funeral marquee. Arafa and Hanash went along with the Rifaaites. Arafa's face was deathly, for he had not slept since the crime. The conversation was all in praise of Gebelaawi, conqueror of the desert, master of men, symbol of strength and courage, lord of the Trust and the Alley, father of so many generations. Arafa looked miserable, but no one imagined what was going on in his mind.

Here was he, the man who had broken into the house, not caring about its reputation, who had not been sure of his Ancestor's existence till his death, who had set himself apart from everyone and soiled his hands for all time. He wondered how he could atone for this crime: all the glorious feats of Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim put together would not be enough; destroying the Trustee and the strongmen and freeing the Alley from their wickedness would not be enough; exposing himself to every danger would not be enough; teaching everyone magic with all its benefits would not be enough. One thing alone would be enough: to reach such a degree of magic that he would be able to restore Gebelaawi to life — Gebelaawi whom it had been easier to kill than to see. Let time give him the power to mend his broken heart. And these strongmen with their crocodile tears...! But — oh God! — none of them had sinned as he had. They were sitting there in silence, overcome with shame and humiliation. People would say in the neighborhood that Gebelaawi had been killed in his house while round about it the mighty strongmen were smoking hashish. Because of that, their eyes threatened vengeance, suffering and death.

When Arafa came back to the basement late that night he drew Awaatif to himself and asked her helplessly:

— Awaatif, tell me frankly, do you think I'm a criminal?

— You're a good man, the best I've met, but the unluckiest. He looked down.

— Nobody before me has tasted such pain.

— I know.

She kissed him with cold lips and whispered:

— I'm afraid the curse will rest on us.

He turned his face away from her. Hanash said:

— I don't feel safe. They'll discover about us today or tomorrow. I don't see how they can know everything about Gebelaawi — his origin, his Trust, his dealings with his sons, his contacts with Gebel and Rifaa and Qaasim — and not know about one thing: his death.

Arafa sighed deeply.

— Have you any solution, apart from running away?

Hanash said nothing. Arafa went on:

— I have a plan, but I want to be at peace with myself before putting it into action. I can't do it if I'm a criminal.

Hanash said without conviction:

— You're innocent.

— I'll do it, Hanash. Don't be afraid for us; the Alley will be distracted from the great crime by other events. Extraordinary things will happen and the most extraordinary of all will be that Gebelaawi will come back to life.

Awaatif gasped, and Hanash said, scowling:

— Are you mad?

He said in a feverish voice:

— A word from our Ancestor used to cause the best of his children to act for him till death. His death is more powerful than his words; it makes it necessary for the good son to do everything, to take his place, to be him. Do you understand?



1 0 4 \*

When the last voice had died away in the Alley, Arafa was ready to set out from the basement. Awaatif went with him as far as the porch, her eyes red from crying. She spoke with the resignation of one who saw no way out:

— May Providence watch over you!

Hanash asked sincerely:

— Why shouldn't I come with you?

Arafa said:

— It's easier for one person to get away than for two.

Hanash patted him on the back and advised him:

— Don't use the bottle unless you're desperate.

He nodded and went. He glanced at the Alley wrapped in darkness, then headed for Gemalia. He made a wide circle, through Watzwit Alley, Derrasa and the desert beyond the Great House, and reached the north wall of Saadallah's house, overlooking the desert. He went to a point half-way along the wall and felt the ground till he found a boulder, which he pushed aside. Then he lowered himself into the tunnel that he and Hanash had been digging night after night, and crawled through. He pulled aside the screen that closed the other end and emerged into the garden of Strongman's House. He hid by the wall and peered round. In the house he saw a faint light behind one shuttered window. As for the garden, it was asleep and in darkness except for a light in the window of the garden house. From time to time he heard the ribaldry and coarse laughs of the men inside. He drew his dagger and waited, poised for action, while time hung heavier than sin.

The hashish session ended half an hour after his arrival. The door opened and the men followed one another out through the garden gate into the Alley, preceded by the gatekeeper with his lantern. He closed the gate and came back, lighting Saadallah's path to the veranda. Arafa picked up a stone in his left hand and crept across, bending low, gripping the dagger

in his right hand. He hid behind a palm tree till Saadallah was about to climb the first step. Then he leapt at him and plunged the dagger into his back at the level of his heart. The man let out a scream and collapsed. The terrified gatekeeper turned, but the stone hit his lantern, smashing and extinguishing it.

Arafa rushed headlong towards the wall where he had come in. The gatekeeper let out a piercing yell. In no time footsteps were hurrying and voices were echoing in the house and at the end of the garden. In his haste Arafa stumbled over something like a tree stump and fell flat on his face. He felt a stabbing pain in his leg and elbow, but he bore it and dragged himself the rest of the way to the tunnel. The cries and footsteps grew louder. He flung himself into the tunnel and crawled quickly through to the desert. He stood up, groaning, then hurried off eastward.

Before he had rounded the wall of the Great House he turned and saw figures rushing towards him. He heard a voice shout: 'Who goes there?' He ran still faster, in spite of the pain, and reached the end of the back wall of the Great House. As he crossed the space between the Great House and Trustee's House he saw torches and heard a great noise. He bolted into the desert, heading for Muqattam Bazaar. He felt that the pain would overcome him sooner or later, and that the pursuers' footsteps were growing closer and their voices louder as they shouted in the stillness: 'Get him! Catch him!' At that he drew the bottle out of his cloak — the bottle that he had spent months testing — stopped running and faced the approaching men. He peered at them till he could make out their shapes, then flung the bottle at them. A second later there was an explosion such as no ear had heard before, followed by screams and groans.

Arafa began to run again, no longer pursued. At the edge of the desert he threw himself down on the ground, panting and moaning. He lay there, weak and racked with pain, alone under the stars. He looked behind him, but all was darkness

and silence. With his hand he wiped away the blood oozing from his leg and stanching it with sand. He knew he must go on, whatever the cost, and he levered himself up and limped towards Derrasa. When he reached it he saw a shape approaching and eyed it anxiously, but it passed him without turning. He sighed with relief and went back by the same roundabout way he had come. When he neared Gebelaawi Alley there was a dreadful din such as was never heard at that time of night. Snarls, wails, angry shouts and evil oaths flew about in the darkness. He hung back a while, then went forward keeping close to the walls. He peeped with one eye round the corner at the end of the Alley and saw a huge crowd at the other end, between the houses of the Trustee and Saadallah. Meanwhile, Qaasim's sector looked dark and deserted. He crept along, hugging the walls, till he reached cover in his tenement-house.

He threw himself down between Awaatif and Hanash, then uncovered his bloody leg. Awaatif was alarmed and hurried away to fetch a basin and jug of water. She washed the wound and he had to clench his teeth to prevent himself from crying out. Hanash helped her, saying anxiously:

— They're burning with rage out there.

Arafa screwed up his face as he asked:

— What did they say about the explosion?

— The men who were chasing you described what happened and nobody would believe them. But people were amazed at the injuries to their faces and necks, and the story of the explosion almost made them forget the murder of Saadallah.

Arafa said:

— The Strongman of the Alley is dead; tomorrow the others will begin to fight for his position. (Then, looking tenderly at his wife who was busy binding up his wounds:) The age of strongmen is about to end, and the first to go will be your father's murderer.

She did not answer. Hanash's eyes continued to rove round

anxiously. Arafa buried his head in his hands because of the pain.

1 0 5 \* \* \* \* \*

Early next morning at the door of the basement someone knocked. When Awaatif opened it, she saw in front of her Yoonus, gatekeeper of Trustee's House. She greeted him courteously and invited him in, but he stayed where he was and said:

— His Honor the Trustee invites Mr Arafa to meet him for urgent consultations.

Awaatif went to tell Arafa, feeling anything but the pleasure that might have been natural in other circumstances. After a little while Arafa emerged, putting on his best clothes — a white jellaba, a spotted turban and clean shoes — but he was walking with a stick because of a new and very visible limp. He raised his hand in greeting and said: 'At your service.' He followed the gatekeeper out. Gloom hung over the Alley from end to end and people's anxious eyes seemed to be asking what disasters tomorrow would bring. The strongmen and their followers were conferring in the cafes, while in Saadallah's home there was constant wailing and moaning.

