



**GHASSAN
KANAFANI**


**MEN IN
THE SUN**

and Other Palestinian Stories





MEN IN THE SUN



ABU QAIS

Abu Qais rested on the damp ground, and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats, which trembled through the grains of sand and penetrated the cells of his body. Every time he threw himself down with his chest to the ground he sensed that throbbing, as though the heart of the earth had been pushing its difficult way towards the light from the utmost depths of hell, ever since the first time he had lain there. Once when he said that to his neighbor, with whom he shared the field in the land he left ten years ago, the man answered mockingly:

"It's the sound of your own heart. You can hear it when you lay your chest close to the ground."

What wicked nonsense! And the smell, then? The smell that, when he sniffed it, surged into his head and then poured down into his veins. Every time he breathed the scent of the earth, as he lay on it, he imagined that he was sniffing his wife's hair when she had just walked out of the bathroom, after washing with cold water. The very same smell, the smell of a woman who had washed with cold water and covered his face with her hair while it was still damp. The same throbbing, like carrying a small bird tenderly in your hands.

The damp earth, he thought, was no doubt the remains of yesterday's rain. No, yesterday it had not rained. The sky now could rain nothing but scorching heat and dust. Have you forgotten where you are? Have you forgotten?

He turned himself over and lay on his back, cradling his head in his hands. He started to stare at the sky. It was blazing white, and

there was one black bird circling high up, alone and aimless. He did not know why, but he was suddenly filled with a bitter feeling of being a stranger, and for a moment he thought he was on the point of weeping. No, yesterday it didn't rain. We are in August now. Have you forgotten? Those miles of road speeding through a void, like black eternity. Have you forgotten it? The bird was still circling around alone like a black spot in that blaze spread out above him. We are in August. Then why this dampness in the ground? It's the Shatt. Can't you see it stretching out beside you as far as the eye can see?

"When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet, they form one river called the Shatt al-Arab, which extends from just above Basra to . . ."

Ustaz Selim, a thin, gray-haired old man, said it a dozen times in his loud voice to a small child standing beside the blackboard, when he was walking past the school in his village. So he stood on a stone and began to eavesdrop through the window. Ustaz Selim was standing in front of the young pupil, shouting at the top of his voice as he shook his thin stick:

"When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet . . ."

The child was trembling with anxiety, while the laughter of the other children in the class could be heard. Abu Qais stretched out his arm and tapped a child on the head. The child raised his eyes to him as he was eavesdropping by the window.

"What's going on?"

The child laughed and replied in a whisper:

"Idiot!"

He drew back, got down off the stone and went on his way, still followed by the voice of Ustaz Selim repeating: "When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet . . ."

That night he saw Ustaz Selim sitting in the headman's reception room, smoking his gurgling water pipe. Ustaz Selim had been sent to their village from Jaffa to teach the boys, and he had spent so much of his life teaching that the title "Ustaz" had become an inseparable part of his name. That night in the reception room someone asked him:

" . . . and you will lead the prayers on Friday, won't you?"

"No, I'm a teacher, not an imam. I can't lead the prayers."

The headman said to him:

"What's the difference? Our teacher was an imam."

"He was a teacher in a Quran school, but I teach in a secular school."

The headman repeated his question, insistently:

"What's the difference?"

Ustaz Selim did not answer, but behind his spectacles his eyes ran over the faces as though he was imploring the help of one of those sitting there. However, everyone was confused about this, like the headman.

After a long period of silence, Ustaz Selim cleared his throat and said quietly:

"Well, I don't know how to perform the prayers."

"You don't know?"

There were growls from everyone, but Ustaz Selim reaffirmed what he had said:

"I don't know."

The seated men exchanged looks of surprise, and then fixed their eyes on the face of the headman, who felt that it was for him to say something. He burst out without thinking:

"And what *do* you know, then?"

Ustaz Selim seemed to be expecting a question like that, for he answered quickly, as he was rising:

"Many things. I'm a good shot, for instance."

He reached the door and turned, and his thin face was trembling:

"If they attack you, wake me; I may be of some use."

This, then, was the Shatt that Ustaz Selim had spoken of ten years before. Here he was lying thousands of miles and days away from his village and Ustaz Selim's school. The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Selim, the mercy of God be upon you. God was certainly good to you when he made you die one night before the wretched village fell into the hands of the Jews. One night only. O God, is there any divine favor greater than that? It is true that the men were too busy to bury you and honor you in your death. But all the same you stayed there. You stayed there. You saved yourself

humiliation and wretchedness, and you preserved your old age from shame. The mercy of God be upon you, Usaz Selim. If you had lived, if you had been drowned by poverty as I have, I wonder if you would have done what I am doing now. Would you have been willing to carry all your years on your shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread?

He sat up, leaned on the ground with his elbows, and began to look at the great river again as though he had not seen it before. . . . So this was the Shatt al-Arab, "a vast river that steamers sail along carrying dates and scraw, like a street full of passing cars in the center of town."

"That's what his son Qais had shouted, hurriedly, when he had asked him that night:

"What is the Shatt al-Arab?"

He meant to test him, but Qais quickly answered in a loud voice, adding:

"I saw you looking through the classroom window today. . . ."

Abu Qais turned to his wife, who grinned. He felt a little embarrassed, and slowly remarked:

"I knew it before."

"No, you didn't. You learned it today while you were peeping through the window."

"All right. And what does it matter whether I know it or not; is it the end of the world?"

His wife glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and then said:

"Qais, go and play in the other room." When he slammed the door behind him, she turned to her husband:

"Don't speak like that in front of him. The boy is happy because he knows it. Why do you discourage him?"

He stood up, went over to her and put his hand on her stomach, whispering:

"When?"

"In seven months' time."

"Ah!"

"We want a girl this time."

"No, we want a boy. A boy."

But she gave birth to a girl he named Hosna, who died two months later. The doctor said distastefully:

"She was extremely emaciated."

It happened a month after he left his village, in an old house in another village far from the firing line.

"Abu Qais! I feel I'm going to give birth!"

"All right. All right. Keep calm."

He said to himself:

"I wish that women gave birth after a pregnancy of a hundred months. Is this the time for labour?"

"O God!"

"What?"

"I'm going to give birth."

"Shall I call anyone?"

"Umm Umar."

"Where can I find her now?"

"Hand me that cushion!"

"Where can I find Umm Umar?"

"O my God! Lift me up a little. Let me rest against the wall."

"Don't move much. Let me call Umm Umar."

"Hurry! Hurry! O Lord of creation!"

He hurried outside. But as he shut the door behind him he heard the cry of the newborn child, so he turned back and put his ear to the wood of the door. . . .

The roar of the Shatt, the sailors shouting to each other, the sky blazing, and the black bird still circling aimlessly.

He got up, brushed the earth from his clothes, and stood looking at the river.

More than at any time in the past he felt alien and insignificant. Rubbing his hand over his rough chin, he brushed from his head all the thoughts that had gathered like teeming hosts of ants.

On the other side of this Shatt, just the other side, were all the things he had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait. What only lived in his mind as a dream and a fantasy existed there. It was certainly something real, of stones, earth, water, and sky, not as it slumbered in his troubled mind. There must be lanes and streets, men and women, and children running about between the trees.

No. No. There were no trees there. Saad, his friend who had emigrated there, worked as a driver, and come back with sacks of money, said there were no trees there. The trees exist in your head, Abu Qais, in your tired old head, Abu Qais. Ten trees with twisted trunks that brought down olives and goodness every spring. There are no trees in Kuwait, Saad said so. You must believe Saad because he knows more than you, although he is younger than you. All of them know more than you, all of them.

In the last ten years you have done nothing but wait. You have needed ten big hungry years to be convinced that you have lost your trees, your house, your youth, and your whole village. People have been making their own way during these long years, while you have been squatting like an old dog in a miserable hut. What do you think you were waiting for? Wealth to come through the roof of your house? Your house? It is not your house. A generous man said to you: "Live here!" That is all. And a year later he said to you: "Give me half the room," so you put up patched sacks between yourself and the new neighbors. You stayed squatting till Saad came and started to shake you as milk is churned to make butter.

"If you get to the Shatt, you can easily reach Kuwait. Basra is full of guides who will undertake to smuggle you there across the desert. Why don't you go?"

When his wife heard what Saad said, she glanced from one to the other and began to rock her baby again.

"It's a risk, and who knows what the outcome will be?"

"What will the outcome be? Ha, ha! Abu Qais, says: 'Who knows what the outcome will be?' Ha, ha!"