Arafa followed the gatekeeper through the gate of Trustee's House and they walked up the path under its canopy of jasmine to the veranda. He considered the points of resemblance between this and the Great House, and there were so many that he decided the only difference was in the steps. He said to himself angrily: 'You imitate him when it suits you, not when it suits the people.'

The gatekeeper went in first to ask if Arafa might enter, then he came back and showed him in. He hobbled into the great

drawing room where he found Qadri the Trustee sitting at the far end, waiting for him. He stopped a few yards away from him and bowed respectfully. He saw at once the man's great height and powerful build and his fleshy red face; but when he smiled in acknowledgment of Arafa's greeting, he revealed dirty yellow teeth that did not match the majesty of his outward appearance. He motioned Arafa to sit beside him on the divan, but Arafa went over to the nearest chair saying:

— Excuse me, your Honor!

But the Trustee insisted he sit on the divan and said gently but firmly:

— Here... sit here!

Arafa could not avoid sitting beside him. He perched on the very end of the divan, saying to himself that the matter he had come for must be very secret. He became sure of this when he saw that the gatekeeper locked the door. He waited quietly and meekly. The Trustee studied him calmly then said in a conspiratorial tone:

— Arafa, why did you kill Saadallah?

Gaze froze under gaze. His joints became weak. Everything spun round. Future became past. He saw the man's confident eyes fixed on him and did not doubt that he knew everything with fateful certainty. The Trustee gave him no time to think, but went on rather briskly:

— Don't be afraid! Why do you kill if you're so frightened? Control your feelings and answer me. Just tell me plainly: why did you kill Saadallah?

Arafa could not bear the silence. He spoke without knowing what he was saying:

— Sir..! Me?

— You son of a bitch, do you think I'm raving? Do you think I'm accusing without proof? Answer me: why did you kill him?

In terror and despair, Arafa let his eyes wander aimlessly over the room. The Trustee spoke in a voice as cold as death:

— There's no escape Arafa. There are people outside who

would chew you to pieces and drink your blood if they knew about you.

The wailing in Strongman's House grew louder. All hope was lost. He opened his mouth without saying anything. The Trustee said harshly:

— Silence seems an easy escape, but I'll throw you to the wild animals outside and say to them: 'Here is Saadallah's killer.' If you like, I'll say: 'Here is Gebelaawi's killer.'

Arafa exclaimed in a strangled voice:

— Gebelaawi's?!

— You dig tunnels under back walls. You got away the first time but slipped up the second. Why do you kill, though, Arafa?

He said hopelessly, without purpose or meaning:

— Innocent, your Honor... I'm innocent.

— If I made public the charge against you, nobody would ask me for proof: in our Alley rumor is truth, truth is sentence and sentence is execution. But tell me what made you break into the Great House and then murder Saadallah?

The man knew everything. Arafa had no idea how, but he knew everything. Otherwise how could he alone in the whole Alley bring these charges?

— Did you intend to steal?

Arafa looked down in despair and said nothing. The Trustee bellowed:

— Talk, you child of vipers!

— Sir...!

— Why do you want to steal when you're better off than most people?

He answered in a tone of helpless acknowledgement:

— The soul is prone to evil.

The Trustee laughed triumphantly. Arafa wondered confusedly why the man had put off killing him till now; in fact, why hadn't he told his secret to one of the strongmen instead of

sending for him in this strange way? The Trustee left him to his thoughts, as if to torment him, then said:

— You're a dangerous man.

— I'm a poor man.

— Can a man be called poor when he has a weapon like yours, which makes nonsense of cudgels?

A dead man doesn't cry for the loss of his sight. This man was the true magician. The Trustee enjoyed his despair for a while, then explained:

— One of my servants joined your pursuers. He lagged behind and was not caught by your weapon. Then he followed you stealthily by himself without you seeing. In Derrasa he recognized you, only he didn't attack for fear of your surprises but hurried back and told me.

— Isn't it possible he'll tell somebody else?

— He's a trustworthy servant. (Then in a meaningful tone:)

And now tell me about your weapon.

The mist began to clear from Arafa's eyes; the man wanted something more precious than his life. His despair was total. What escape was there? He said in a subdued voice:

— It's simpler than people imagine.

The Trustee frowned.

— I could easily search your house now, but I don't want to draw attention to you. Do you understand? (Then, after a pause:) You won't die as long as you obey me.

His eyes glittered with menace as he spoke. Abandoning himself to despair, Arafa replied:

— You'll find me obedient to your will.

— You've begun to understand me, Mr Know-all Arafa. If it had been my intention to kill you, the dogs would already have eaten you. (Then, after clearing his throat:) That's enough about Gebelaawi and Saadallah. Tell me about your weapon; what is it?

He replied cunningly:

— A magic bottle.

The Trustee looked at him suspiciously.

— Explain!

Feeling for the first time a little easier, Arafa said:

— Only magicians understand the language of magic.

— Won't you explain, even if I promise you safety?

Arafa laughed inwardly, but remained outwardly serious.

— I have only spoken the truth.

The man stared at the floor for a while, then looked up and asked:

— Do you have many of them?

— I have none at the moment.

The Trustee ground his teeth and shouted:

— Child of vipers!

— Search my house and see for yourself.

— Could you make some more?

— Certainly.

The Trustee hugged himself with excitement.

— I want lots of them.

— You shall have as many as you want.

For the first time they exchanged understanding looks. Arafa said boldly:

— Your Honor wishes to dispense with those damnable strongmen?

With a strange glint in his eye, Qadri asked:

— Tell me what made you break into the Great House.

— Only curiosity. I didn't mean to kill that faithful servant.

The Trustee stared at him suspiciously.

— You caused the death of the great man.

— I was heartbroken over that.

The Trustee shrugged his shoulders and said:

— If only we could live like him.

Arafa thought: 'You dreadful hypocrite! You're only interested in the Trust.' But he said:

— May God grant you a long life!

The Trustee still sounded suspicious:



— You really went just out of curiosity?

— Yes!

— And why did you kill Saadallah?

— Because, like you, I want to get rid of the strongmen.

The Trustee smiled.

— They're a great evil.

Arafa thought: 'You only hate them because of the money they take from the Trust, not because of their wickedness.' But he said:

— You're quite right, sir.

— You'll become richer than you ever dreamed.

Arafa said craftily:

— That's all I wanted.

— You needn't bother to work for milliemes; you'll have all your time to make magic for my defence, and whatever your heart desires shall be yours.

1 0 6 \* \* \* \* \*

On the sofa sat the three of them — Arafa describing what had happened, and Awaatif and Hanash following his words with anxious attention. Arafa finished by saying:

— We have no choice. Saadallah is not yet buried. It's either accept or be destroyed!

Awaatif said:

— Or run away!

— There's no escape from his spies who are all around us.

— We shan't be safe under his protection.

He ignored her words, and would have liked to ignore her thought. He turned to Hanash and asked:

— Why don't you say something?

Hanash said sadly:

— We came back to this Alley with simple, modest hopes. You alone have to answer for the change that came about later — for the high hopes we came to have. I was against your ambition at first, but I didn't hesitate to help you. I began to be convinced by your views, little by little, till my only hope was the Alley's hope of freedom and perfection. Now you surprise us with a new plan by which we'll become a terrible tool for oppression — a tool that can't be resisted or destroyed, whereas a strongman can be fought or killed.

Awaatif said:

— And after that there will be no safety for us; he may get what he wants from you and then get rid of you by a trick, as he is now preparing to do with the strongmen.

Deep down Arafa could not help agreeing with what they said, but he spoke as if trying to persuade himself:

— I'll make him need my magic always.

Awaatif said:

— At best you'll be his new strongman.

Hanash backed her up:

— Yes, one whose weapon is a bottle instead of a cudgel. And remember how he feels about the strongmen; then you'll know how he'll feel about you.

Arafa became angry.