Then Saad looked at her and said:

"Have you heard what your husband says? Who knows what the outcome will be? As though life were like eating yogurt. Why doesn't he behave like us? Is he better?"

She did not raise her eyes to Abu Qais, who was hoping she would not.

"Do you like this life here? Ten years have passed and you live like a beggar. It's disgraceful. Your son, Qais, when will he go back to school? Soon the other one will grow up. How will you be able to look at him when you haven't . . .?"

"All right. That's enough."

"No. It's not enough. It's terrible. You are responsible for a big family now. Why don't you go there? What's your opinion, Umm Qais?"

His wife was silent, while he thought: "Soon he too will grow up . . ." but he said:

"It's a long way. And I'm an old man; I can't walk as you did. I might die."

No one in the room spoke. His wife was still rocking her child. Saad gave up insisting, but the rough voice exploded inside his own head:

"Die! Who says that isn't preferable to your life at the moment? For ten years you have been hoping to return to the ten olive trees that you once owned in your village. Your village! Ha!"

He turned to his wife.

"What do you think, Umm Qais?"

She gazed at him, whispering:

"It's just as you think."

"We'll be able to send Qais to school."

"Yes."

"And perhaps buy one or two olive shoots."

"Of course."

"Maybe we'll be able to build a shack somewhere."

"Certainly."

"If I arrive. If I arrive."

He broke off, and looked at her. He had known that she would start weeping; her lower lip would tremble a little and then one tear would well up, gradually growing bigger and slipping down her brown, wrinkled cheek. He tried to say something, but he was unable to. A choking lump was tearing his throat. A lump just like the one he had felt when he arrived in Basra and went to the shop belonging to the fat man whose job was smuggling people from Basra to Kuwait. He stood before him, bearing on his shoulders all the humiliation and hope that an old man can carry. And there was a blanket of echoing silence after the fat proprietor of the office had repeated:

"It's a difficult journey, I tell you. It will cost you fifteen dinars."

"And can you guarantee that we shall arrive safely?"

"Of course you will arrive safely. But you will have to suffer a little discomfort. You know, we are in August now. The heat is intense and the desert has no shade. But you will arrive."

The lump was still in his throat. But he felt that if he put off saying what he had to say, he would not be able to pronounce the words later.

"I have traveled thousands of miles to reach you. Saad sent me. Do you remember him? But I have only got fifteen dinars. What do you say to taking ten and leaving me the rest?"

The man interrupted him:

"We are not playing games. Didn't your friend tell you that the price is fixed here? We are risking the guide's life for your sake."

"We too are risking our lives."

"I didn't force you to."

"Ten dinars?"

"Fifteen dinars, can't you hear?"

He could not go on any longer. The fat man, sitting behind his desk, dripping with sweat, was gazing at him, his eyes wide open. He wished the man would stop staring. Then he felt them, hot, filling his eyes, about to fall. He wanted to say something but could not. He felt that his whole head had filled with tears, welling up from inside, so he turned and went out into the street. There human beings began to swim behind a mist of tears, the horizon of the river and the sky came together, and everything around him became simply an endless white glow. He went back, and threw himself down with his chest on the damp earth, which began to beat beneath him again, while the scent of the earth rose to his nostrils and poured into his veins like a flood.

ASSAD

Assad stood in front of the fat man, the proprietor of the office that undertook to smuggle people from Basra to Kuwait, and burst out: "Fifteen dinars I'll pay you. Fine! But after I arrive, not before."

The man looked at him from under his heavy eyelids, asking stupidly: "Why?"

"Why? Ha! Because the guide you send with us will run away before we get halfway there. Fifteen dinars, fine, but not before we arrive."

Folding some yellow papers in front of him, the man said reproachfully: "I'm not forcing you to do anything, I'm not forcing you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you don't like our conditions, you can turn around, take three steps, and find yourself in the road."

The road! Were there still roads in this world? Hadn't he wiped them with his forehead and washed them with his sweat for days and days? They all say that: "You'll find yourself in the road." Abul-Abd, who smuggled him from Jordan to Iraq, had told him:

"You've only got to go round H4,* it doesn't matter if you stray a little into the interior. You're still a boy and you can take a bit of heat. Then come back, and you will find me waiting for you in the road."

But that wasn't one of the conditions. You told me, when we were in Amman, that you would take me to Baghdad, and I paid you twenty whole dinars. You didn't tell me I was to walk around H4."

Abul-Abd hit the dusty bonnet of his lorry, so that his five fingers made a mark and the vivid red of the lorry showed up under them. The big truck was standing by the house near Jebel Amman when he negotiated with him, and he remembered exactly the conditions that were mentioned.

"It's a difficult business. They'll take me to prison if they catch you with me. All the same I'll do you a very great service because I knew your father, may God have mercy on him. In fact we fought together in Ramleh ten years ago."

Abul-Abd said nothing for a while. His blue shirt was damp with sweat, and his hard face gave Assad the feeling that he was one

* H1, H2, H3, and so on, are pumping stations on the IPC pipeline from Kirkuk to the Mediterranean. H4 is about 70 km within Jordanian territory. (It.)

of those men who do not expect the head of a family to accomplish miracles. "I'll take twenty dinars from you. And you will find yourself in Baghdad."

"Twenty dinars?"

"Yes, and you must help me the whole of the way, too. We'll set off the day after tomorrow. I must deliver a small car to a rich Baghdadí who spent part of the summer in Ramallah and then decided to return to Baghdad by plane."

"But . . . twenty dinars?"

Abul-Abd looked at him intently, and then exploded: "I'll save your life for twenty dinars. Do you think you'll spend your life here in hiding? Tomorrow they'll arrest you."

"But where from? Where can I get you the twenty dinars from?"

"Borrow them, borrow them. Any friend will give you twenty dinars if he knows you are traveling to Kuwait."

"Twenty dinars?"

"Twenty, twenty."

"To Baghdad?"

"Directly."

But he lied to him. He took advantage of his innocence and ignorance, tricking him, making him get out of the lorry after a journey on a burning hot day, telling him that he must walk round H4 so as not to fall into the hands of the frontier guards, and then promising to meet him on the road.

"But I don't know this area. Do you realize what it means for me to walk all this distance round H4, when the sun is at its height?"

Abul-Abd hit the dusty side of his lorry again. They were standing by themselves a mile before H4. He shouted out:

"What do you think will happen? Your name is registered at all the frontier posts. If they see you with me now, without a passport or an exit visa, a plotter against the state, what do you think will happen? Stop making difficulties. You are as strong as a bull, and you can move your legs. I'll meet you on the road beyond H4."

They all talked about roads. They said: "You will find yourself on the road!" And all they knew of the road was its blackness and its

pavements. Here was the fat man, the Basran smuggler, repeating the very same tale. "Can't you hear? I am a very busy man. I told you: fifteen dinars and I will get you to Kuwait. Of course you will have to walk a little, but you're young and strong; it will not do you any harm."

"But why don't you listen to me? I told you that I will give you the money when we reach Kuwait."

"You will get there. You will get there."

"How?"

"I swear to you on my honor that you will get to Kuwait."

"You swear on your honor?"

"I swear to you on my honor that I will meet you beyond H4. You have only got to walk round that damned place and you will find me waiting for you."

He had given H4 a wide berth. The sun was pouring flame down on his head, and as he climbed the yellow slopes, he felt he was alone in the whole world. He dragged his feet over the sand as though he were walking on the seashore after pulling up a heavy boat that had drained the firmness from his legs. He crossed hard patches of brown rocks like splinters, climbed low hills with flattened tops of soft yellow earth like flour. If they had taken me to the desert prison, Al-Jafir, at H4, I wonder if life would have been kinder than it is now. Pointless, pointless. The desert was everywhere. Abul-Abd had given him a headdress, and he had wrapped it round his head, but it was no use for keeping off the blaze. Indeed it seemed to him that it too was catching fire. The horizon was a collection of straight, orange lines, but he had taken a firm decision to go forward, doggedly. Even when the earth turned into shining sheets of yellow paper he did not slow down. Suddenly the yellow sheets began to fly about, and he scooped to gather them up.

"Thanks. Thanks. This damned fan makes the papers fly about in front of me, but I can't breathe without it. Ha! What have you decided?"

"Are you sure the guide you send with us won't run away?"

"How will he be able to run away, you fool? There will be more than ten of you. He won't be able to escape from you."

"Where will he take us to?"

"As far as the Jahra road, beyond Mudlaa. There you will be inside Kuwait."

"Will we have a lot of walking to do?"

"Six or seven hours, no more."