— Well, well! It's as if I was the greedy one and you were both pure. But it's *me* that you came to believe in. I only spent my nights awake in the back room and risked death twice for the good of the Alley. If you don't want to accept what's being forced on us, tell me what's to be done.

He gave them a look of angry defiance. Neither of them spoke. Pain was crushing him and he saw the world as a stifling nightmare. He was overcome by a strange feeling that his suffering was in revenge for his cruel trespass on his Ancestor. His grief and anguish grew worse. Awaatif whispered in desperate entreaty:

— Let's run away.

He asked angrily:

— How?

— I don't know, but it can't be harder for you than getting into Gebelaawi's house.

He puffed.

— The Trustee is waiting for us, and his spies are all around; how could we possibly escape?

There was a silence like that of Gebelaawi's tomb. Arafa said reproachfully:

— I don't want to bear failure alone.

Hanash said apologetically:

— We have no choice. (Then, brightly:) The future may bring a chance to escape.

Arafa said absently:

— Who knows!

He went to the back room, followed by Hanash. They began packing glass and gravel and other ingredients into bottles. Arafa said:

— We must invent symbols for our magic procedures and write them in a secret book so that our efforts don't risk getting lost — and so that my death will not mean the end of the experiments. Besides, I hope you'll be ready to learn magic, for we have no idea what fate has in store for us.

They went on working with great care. Arafa glanced at his companion and saw that he was scowling. He did not hide his thoughts, but made the best of the strange situation.

— These bottles will finish off the strongmen.

Hanash said, almost in a whisper:

— Not to our advantage nor that of the Alley.

Arafa spoke without pausing in his work:

— What has the rebec told you? In the past there were men like Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim; why shouldn't such men come in the future?

Hanash sighed.

— I almost thought sometimes that you were one of them.

Arafa laughed a short, dry laugh.

— Has my failure made you change your mind about that?

Hanash said nothing. Arafa went on:

— I shall never be like them from one point of view at least: they had a following, but as for me, nobody understands me. (He laughed.) Qaasim could win a staunch follower by a single kind word, but it will take me years and years to train one man in my work and make him into my follower. (He finished filling a bottle, put the cork in and held it up to the lamp admiringly.) Today these just frighten people and cut their faces; tomorrow they may kill. I tell you, there will be no end to magic.

1 0 7 \* \* \* \* \*

Who would be Strongman of the Alley? No sooner had Saadallah been laid in his grave than people began to wonder. Each faction started pushing its own man. Gebel's people said Yoosuf was the most powerful and the one most certainly related to Gebelaawi, and the Riffaite's said they were the followers of the finest person the Alley had ever known, the man Gebelaawi had buried in his own house and with his own hands. Qaasim's people said they were the ones who had used victory not just for the benefit of their own sector, but for the benefit of everyone, and that the Alley had been united in the days of their hero and ruled by justice and brotherhood. As usual, the differences began as whisperings over the hashish, which spread and grew till people were preparing for the worst. The strongmen stopped going about alone, and if they stayed up late in a cafe or hashish den they were surrounded by supporters armed with cudgels. Each bard prayed to the sound of his rebec for the strongman of his sector. The shopkeepers and peddlers scowled and looked gloomy, and

people were so worried and afraid that they forgot about the death of Gebelaawi and the murder of Saadallah. Um Nabawia the bean seller expressed the general feeling when she cried out at the top of her voice:

— Damn this life! Those who die are the lucky ones.

One evening a voice shouted from a roof in Gebel's sector:

— Listen, you people, and let reason judge between us and you: Gebel's sector is the oldest and Gebel was the first of our heroes, so it will disgrace nobody if you accept Yoosuf as strongman.

Shouts of derision rang out from the Rifaaites and Qaasimites, mixed with obscene insults and curses. In no time urchins had gathered chanting:

Yoosuf with your lousy face it's you,  
You who find a crazy thing to do!

People's hearts became still harder and blacker. The only thing that put off disaster was that three factions were involved; two would have to unite, or one must withdraw from the competition. Incidents began happening far from the Alley. Two peddlers fought at Beit el-Qadi; one — a Qaasimite — lost some teeth while the other — a Gebelite — lost an eye. At Hammam el-Sultan there was a battle between women from all three factions, naked in the baths. They scratched and bit each other and tore at each other's hair. The air was thick with flying jugs, pumice stones, luffas and pieces of soap. Two women fainted and one had a miscarriage, and blood was everywhere. Later the same day, after the amazons had trooped back to the Alley, they resumed battle on the rooftops, and the sky was filled with missiles, and filthy insults flew up to the clouds.

The Trustee secretly sent a messenger to Yoosuf, the Gebelite strongman, asking him to come for a meeting without letting anyone know. The Trustee received him graciously and asked him to do something to calm people down in his sector,

especially as it was the one next to Trustee's House. When he shook his hand to say goodbye, the Trustee said he hoped that, the next time they met, Yoosuf would be Strongman of the Alley. The man left intoxicated by the thought of this frank support and believing power was in his grasp. Soon he had organized his people, and they whispered to one another about the power and prestige that tomorrow held in store for them. The news got out to the rest of the Alley, and feelings ran high. Not many days passed before Fisticuff and Harpstrings met secretly and agreed to join forces to destroy Yoosuf and then, after victory, to draw lots to become strongman.

Next day at dawn the men of Qaasim and Rifaa gathered and attacked Gebel's sector. There was a fierce battle and Yoosuf and many of his men were killed. The Gebelites submitted in despair to superior strength. The afternoon was chosen for lots to be drawn as agreed, and at the appointed hour the Qaasimite and Rifaaites men and women hurried to the top of the Alley, filling the area between Trustee's House and Strongman's House, which would belong to the winner of the draw. Harpstrings and Fisticuff arrived, each with his gang, and greeted each other amicably and peacefully. They embraced in front of everyone, and Fisticuff said in a voice that all could hear:

— You and I are brothers and we'll remain brothers whatever happens.

Harpstrings said with enthusiasm:

— Always!

The two factions stood opposite one another, separated by a space in front of the entrance of the Great House. Two men came forward, one from each side, with a basket full of paper bags. They put it down in the space and retreated, each to his own people. It was announced that the hammer was Fisticuff's symbol and the cleaver Harpstrings', and that models of each were equally divided between the bags. A young man was led blindfold to the basket to make the draw. In the tense silence

he dipped in his hand and pulled out a paper bag. Still blindfold, he opened it, took out its content and held it up. The Qaasimites shouted:

— The cleaver! The cleaver!

Harpstrings stretched his hand out to Fisticuff who took and squeezed it, grinning. There were excited shouts of:

— Long live Harpstrings, Strongman of the Alley!

From the ranks of the Rifaaites a man came towards Harpstrings, his arms wide open. Harpstrings opened his arms to embrace him, but the man stabbed him in the heart with incredible force and speed. Harpstrings fell forward, dead. There was a moment of stunned silence, then an explosion of furious shouts and threats. The two factions met in fierce and bloody battle but none of the Qaasimites could stand against Fisticuff. Soon the prospect of defeat broke their spirit, and some fell while others fled, and by the evening Fisticuff was firmly established as Strongman of the Alley. While Qaasim's sector resounded with howls of grief, Rifaa's was filled with shouts of joy, and they crowded into the Alley, dancing round Fisticuff.

Suddenly a voice shouted above the cheers:

— Quiet! Listen! Listen you sheep!

They looked round in amazement to see the arrival of Yonus, the Trustee's gatekeeper, followed by the Trustee himself, ringed by his servants. Fisticuff went towards the Trustee's party, saying:

— Fisticuff, Strongman of the Alley, at your service!

The Trustee glared at him scornfully. In the terrible silence that fell, he said:

— Fisticuff, I don't want any strongmen in the Alley, nor any strongman methods.

Rifaa's men were bewildered, and the triumphant smiles died on their lips. Fisticuff asked in astonishment:

— What does your Honor mean?

— We don't want any strongmen nor any strongman methods. Let the Alley live in peace!

— Peace?!