Four hours later he reached the road. He had left H4 behind him, and the sun had set behind the brown hills. But his head was still burning, and he had the feeling that his forehead was dripping blood. He sat down on a stone and gazed into the distance at the end of the straight black road. His head felt muddled, with thousands of confused voices throbbing in it, and it seemed to him that the appearance of a big red lorry at the end of the road was a stupid fantasy. He stood up, looking at the road again, but he could not see clearly yet. Was it twilight or sweat? His head was still humming like a beehive, and he cried with all his strength:

"Abul-Abd, damn your father, damn your forefathers!"

"What did you say?"

"Me? Nothing, nothing. When will the journey begin?"

"As soon as there are ten of you. You know, we cannot send a guide with each of you. So we wait till the number reaches ten and we send one guide with them. Will you give me the cash now?"

He tightened his hold on the money in his pocket, and reflected: "I will be able to return the amount to my uncle in less than a month. A man can collect money in the twinkling of an eye there in Kuwait."

"Don't be too optimistic. Dozens of people have gone before you and come back without bringing a penny with them. All the same I'll give you the fifty dinars you have asked for. You must realize that they are the fruits of a lifetime."

"Then why do you give me the money, if you're sure that I won't return it to you?"

"You know why, don't you? I want you to make a start, even in hell, so that you'll be in a position to marry Nada. I can't imagine my poor daughter waiting any longer. Do you understand?"

He felt the unuttered insult wound his throat, and he had an urge to give the fifty dinars back to his uncle, to throw them in his face with all the strength in his arms and all the hatred in his heart. To marry him off to Nada! Who told him that he wanted to marry

Nada? Just because his father had recited the Fatiha* with his uncle when he and Nada were born on the same day? His uncle considered that was fate. Indeed he had refused a hundred suitors who had asked for his daughter's hand and told them she was engaged. O God of devils! Who told him that he, Assad, wanted to marry her? Who told him that he ever wanted to get married? Here he was now reminding him again. He wanted to buy him for his daughter as you buy a sack of manure for a field. He tightened his grasp on the money in his pocket and got ready to get up. But when he touched it there in his pocket, soft and warm, he felt he was holding the keys of his whole future. If he allowed his rage to get the better of him now and gave the money back to his uncle, he would never be offered the opportunity to obtain fifty dinars by any means. He calmed himself, firmly shutting his mouth and tightening his grasp on the bundle of money in his trouser pocket. Then he remarked:

"No. No. I will give you the money when all the preparations for the journey are made. I will see you once a day. I am staying in a nearby hotel."

The fat man smiled. He went on smiling, and then burst out, laughing loudly:

"It's better for you not to waste your time, my boy. All the smugglers ask the same price. We have come to an agreement among ourselves. Don't wear yourself out. All the same, keep your money till the preparations are made. It's up to you. What's the name of the hotel where you are staying?"

"The Shatt Hotel."

"Ah, the rats' hotel!"

The wild rat ran across the road, its little eyes shining in the car's headlights. The blonde woman said to her husband, who was concentrating on driving:

"It's a fox. Did you see it?"

The husband, a foreigner, laughed. "You women! You make a rat into a fox."

* The first sura of the Quran, customarily recited at the conclusion of an agreement or contract. (Tr.)

They had picked him up a little after sunset, after he had waved to them in their small car. When the husband stopped the car, he looked through the window. He was trembling from the extreme cold. The wife was frightened of him, but he gathered together in his mind all the English he had learned, and said:

"My friend had to go back to H4 with the car, and he left me —"

The man interrupted him:

"Don't lie. You're escaping from there. All right. Get in. I'll take you to Baaquba."

The back seat was comfortable, and the girl handed him a blanket, which he wrapped himself in; he could not tell exactly whether he was trembling because of the desert cold, or from fear, or exhaustion. The man asked:

"Have you walked a lot?"

"I don't know. Four hours perhaps."

"The guide abandoned you, didn't he? That's always happening."

The girl turned to him with a question:

"Why are you escaping from there?"

Her husband gave her the answer:

"It's a long story. Tell me, do you drive well?"

"Yes."

"You can take my place when you've had a little rest. I may be able to help you cross the Iraqi frontier. We will get there at two in the morning, and the officials will be asleep."

He could not get his mind to focus on one subject. He was confused and did not know where to start asking the host of questions that needed an answer, so he tried to get to sleep, even if it was just for half an hour.

"Where are you from?"

"Palestine. Ramleh."