The Trustee looked at him coldly but Fisticuff asked provocatively:

— And who will protect *you*?

Bottles flew from the hands of the servants and landed on Fisticuff and his men. Explosions shook the walls, and splinters of glass and pellets of gravel flew into faces and bodies. Blood flowed, and terror seized them in its talons. Bewildered and helpless, Fisticuff and his men went down, and the servants finished them off. There were howls of misery from the Rifaaites, and cries of spiteful joy from the Gebelites and Qaasimites. Yoonus walked to the middle of the Alley and called for silence, then proclaimed:

— People of the Alley, happiness and peace have been granted to you by grace of his Honor the Trustee. Long may he live! From today there are no strongmen to humiliate you and steal your money.

Shouts of joy rose to the sky.

1 0 8 \* \* \* \* \*

Arafa and his family moved by night from their basement in the Rifaaites sector to Strongman's House on the right of the Great House. It was the Trustee's order, against which there was no recourse. They found themselves in a dream-like place. They wandered about the luxuriant garden, the delightful garden-house, the veranda, the drawing room, the bedrooms, the boudoirs, the upstairs dining-room and the roof with its collection of hen-houses, rabbit-hutches and dove-cotes. For



the first time they put on fine clothes, breathed pure air and savored delicate scents. Arafa said:

— A little replica of the Great House, but without the secrets.

Hanash asked:

— And your magic? Doesn't that count as a secret?

Awaatif's eyes were full of astonishment.

— Nobody could dream of anything like this.

The three of them changed in appearance, color and odor. Hardly had they begun to get used to the place than a group of men and women presented themselves. One said he was the gatekeeper, another the cook, a third the gardener, a fourth the poultry-keeper, and the rest said they were housemaids.

Arafa asked in amazement:

— Who sent you?

The gatekeeper spoke for them:

— His Honor the Trustee.

Soon after, Arafa was summoned by the Trustee and went straight away. They sat down side by side on the divan in the drawing room and Qadri said:

— We shall meet often, Arafa; don't let it disturb you when I send for you.

In fact he was worried by the place, the occasion and the man, but he said cheerfully:

— You are too good, sir.

— The good comes from your magic. How do you like the house?

— It is beyond the dreams of poor people like us. And today all sorts of servants came to us.

The Trustee studied his face as he said:

— They are people of mine whom I sent over to serve and protect you.

— Protect me?!

Qadri laughed.

— Yes! Didn't you know that in the Alley they're talking

about nothing but your move to Strongman's House. They're saying to each other: 'So, *he's* the one who makes the magic bottles.' The strongmen's families haven't disappeared, you know, and the rest are dying of jealousy. So you're in grave danger. My advice is not to trust anybody or walk alone or go far from your house.

Arafa frowned. He was just a prisoner surrounded by anger and hatred. Qadri went on:

— But don't be afraid. My men are around you. Enjoy life as you please in your house and in mine. What will you have lost? What else is there other than desert and ruins? Don't forget that in the Alley people are saying: 'Saadallah's killer used the same weapon as Fisticuff's, and his way into Saadallah's house was the same as the way the Great House was broken into; so one man killed Fisticuff and Saadallah and Gebelaawi: Arafa the magician.'

Arafa trembled, shouting:

— This is a sword over my head.

The Trustee said calmly:

— There's no need to be afraid as long as you're under my protection and surrounded by my servants.

Arafa thought: 'You wretch; you've made me your prisoner. I wanted to use magic to destroy you, not to serve you. Now those I love and wish to free hate me, and I may be killed by one of them.' Out loud, he said hopefully:

— Share out the strongmen's portion between the people; they will be pleased with you and with us.

Qadri laughed scornfully.

— Then why get rid of the strongmen? (He examined him coldly:.) So you're looking for ways to please them! Give that up and get used to their hatred as I have done. And don't forget that your real protection lies in pleasing me.

Arafa said in despair:

— I've been at your service and still am.

The Trustee raised his eyes to the ceiling, as though study-

ing its decorations, then looked back at Arafa and said:

— I hope the pleasures of your new life won't distract you from your magic. (Arafa nodded.) And that you'll make as many of the magic bottles as possible.

— We don't need any more than we already have.

Qadri smiled to hide his annoyance.

— Wouldn't it be a good idea to stockpile a good number of them?

Arafa did not answer. He was overcome with despair; was it his turn already? He asked suddenly:

— Your Honor, if my staying is a nuisance to you, let me go away for good.

Qadri looked alarmed.

— What did you say, young man?

Arafa faced him with a frank look.

— I know my life depends on how much you need me...

Qadri laughed mirthlessly.

— Don't get the idea I underrate your intelligence. I can see what you're thinking; but why do you imagine my need for you is limited to the bottles? Doesn't your magic have the power to work other wonders?

Arafa persisted in his first line of thought.

— It was your men who spread the secret of my services to you; I'm sure of that. But you must remember too that your life depends on me. (The Trustee frowned menacingly but Arafa went on:) Today you have no strongman; your only power comes from my bottles, and the few that you have don't make you independent at all. If I died today, you would follow me tomorrow.

The Trustee suddenly turned on him like a wild beast, seized him by the throat and squeezed till his body trembled. But he quickly relaxed his grip, removed his hands and said, smiling evilly:

— See what your blathering tongue has made me do, Mr Know-All Arafa, when there's no reason for us to quarrel, and

when we can enjoy the fruits of victory in peace. (Arafa breathed deeply to get his wind back. Qadri went on:) Don't be afraid; your life is in no danger from me. I care for it as much as I care for life itself. Enjoy the world and don't forget your magic, whose fruits we gather. Realize that if one of us betrays the other, he betrays himself.

Awaatif and Hanash looked miserable when he recounted this conversation to them in the new house. None of the three seemed to be finding any real peace in their changed life. However, they forgot their worries at supper round a table laden with all kinds of delicious food and vintage wine. For the first time Arafa and Hanash laughed heartily. The two of them started to live as circumstances dictated. They worked in a room behind the drawing room, which they fitted out for magic. Arafa took great trouble putting down the symbols he had devised in an exercise book that only the two of them knew about. Hanash said to him one time while they were working:

— What prisoners we are!

— Talk quietly; the walls have ears.

Hanash looked resentfully towards the door, then went on, almost in a whisper:

— Wouldn't it be possible for you to make a new weapon with which we could destroy him by surprise?

— We wouldn't get a chance to test it secretly with all these servants around. There's nothing about us he doesn't know. And if we destroyed him, then before we could defend ourselves we'd be destroyed by the people who want revenge.

— Then why work so hard?

Arafa sighed.

— Because nothing is left to me except my work.

In the evening Arafa would go to Trustee's House to sit drinking with him, then would come home at night to find that Hanash had prepared a little hashish session in the garden or by the wood-lattice bay window, and the two of them would

smoke together. Arafa had not been a hashish-smoker before, but the current of events carried him along and tedium preyed on him. Even Awaatif learnt these habits. They had to forget their boredom and fear, their despair and guilt, just as they had to forget the great hopes of the past. Still, the two men had work to do but Awaatif had none. She used to eat till she was sick of eating and sleep till she was weary of sleeping, and she would spend hours in the garden enjoying its many-colored beauty. She remembered that she was living the life Adham had yearned for. What a dull life it was! How could anyone have wanted it badly enough to pine away? Perhaps it would have been like his dream if it had not been a prison, surrounded by enmity and hatred. But a prison it would remain, and the only escape was beside the hashish brazier.

One night Arafa was late back from Trustee's House and she had the idea of waiting for him in the garden. The caravan of night advanced, led by the moon, and she sat listening to the rustling of branches and the croaking of frogs. She heard the gate open and prepared to meet him, but a swish of clothes from the direction of the basement caught her ear and in the moonlight she saw the figure of a maid hurry towards the gate, not noticing her. Arafa came forward, staggering a little, the maid went over to the wall by the veranda, and he joined her. Then Awaatif saw them embrace in the deep shadow cast by the moon.

1 0 9 \*

Awaatif exploded, as befits a woman of Gebelaawi Alley. She leapt on the kissing couple like a lioness and beat Arafa's head with her fists till he staggered back, lost his balance and fell. She clawed at the maid's neck and hit her about the head till

her screams pierced the silence of the night. Arafa stood up but did not dare go near the battle. Hanash hurried up, followed by several servants. When he saw what had happened he sent the servants away and tactfully intervened between the two women till he was able to escort Awaatif home, still pouring out a stream of oaths and curses and insults. Arafa made his way unsteadily up to the wood-lattice window looking out over the desert and threw himself down on his cushion, alone in the hashish-den. He stretched out his legs, propped his head against the wall and lay there half conscious. Hanash joined him after some time and without a word sat down facing him across the brazier. He gave him a quick glance, then looked back at the floor and finally broke the silence:

— The scandal was bound to come.

Arafa looked up, his eyes full of shame, and hastily changed the subject:

— Light up!

They stayed in the wood-lattice bay window till early next morning. The maid went and another took her place. The all-pervading atmosphere seemed to Awaatif to produce one affair after another, and she began putting the worst interpretation on his every move to fit in with her suspicions. Life became hell, for she had lost the one comfort that had sustained her in her fearful prison. The house did not belong to her nor did her husband. It was a prison by day and a brothel by night. Where was the Arafa she had loved, the Arafa who had defied Harpstrings to marry her, who had risked death time after time for the sake of the Alley, till she had begun to think he was one of the rebec's heroes? Now he was just a scoundrel like Qadri or Saadallah, and life at his side was a burning torment, one long nightmare.

Arafa came home one night from Trustee's House and found no trace of Awaatif. The gatekeeper said he had seen her leave the house at nightfall and not come back. His breath reeking of wine, Arafa asked:

— Where do you think she's gone?

Hanash said anxiously:

— If she's in the Alley she'll be with her old neighbor, Snarler's mother, the woman who sells lemon sweets.

Arafa said angrily:

— You can't catch a woman by kindness, as they say in the Alley. I'll ignore her till she comes crawling back.

But she did not come back. Ten days passed. Arafa decided to go by night to Snarler's mother, meaning no one to know that he had gone. At the appointed hour he slipped out of the house followed by Hanash. Scarcely had they gone any way than they heard footsteps behind them. They turned and saw two servants from the house following them. Arafa said:

— Go back to the house!

One of them answered:

— We're guarding you by order of his Honor the Trustee.

He was furious, but did not insist. They all went to an old tenement-house in Qaasim's sector and climbed to the top floor where Snarler's mother had a room. Arafa knocked at the door several times, and Awaatif herself opened it, looking very sleepy. When she made out his face by the light of a tiny lamp in her hand, she scowled and drew back. He followed her, closing the door behind him. In the corner of the room Snarler's mother woke up and stared at Arafa in astonishment. Awaatif said angrily:

— What brings you here? What do you want? Go back to your blessed house!

Snarler's mother whispered uneasily, peering at his face:

— Arafa the magician!

Arafa spoke to his wife, taking no notice of the other woman's alarm:

— Be sensible and come with me!

She spoke with naked fury:

— I'll never come back to your prison. I won't destroy the peace of mind that I find in this room.

— But you're my wife.

She shouted:

— Your wives are there and in good health.

Snarler's mother protested:

— Let her sleep! Come back in the morning!

He glared at her coldly without a word, then looked back at his wife and said:

— Every man makes mistakes.

She yelled:

— You're just one big mistake.

He edged towards her and spoke in his gentlest tone:

— Awaatif, little passion-flower, I can't live without you.

— But I can live without you.

— Are you giving me up because I once slipped up when I was drunk?

She quivered with rage.

— Don't make an excuse of drink; your whole life is nothing but slipping up. You'd need dozens of excuses for all the wrong you've done. All I could expect is pain and trouble.

— Anyway it'd be better than life in this room.

She smiled a bitterly sarcastic smile.

— Don't be so sure! Tell me why your jailers have let you come to me!

— Awaatif!

— I'm not coming back to a house where I have nothing to do except yawn and watch the love affairs of my husband, the great magician.

He tried in vain to make her change her mind. She countered his gentleness with stubbornness, his anger with anger, and his abuse with abuse. He gave up in despair and left the place, followed by his companion and the two servants. Hanash asked:

— What are you going to do?

He answered with resentful resignation:

— The same as every day.



Qadri the Trustee asked him:

— Any news of your wife?

Arafa answered as he sat down beside him:

— Stubborn as a mule, for God's sake!

— Don't bother with her when you have better women!

(Then after studying Arafa anxiously:) Does your wife know any of the secrets of your work?

Arafa gave him a queer look.

— Only a magician knows magic.

— I'm afraid that...

— There's not a shadow of anything to be afraid of. (Then after a pause he added with feeling:) You're not to lift a finger against her as long as I'm alive.

The Trustee suppressed his annoyance and smiled, indicating two full glasses.

— Who said anybody would lift a finger against her?

1 1 0 \*

Once Qadri's friendship with Arafa had grown firm, he began inviting him to his special parties, which usually began at midnight. Arafa attended an amazing one in the great drawing room. There was every kind of food and drink, and beautiful women danced naked. Arafa nearly went crazy with the drink and the spectacle. He saw the Trustee acting with complete abandon, like a deranged animal.

He invited Arafa to another party in the garden, among shrubs round which ran a stream that sparkled in the light of the moon. Beside them they had fruit and wine, and in front of them were two beautiful girls, one to tend the brazier, the other to look after the hookah. A night breeze stirred, wafting

to them the scents of flowers, the melody of a lute and the sound of voices singing:

Here's a paradise of mint and clove,  
Fit for heroes of hashish to rove.

The night was bright with the full moon, whose whole disc appeared whenever the breeze parted the branches of the luxuriant mulberry tree, and points of light shone through the mass of twigs and leaves when the branches closed again. The hookah in the lovely girl's hand intoxicated Arafa and his head seemed to turn in harmony with the heavenly spheres. He said:

— God have mercy on Adham!

The Trustee smiled.

— And God have mercy on Idrees! What makes you think of him?

— The place we're sitting in.

— Adham loved dreams but he only knew the ones that Gebelaawi put in his head. (He laughed.) Gebelaawi whom you released from the torment of old age!

Arafa's heart contracted and his intoxication vanished. He murmured:

— I never in my life killed anybody except an evil strongman.

— And Gebelaawi's servant.

— I didn't mean to kill him.

— You're a coward, Arafa.

His thoughts fled to the moon, and he gazed up through the branches, leaving the hashish den for the sounds of the lute. Then he began stealing glances at the girl's hand as she packed down the hashish. The Trustee asked loudly:

— Where are you, so far away?

Arafa turned to him and asked with a smile:

— Do you stay up like this alone, your Honor?

— Nobody here is fit to join me.

— Even I have only Hanash to drink with.

— Once you're stoned it doesn't matter being alone.

Arafa hesitated a little, then said:

— We're prisoners aren't we, your Honor.

— What do you expect as long as we are surrounded by people who hate us?

He remembered Awaatif's words, and the way she had preferred the home of Snarler's mother to his house. He said with a sigh:

— What a curse!

— Be careful, or you'll spoil our enjoyment.

Arafa took the hookah.

— May life be always enjoyable!

Qadri laughed:

— Always? It would be enough if your magic could let us keep some of the spirit of youth all our lives.

Arafa filled his lungs with the night air of the garden, whose fragrance was enhanced by the dew.

— Luckily Arafa is not without his uses.

The Trustee let the girl take back the hookah and puffed out a thick cloud of smoke, which shone silver in the moonlight. He said sadly:

— Why does old age overtake us? We eat the tastiest food, we drink the finest wines, and we enjoy the best possible life, but age creeps over us when the time comes, and nothing can turn it back any more than the sun or the moon.

— But Arafa's pills turn the chill of old age into warmth.

— There is one thing before which you are helpless.

— And what is that?

The Trustee looked sad in the moonlight.

— What thing is most hateful to you?

Perhaps it was the prison in which he had been placed, or the hatred all round him, or else it was the goal he had given up; but he said:

— Losing youth.