"Oh. Ramleh is a very long way away. A couple of weeks ago I was in Zeita. Do you know Zeita? I stood in front of the barbed wire. A little child came up to me and said in English that his house was a few feet beyond the barbed wire."

"Do you work in an office?"

"Work in an office? Ha! The devil himself is too innocent to be employed in an office. No, my friend, I'm a tourist."

"Look! Look! There's another fox. Didn't you see how his eyes glitter?"

"He's a rat, my dear, a rat. Why do you insist that he's a fox? Have you heard what happened there recently, near Zeita?"

"No. What happened?"

"The devil himself doesn't know what happened. Will you stay in Baghdad?"

"No."

"Oh. This desert is full of rats. What on earth do they eat?"

He answered quietly:

"Rats smaller than them."

"Really?" said the girl. "It's frightening. Rats themselves are horrible, frightening animals."

The fat man who owned the office said:

"Rats are horrible animals. How can you sleep in that hotel?"

"It's cheap."

The fat owner of the office stood up and came towards him, putting his heavy arms on his shoulders:

"You look tired, my boy. What's happened? Are you ill?"

"Me? No."

"If you are ill, tell me. I may be able to help you. I have many friends who are doctors. Don't worry, you won't pay anything."

"You're very kind. But I'm a little tired, that's all there is to it. Will the preparations take long?"

"No. Thank heavens there are many of you. You'll find yourself on the road in two days."

He turned his back and went towards the door, but before he went through it he heard the fat man chuckling behind his back:

"But take care the rats don't eat you before you set out."

✻ MARWAN

Marwan came out of the shop belonging to the fat man who smuggled people from Basra to Kuwait, and found himself in the

crowded covered street, which smelt of dates and big straw baskets. He had no definite idea where to make for now; there, inside the shop, the last threads of hope that had held together everything inside him for long years had been snapped. The last words the fat man had spoken were decisive and final; it seemed to him that they were forged from lead.

"Fifteen dinars, can't you hear?"

"But . . ."

"I beg you, I beg you. Don't start wailing. You all come here and then start wailing like widows. My friend! My dear friend! No one's forcing you to stay here. Why don't you go and ask someone else? Basra is full of smugglers."

Yes, of course Marwan would go and ask someone else. Hasan, who had worked in Kuwait for four years, had told him that to smuggle one person from Basra to Kuwait cost five dinars and no more, and that when he came to stand in front of the smuggler he must be more than a man, and show more than courage, or they would laugh at him, cheat him, and take advantage of his sixteen years.

"They told me that the price for one person was five dinars."

"Five dinars? Ha, ha! That was before Adam married Eve. Turn around, my boy, take three steps, and you will find yourself in the road without being thrown out."

Marwan gathered all his courage and put it into his words. There were only seven dinars left in his pocket, and a moment before he had thought himself rich. But now . . . was he being treated like a child?

"You'll take five dinars from me and be satisfied, or else . . ."

"Or else?"

"Or else I'll denounce you to the police."

Getting up, the fat man came round his desk, till he stood, panting and dripping with sweat, in front of Marwan. He stared at him for a second, looking him up and down, and then raised his heavy hand in the air. "You want to complain to the police about me, son of a . . ."

The heavy hand crashed down onto his cheek, and the word was lost in a fearful roar, which began reverberating between his

ears. He almost lost his balance for a moment, and staggered a couple of steps back. The voice of the fat man, hoarse with anger, reached him:

"Go and tell the pimps that I've hit you. You'll complain to the police about me?"

Marwan stood his ground for a short while, which was enough for him to realize that any attempt to restore his honor was futile. In fact he felt, to the marrow of his bones, that he had committed an unforgivable sin. As the marks of the fingers on his left cheek burned, he began to digest his humiliation.

"What are you waiting here for?"

He turned on his heel and went out through the door. His nose was assailed by the smell of dates and big straw baskets. What should he do now? He had no wish to ask himself the question. Yet he didn't know why he felt some sort of relief; what could be the reason for it? He wanted to distract himself by searching for the reason. Part of his mind was taken up with feelings of happiness and relief, but they couldn't sidetrack him from all the sorrows that had filled his heart in the last half hour. When all his efforts failed, he leaned against the wall. Crowds of people walked past without paying him any attention. Perhaps it was the first time in his life that he had found himself alone and a stranger in a throng of people like this. He wanted to know the reason for that remote sensation that gave him contentment and rest; a sensation like the one he used to have when he had finished watching a film, and felt that life was grand and vast, and that in the future he would be one of those men who spend every hour and day of their lives in exciting fulfillment and variety. But what was the reason for his having such a feeling now, when he had not seen a film like that for a long time, and only a few minutes before the threads of hope that had woven fine dreams in his heart had been broken in the fat man's shop?