— Oh no; you're not afraid of that.

— How can I not be when my wife has gone off furious?

— Women will always find one reason or another for fury.

A gust of wind made the branches rustle and the charcoal glow. Qadri asked:

— Why do we die, Arafa?

Arafa stared at him gloomily but said nothing. Qadri went on:

— Even Gebelaawi died.

It was as if a needle had pierced his heart, but he said:

— We are all mortal and the children of mortals.

Qadri said with annoyance:

— I don't need to be reminded of that.

— May your life be long, sir.

— Long or short, the end is that pit of worms.

Arafa spoke gently:

— Don't let thoughts spoil your tranquility.

— They won't leave me. Death... death... always death! It can come at any time and for the slightest reason, or for no reason at all. Where is Gebelaawi? Where are the heroes whose deeds are sung to the music of the rebec? This is a fate that should not be.

Arafa glanced at him and saw his pale face and his anguished eyes. There was a glaring contradiction between his state of mind and his surroundings. Arafawas uneasy and said:

— The important thing is for life to be as it should.

Qadri waved his hand angrily and said with a ferocity that killed all tranquility stone dead:

— Life is what it should be and better; it lacks nothing. Even youth can be brought back by pills. But what use is all that when death follows us like a shadow? How can I forget it, when it reminds me of itself every hour?

He enjoyed Qadri's suffering, but soon he despised his own feelings. He followed the girl's hand with sympathetic yearning and wondered: 'Who can guarantee that I'll see the moon another night?' Then he said:

— Perhaps we need more wine.

— In the morning we'll be sober.

Arafa felt contempt for him. He thought this was a good opportunity and he took it, saying:

— If it wasn't for the envy of those around us who are deprived, the taste of life would change in our mouths.

The Trustee laughed scornfully and said:

— Talk of the impossible! Suppose we could raise the life of the people to our level, would death stop stalking us?

Arafa conceded with a nod and waited for Qadri's anger to subside, then said:

— Death breeds where there's poverty and misery and bad conditions.

— And where there are none of those things, you fool!

Arafa smiled.

— Yes, because it's contagious.

The Trustee laughed.

— That's the strangest argument for your helplessness.

Arafa took courage from his laughter.

— We don't know anything about it; it may be like that. As people's conditions improve, their ills decrease and life grows in value, and each happy person feels the urge to fight for the destined happiness of life.

— And that's not a bit of use.

— Oh, but it is. The magicians will bring people together to resist death. Everybody who is able will work with magic. And so death will be threatened with death.

The Trustee laughed loudly, then closed his eyes and was lost in dreams. Arafa took the hookah and drew a long puff till the hashish glowed. After an interval the lute sounded again and the sweet voice sang: 'Be long oh night.' Qadri said:

— You're a dope-head, Arafa, not a magician.

Arafa said candidly:

— That's how we kill death.

— Why don't you work at it by yourself?

— I work at it every day, but by myself I'm helpless in face of it.

The Trustee listened to the music without enthusiasm for a while, then said:

— Oh, if only you could succeed, Know-All Arafa! What would you do if you succeeded?

The words seemed to burst out:

— I'd bring Gebelaawi back to life.

Qadri grimaced disdainfully.

— That's your business; you're his murderer.

Arafa frowned and muttered almost inaudibly:

— Oh, if only you could succeed, Arafa!

1 1 1 \* \* \* \* \*

At dawn Arafa left Trustee's House. He was in a drugged man's enchanted world, and its sounds and sights were blurred. His feet would hardly carry him. He was heading for home across the sleeping Alley bathed in moonlight. Half-way across, in front of the gate of the Great House a ghostly figure loomed up from he could not tell where. It whispered to him:

— Good morning, Mr Arafa!

He was terrified, perhaps out of shock, but his two guards leapt on the figure and caught hold of it. He peered at it and clearly saw, in spite of his blurred vision, that it was a black woman wrapped from neck to ankle in a black jellaba. He ordered his servants to let her go, which they did, then asked her:

— What do you want, woman?

— I want to speak to you alone.

— Why?

— I'm an unfortunate woman and I want to make a plea.

He said with annoyance, making to go:

— May God be gracious to you!

She implored him:

— By the life of your dear Ancestor, please let me.

He gave her an angry look, but his eyes stayed fixed on her face. Where and when had he seen that face before? His heart pounded and his intoxication vanished. This was the face he had seen in the doorway of Gebelaawi's room as he had hidden behind the chair on the fateful night. This was Gebelaawi's servant who had shared his room. His limbs went weak with fear and he stared into her face. One of his servants asked:

— Shall we chase her off?

— Go to the gate of my house and wait for me.

He waited till they had gone and he was alone with her in front of the Great House. He studied her thin, black face with its high, narrow forehead, its pointed chin and wrinkled mouth and brow. He felt certain that she had not seen him that night; but where had she been since Gebelaawi's death, and what brought her now? He asked:

— Yes, my dear lady?

— I have no plea; I wanted to be alone with you to execute somebody's will.

— What will?

She leaned towards him and said:

— I was Gebelaawi's servant and he died in front of me.

— You?

— Yes! Believe me!

He needed no proof. He asked her in an agitated voice:

— How did the old man die?

— He was terribly sad when his servant's body was found, and suddenly there he was dying. I hurried over to support his trembling back — that giant who had subdued the desert!

Arafa moaned loudly, breaking the silence of the night. His head was bowed in sorrow as if he were shrinking from the light of the moon. The woman went back to her first line of thought.

— I've come to execute his will.

He raised his head to her, trembling, and asked:

— What do you mean? Tell me!

She said in a voice as gentle as the moonlight:

— Before he gave up the ghost, he said to me: 'Go to Arafa the magician and tell him from me that his Ancestor died pleased with him.'

Arafa jumped as though he had been stung, and he exclaimed:

— Imposter! What's your scheme?

— Sir! Please!

— Tell me what game you're playing.

She said simply:

— Nothing but what I've said, so help me God!

He asked suspiciously:

— What do you know about the murderer?

— I don't know anything, sir. Since my master died I've been ill in bed. The first thing I've done since getting better is come and see you.

— What did he say to you?

— Go to Arafa the magician and tell him from me that his Ancestor died pleased with him.

Arafa said fiercely:

— Liar! You know, you schemer, that I... (Then, changing his tone:) How did you know where I was?

— I asked about you as soon as I came, and they said you were at the Trustee's, so I waited.

— Didn't they tell you I killed Gebelaawi?

She said in horror:

— Nobody killed Gebelaawi; nobody *could* have killed him.

— You're wrong. The man who killed his servant killed him.

She shouted angrily:

— Lies and fairy tales! He died in front of me.

Arafa wanted to cry, but no tears came. He stared at the woman, defeated. She said simply:



— Goodbye, then!

He asked her in voice that grated in his throat and seemed to betray his inmost torment:

— Do you swear you've told the truth?

— I swear by God; let Him be my witness.

Dawn was beginning to tint the horizon as she left. He followed her with his eyes till she disappeared, then left. In his bedroom he fainted. After a few minutes he came round, realized that he was dead with fatigue and fell asleep. But he slept only for a couple of hours before his inner turmoil woke him again. He called Hanash and told him the story of the woman. Hanash stared at him in alarm and laughed when he had finished, and said:

— You had a good dose yesterday!

Arafa was furious.

— What I saw wasn't a hallucination; it was real and there's no doubting it.

— Sleep! You need a good sleep.

— Don't you believe me?

— Of course not! When you've slept as I want you to, you won't come back with this story.

— Why don't you believe me?

Hanash laughed.

— I was at the window as you left Trustee's House and I saw you cross the road to our house. You stopped for a while in front of the Great House gate; then you went on, followed by your two servants.

Arafa jumped up and said triumphantly:

— Bring me the two servants!

Hanash made a gesture of warning.

— Certainly not, or they'll doubt your sanity.

He said with determination:

— I'm going to ask for their evidence in your presence.

Hanash implored him:

— We have only a little respect now from the servants; don't throw it away.