It was no use. It seemed he would not be able to penetrate the thick veil of disappointment that separated him from that distinct feeling which existed, unexpressed, somewhere in his mind. In the end he decided not to wear his brain out, but to occupy himself with walking. But as soon as he left the wall and began to walk through the crowd, he felt a hand grasp his shoulder.

"Don't be so desperate. Where are you going now?"

The tall man had begun to walk beside him familiarly, and when Marwan looked at him he thought he'd seen him somewhere before. All the same, he moved a step away from him and gave him a questioning look.

"He's a well-known thief," said the man. "What made you go to him?"

He answered after a short hesitation:

"Everyone goes to him."

The man came closer to Marwan and linked his arm through his, as though he had known him for ages.

"Do you want to go to Kuwait?"

"How did you know?"

"I was standing by the door of that shop, and I saw you go in and come out. What's your name?"

"Marwan. And you?"

"They call me Abul Khaizuran."

For the first time since Marwan had set eyes on the man, he noticed that he really did remind one of a cane. He was very tall, very thin, but his neck and hands had a suggestion of strength and firmness, and for some reason he looked as though he could bend down and put his head between his legs without its upsetting his spine or his other bones at all.

"Well, what do you want of me?"

Abul Khaizuran sidestepped the question with one of his own:

"Why do you want to go to Kuwait?"

"I want to work. You know how things are there. For months I . . . He suddenly fell silent and stood still.

Only now did he recognize the source of that feeling of rest and contentment which he had not been able to discover a few minutes before. It was suddenly revealed to him in its full depth and clarity; in fact, in some wonderful way it had broken down all the barriers of despondency that stood between him and the realization of it. Here was this feeling taking possession of him again with unparal-

* "Khaizuran" means "cane," "bamboo." (T.)

leled force. The first thing he had done that morning, early, had been to write a long letter to his mother. Now he felt all the more relief because he had written that letter before seeing all his hopes dashed in the fat man's shop, and losing the pure joy that he had poured into the letter. It had been wonderful to spend some time with his mother.

He'd got up early that morning. The servant had taken the bed up to the roof of the hotel, because sleeping in the room when it was as hot and damp as that was impossible. When the sun rose he opened his eyes. The weather was beautiful and calm, and the sky was still blue, with black pigeons hovering low in it. He could hear their wings fluttering when they flew over the hotel in a wide circle. A thick blanket of silence covered everything, and the air had a clean, moist scent of early morning. He stretched out his hand to the small case under the bed, took out a notebook and pen, and proceeded to write to his mother as he lay there.

It was the best thing he'd done for months. He was not obliged to do it, but he did it quite willingly. He was in an excellent mood, and the letter reflected the tranquillity of the sky above him. He didn't know how he had allowed himself to describe his father as nothing but a depraved beast, but he was unwilling to cross the words out once he'd written them; he didn't want to cross out anything in the whole letter—not only because his mother would see the crossed-out words as a bad omen, but also, quite simply, because he didn't want to.

In any case, he didn't hate his father so much. His father had certainly done something horrible, but which of us doesn't from time to time? He could quite understand his father's circumstances and he could forgive him. But could his father forgive himself for such a crime?

"To leave four children, to divorce you for no reason, then to marry that deformed woman. It is something for which he won't forgive himself, when he wakes up one day and realizes what he's done.

"I don't want to hate anybody; it is beyond me to do so even if I wanted to. But why did he do that, to *you*? You don't like any of us to talk about him, I know. But why do you think he did that?"

"It's all over and done with now, and there's no hope of us getting him back again. But why did he do it? At least let us ask why."

"I'll tell you why. When we stopped hearing news of my brother Zakaria the situation finally changed. Zakaria used to send us about two hundred rupees from Kuwait every month. That sum gave my father some of the stability he dreamed of. But when we stopped hearing news of Zakaria—let us hope he's all right—what do you suppose my father thought?"