Arafa's eyes had a deranged look. He spoke absently:

— I'm not crazy. It wasn't a hallucination. Gebelaawi died pleased with me.

Hanash said tenderly:

— All right! But don't call any of the servants.

— If anything terrible happens it will hit you first.

Hanash said patiently:

— God forbid! Let's call the woman to talk to us herself.

Where did she go?

Arafa frowned as he tried to remember, then said anxiously:

— I forgot to ask where she lived.

— If what you saw had really happened, you wouldn't have let her go.

Arafa shouted:

— It did happen. I'm not crazy. Gebelaawi died pleased with me.

Hanash said kindly:

— Don't strain yourself; you need rest.

Hanash came close to him, stroked his head and gently led him to the bed. He did not leave him till he was lying down. Arafa closed his eyes wearily and was soon fast asleep.

1 1 2 \* \* \* \* \*

Calmly and firmly Arafa said:

— I've decided to run away.

Hanash was so astonished that his hands stopped their work. He looked round cautiously and was frightened, although the door of the workshop was closed. Arafa took no notice of his astonishment and went on working. He said:

— This prison no longer gives me anything but thoughts of death. The pleasure and wine and dancing girls are just the music of death. I seem to smell the grave in every pot of flowers.

— But death is certainly waiting for us in the Alley.

— We'll escape far away from the Alley. (Then, looking into Hanash's eyes:) And one day we shall come back to victory.

— If we manage to run away!

— The villains feel sure of us now. Escape won't be impossible for us.

They went on working silently for a while, then Arafa asked:

— Isn't that what you wanted?

Hanash muttered in embarrassment:

— I'd almost forgotten. But tell me what's made you decide this today?

Arafa smiled.

— Our Ancestor let me know he was pleased with me in spite of my breaking into his house and killing his servant.

Hanash looked astonished again.

— Are you going to risk your life for the sake of what you dreamed when you were stoned?

— Call it what you like; I'm certain that he died pleased with me. He wasn't angry either at the breaking in or at the killing, but if he could see my present life the world wouldn't be wide enough for his anger. (Then, in a soft voice:) And that's why he told me he was pleased.

Hanash shook his head in amazement.

— You used not to talk about him with respect.

— That was earlier, when I was full of doubts. Now that he's gone, respect is due to the dead man.

— God have mercy on him!

— Never, never can I forget that I caused his death. That's why my job is to bring him back to life if I can. If I succeed, we shan't know death.

Hanash looked at him sadly.

— Magic has so far given you nothing but love potions and deadly bottles.

— We know where magic begins, but we can't imagine where it will end. (Then, looking round the room:) We shall destroy everything except the book, Hanash; it's the treasure chest of secrets. I shall put it next to my heart. We shan't find escape as hard as you think.

In the evening Arafa went as usual to Trustee's House. A little before dawn he returned home. He found Hanash awake and waiting for him. They stayed in the bedroom a while, till they were sure the servants were asleep. The two of them then crept stealthily to the veranda. The servant sleeping by the balustrade snored regularly. They went down the steps and towards the gate. Hanash went over to the gatekeeper's bed and clubbed it with a stick, but it struck a cotton dummy and made an alarming thud in the stillness of the night. They were afraid the noise might have woken someone and waited at the gate with pounding hearts. Then Arafa drew the bolt gently, opened the gate and slipped out, followed by Hanash. They closed the gate and stole away through the darkness and silence, adhering to the walls and making for the home of Snarler's mother. Half-way down the Alley lay a dog. It stood up curiously and ran towards them sniffing. It followed them for a few yards, then stopped and yawned. When they reached the entrance of the tenement-house, Arafa whispered:

— Wait for me here. If anything alarms you, whistle to me and escape to Muqattam Bazaar.

Arafa went down the entry passage to the stairs and climbed up to the room of Snarler's mother. He tapped on the door till he heard his wife's voice asking who it was. He said eagerly:

— It's Arafa. Open up, Awaatif!

She opened the door and by the light of the lamp in her hand he saw her looking up at him, her face pale and sleepy. He came straight to the point.

— Come with me; we shall run away together.

She stood looking at him, stupefied. Over her shoulder he saw Snarler's mother appear. He said:

— We shall run away from the Alley and live as we used to. Hurry!

She hesitated, then said with some annoyance:

— What made you remember me?

— Leave talking for the proper time. Every minute is precious now.

There came a whistle from Hanash followed by the noise of men. Arafa shouted in panic:

— The dogs! We've lost our chance, Awaatif.

He rushed to the top of the stairs and saw figures and lights in the courtyard below. He went back in despair. Awaatif said:

— Come in here!

Snarler's mother said harshly, in self-defence:

— No, don't come in!

What was the use of going in? He pointed to the little window in the corridor and asked his wife hurriedly:

— What does it look out on?

— The light-shaft.

Taking the exercise book from his breast he rushed to the window, pushing Snarler's mother aside, and threw it out. Then he hurried out through the door, closing it behind him, bounded up the few steps to the roof and looked over the parapet into the Alley. It was swarming with torch-lit figures. He heard the noise of men coming up to get him and ran to the wall dividing the roof from that of the next house in the direction of Gemalia. He saw a group, led by a torch-bearer, forestalling him. He doubled back towards the wall of the first roof in the Rifaaite sector. Through the door to that roof he saw torches approaching. He was choking with despair. He thought he heard Snarler's mother scream. Could they have broken into her room? Had they taken Awaatif? A voice at the door to the roof shouted:

— Give yourself up, Arafa.

He stood there without a word, ready to surrender. No one approached him, but a voice said:

— If you throw a bottle, dozens will be thrown back at you.

— I have nothing.

They closed in and surrounded him. Among them he saw Yoonus, the Trustee's gatekeeper, who came up and shouted:

— Criminal! Scoundrel! Ungrateful bastard!

In the Alley he saw two men pushing Awaatif in front of them. He implored them:

— Let her go! She's nothing to do with me.

But a blow caught him on the temple and silenced him.

1 1 3 \* \* \* \* \*

In front of the furious Trustee stood Arafa and Awaatif, their hands tied behind their backs. The Trustee rained blows on Arafa's face till his hands ached. He shouted:

— You drank with me while you were scheming to betray me, you bastard!

Awaatif said with tears in her eyes:

— He only came to me to make his peace with me.

The Trustee spat in her face and shouted:

— Shut up, criminal!

Arafa said:

— She's innocent. She had no hand in anything.

— Not at all; she was your accomplice in the murder of Gebelaawi and all your other crimes. (Then he roared:) You wanted to escape; I'll help you to escape from this world altogether.

He called his men and they brought two sacks. They pushed Awaatif over on her face and quickly bound her feet together,

bundled her screaming into a sack and tied its neck tightly. Arafa shouted with insane excitement:

— Kill us however you like! Tomorrow your enemies will kill you.

The Trustee laughed coldly.

— I have enough bottles to protect me for ever.

Arafa yelled:

— Hanash got away. He escaped with all the secrets. He'll come back one day with irresistible power and he'll free the Alley from your wickedness.

Qadri kicked him in the stomach and he fell down writhing. The men leapt at him and dealt with him as they had dealt with his wife, and set off with the two sacks to the desert. Awaatif soon fainted, but Arafa went on suffering torment. Where were they taking them and which of the varieties of death had they prepared? Would they club them to death? Stone them? Burn them? Or throw them down from the Jebel? How terrible was the pain that filled these last minutes of life! Even magic offered no escape from this choking, rending pain. His head, which was throbbing from the Trustee's blows, was at the bottom of the sack, and he was almost suffocating. Death was his only hope of release. He would die and with him would die hope; and that man with his cold laugh might well live long. Those whose deliverance he had longed for would rejoice at his death. No one would know what Hanash would do.

The men who were carrying them to their death were silent; not one of them said a word. There was nothing but darkness, and beyond darkness, death. For fear of death he had put himself under the Trustee's protection and lost everything; yet death had come — death, which destroys life with fear even before it strikes. If he lived again, he would shout to everyone: 'Don't be afraid; fear doesn't stop you from dying, but it stops you from living. People of our Alley, you are not alive; you will never be granted life as long as you fear death.'

One of the killers said:

— Here?

Another protested:

— The soil here is too heavy.

His heart fluttered, although he did not understand what they meant, but in any case it was the language of death. The agony of suspense grew still more intense till he almost shouted: 'Kill me!' Suddenly the sack was dropped. Arafa groaned as his head struck the ground and pain shot through his neck and spine. From moment to moment he expected the cudgels to descend or worse to happen. He cursed the whole of life because of evil, the ally of death. He heard Yoonus say:

— Dig fast so that we can get back before morning!

Why were they digging the grave before killing them? He felt as if Jebel Muqattam were resting on his chest. He heard a moaning which he soon recognized as that of Awaatif, and his trussed body heaved violently. Then the sound of the digging filled his ears. He marvelled at the hardness of men's hearts. Then he heard Yoonus speaking:

— You will be thrown to the bottom of the pit and the earth will cover you without anybody having raised a hand against you.

Awaatif screamed despite her exhaustion, and from the depths of his being he shouted in an unknown language. Strong hands lifted them, threw them into the pit and shovelled the earth back. A cloud of dust rose in the darkness.

1 1 4 \* \* \* \* \*

The news about Arafa spread through the Alley. No one knew the real reasons for his death but they guessed that he had annoyed his master and that the latter had brought him to his inevitable fate. At some time it got around that he had



been killed by the same magical weapon as he had used to kill Saadallah and Gebelaawi. Everyone took pleasure in his death, despite their hatred for the Trustee, and the relatives and friends of the strongmen rejoiced. They were pleased at the killing of the man who had killed their blessed Ancestor and given their tyrannical Trustee a terrible weapon with which to subdue them for all time. The future seemed black — blacker than ever, now that power was concentrated in the hands of one cruel man. There was no longer the hope that a quarrel might break out between the two men, weakening both and causing one to sidewith the people of the Alley. It seemed that nothing was left for them but subjection and that they must regard the Trust and the Clauses governing it and the words of Gebel and Rifaa and Qaasim as forlorn dreams, fit only for the music of the rebec and not for putting into practice in this life.

One day a man accosted Snarler's mother as she was on her way to Derrasa:

— Good evening!

She looked closely at him and in a moment exclaimed:

— Hanash!

He came nearer to her, smiling, and asked:

— Did the dead man leave anything at your place the night he was caught?

In the tone of one who wants to ward off suspicion from herself, she replied:

— He didn't leave anything. I saw him throw his papers into the light-shaft. I went the next day and found a worthless exercise book amongst the garbage, a useless thing, so I left it.

Hanash's eyes shone strangely.

— Lend me a hand to find the book!

The old woman started with fright and shouted:

— Leave me alone! But for God's grace you would have died too that night.

He pressed a coin into her hand and she calmed down. He arranged to meet her in the small hours, when all eyes would

be closed. At the appointed time she led him to the bottom of the light-shaft and he lit a candle and squatted between the heaps of garbage looking for Arafa's exercise book. He sifted them paper by paper and rag by rag, poking his fingers into sand and dust, shreds of tobacco and fragments of rotting food. But he did not find what he was looking for. He went back to Snarler's mother and said resentfully in his despair:

— I didn't find anything.

She retorted angrily:

— It's none of my business. When you people come disasters follow.

— Patience, mother!

— Time has taken away our patience. Tell me why that book interests you.

Hanash hesitated, then said:

— It's Arafa's book.

— Arafa! God forgive him! He killed Gebelaawi, then gave the Trustee his magic and went.

— He was one of the best sons of our Alley but luck was against him. He wanted the things that Gebel and Rifaa and Qaasim wanted for you, and more.

She looked at him suspiciously and then, to get rid of him, said:

— Perhaps the garbage man took the stuff with the book in it. Look for it by the bath-house furnace at Salihia.

Hanash went to the furnace and found the garbage man of Gebelaawi Alley. He asked him about the rubbish. The man said:

— You're looking for something you lost? What is it?

— An exercise book.

The man looked suspicious but pointed to a corner next to the bath house.

— Try your luck! Either you find it there or it's been burnt.

Hanash began searching through the garbage patiently and eagerly. The only hope he had left in the world was that book;

it was his hope and that of the Alley. The unlucky Arafa had died defeated, leaving behind only evil and a foul reputation. This book could make good his mistakes, destroy his enemies and reawaken hope in the grim Alley.

Up came the garbage man and asked:

— Haven't you found what you're looking for?

— Please, give me time!

The man scratched his armpits.

— What's so important about the book?

— It has our accounts in it; you shall see for yourself.

He went on with his search with mounting anxiety, till he heard a voice he knew asking:

— Where's the bean-pot, chief?

Hanash was horrified to recognize the voice of 'Pegnose' who sold stewed beans in the Alley. He did not turn round, but he wondered anxiously whether the man could have seen him and whether it would be best to run away now. His hands burrowed away still faster like a rabbit's paws.

Pegnose went back to the Alley to tell everyone he met that he had seen Hanash, Arafa's friend, at the Salihia furnace busily hunting through the rubbish — for a book, so the garbage man had told him. No sooner had the news reached Trustee's House than a party of servants set out for the furnace, but they found no trace of Hanash. When the garbage man was asked, he said he had gone to see about something, and when he had come back Hanash had gone, so he did not know whether he had found what he was looking for.

No one knows how people first began whispering it around that the book Hanash had taken was none other than the book of magic in which Arafa had set down the secrets of his art and of his weapons, and that it was lost when he had tried to escape and had been taken to the bath-house, where Hanash had found it. The rumor spread from one hashish den to another that Hanash would finish what Arafa had begun and would take a terrible revenge on the Trustee. The Trustee added

force to these rumors by promising a huge reward to anyone who brought Hanash alive or dead, as his men proclaimed in the cafes and in the hashish dens.

No one any longer doubted the part that Hanash was expected to play in their lives. A wave of joy and optimism swept away their despair and servility, and people were filled with love for Hanash in his unknown refuge. Indeed, their love extended to the memory of Arafa himself. They longed to help Hanash in his stand against the Trustee, to make his victory their own and secure a life of justice and peace. They were ready to help him in any way they could, seeing in him the only path to deliverance, for it seemed that the magical power possessed by the Trustee could be defeated only by a similar power such as Hanash was perhaps making ready. The Trustee heard what people were whispering and instructed the bards in the cafes to sing the story of Gebelaawi, emphasizing how he had died at the hand of Arafa, and how the Trustee had been forced to make a truce with the killer and be friendly with him for fear of his magic, till he was able to kill him in revenge for their mighty Ancestor. The remarkable thing was that the people met the lies of the rebec with indifference and mockery. They grew so stubborn in their resistance that they said: 'The past is nothing to us. Our only hope is Arafa's magic. If we had to choose between Gebelaawi and magic, we would choose magic.'

Day by day more and more of the truth about Arafa was revealed to people. It may have originated with Snarler's mother, for she knew a great deal about him from Awaatif, or it may have come from Hanash himself when he happened to meet people far away. The point was that people came to know both the man and the wonderful life he had wanted for them through his magic. They were astonished by the truth and venerated his memory and exalted his name even above those of Gebel, Rifaa and Qaasim. Some people said he could not possibly have been the killer of Gebelaawi as was supposed,

and others said he was the first and last of the Alley's men even if he was Gebelaawi's killer. Each sector claimed him for its own.

Young men began disappearing from our Alley, one by one. It was said in explanation that they had been guided to Hanash's hideout and had joined him, and that he was teaching them magic in preparation for the promised day of deliverance. Fear gripped the Trustee and his men, and they sent spies into every corner and searched every home and every shop. They fixed the harshest punishment for the slightest offence and lashed out for a glance or a joke or a laugh, so that the Alley lived in a terrible atmosphere of fear and hatred and intimidation. But people bore the oppression bravely and took refuge in patience and hope. Whenever they suffered injustice they said: 'Oppression must end as night yields to day. We shall see in our Alley the death of tyranny and the dawn of miracles.'