"He told himself, in fact he told us all, that life is an extraordinary business, and that a man wants to be able to settle down in his old age and not find himself obliged to feed half a dozen open mouths. Didn't he say that? Zakaria had gone . . . there had been no news of him. Who would feed the mouths? Who would pay for the rest of Marwan's education, and buy May's clothes, and bring back bread for Riyad, Salma, and Hasan? Who?"

"He is penniless, you know that. His one and only ambition was to move from the mud house that he had occupied in the camp for ten years and live under a concrete roof, as he used to say. Now, Zakaria had gone. All his hopes had collapsed, his dreams had been destroyed, his ambition had seeped away. So what would he do, do you think?"

"His old friend, Shafiq's father, suggested he should marry her. He told him she owned a three-roomed house on the edge of the town, which she had bought with the money collected for her by a charity. Shafiq's father had one desire: to transfer to a husband's shoulders the burden of his daughter, who had lost her right leg during the bombardment of Jaffa. He already had one foot in the grave and wanted to go down into it reassured about the fate of his daughter, who had been turned down by everyone because of that leg, amputated at the top of the thigh. My father thought about the matter; if he let two rooms and lived with his lame wife in the third, he would live out the rest of his life in security, untroubled by anything. And more important than that, under a concrete roof."

"Do you want to stand here forever?"

He shook his head and walked on. Abul Khaizuran was looking at him out of the corner of his eye, and he imagined he was about to smile sarcastically.

"What's the matter with you, thinking like this? Thinking doesn't suit you, Marwan. You're still young, and life is long. . . ."

Marwan stopped again and jerked his head back slightly.

"And now, what do you want from me?"

Abul Khaizuran went on walking, so Marwan caught up with him again.

"I can smuggle you to Kuwait."

"How?"

"That's my affair. You want to go to Kuwait, don't you? Here is someone who can take you there. What more do you want?"

"How much do you want from me?"

"That's not really important."

"It is."

Abul Khaizuran smiled broadly, and his lips parted to show two rows of large teeth, gleaming white. Then he said:

"I'll be quite honest with you. I have got to go to Kuwait, and I said to myself: why not earn a little money and take someone with you who wants to go there? How much can you pay?"

"Five dinars."

"Is that all?"

"I haven't any more."

"Very well. I accept."

Abul Khaizuran put his hands in his pockets and strode forward, taking such big steps that Marwan almost lost him and had to hurry after him. But he stopped suddenly and shook his finger in front of his lips. "But . . . you mustn't tell anyone that. I mean, if I ask someone else for ten dinars, don't tell him I'm just getting five from you."

"But how do you expect me to trust you?"

Abul Khaizuran thought for a moment, then he smiled the same broad smile again, saying:

"You're right. You'll give me the money in Al-Safa Square in Kuwait—in the capital, in the middle of the capital. Satisfied?"

"All right."

"But we'll need some more people to make the journey. You must help me. That is a condition."

"I know someone staying in the same hotel with me who wants to go."

"That's splendid. I know someone else. He comes from the town where I lived in Palestine, in the old days, and I came across him here. But I haven't asked you: what do you want to do in Kuwait? Do you know anyone there?"

Marwan stopped again, but Abul Khaizuran pulled him by the arm and he trotted along by his side.

"My brother works there."

Abul Khaizuran shook his head as he hurried along. Then he raised his shoulders so that his neck sank between them and he seemed shorter than before.

"If your brother is working there, why do you want to take a job? People of your age are still at school."

"I was at school two months ago. But now I want to work to support my family."

Abul Khaizuran stopped and took his hands out of his pockets, putting them on his hips. He began to stare laughingly at Marwan.

"Ah! Now I understand. Your brother has stopped sending you money, hasn't he?"

Marwan nodded and tried to walk on, but Abul Khaizuran caught his arm and stopped him.

"Why? Has he got married?"

Amazed, Marwan looked at Abul Khaizuran, and whispered:

"How did you know?"

"Ah! One doesn't have to be a genius to understand. Everyone stops sending money to their families when they get married or fall in love."

Marwan felt a small disappointment growing in his heart, not because he had been surprised, but because he had discovered that it was something common and well known. He had thought that his heart held a great secret that no one else knew. He had guarded it from his mother and father for months and months, and here it was now, seeming on the tongue of Abul Khaizuran like a well-known, self-evident principle. "But . . . why do they do that? Why do they deny . . . ?"

He suddenly fell silent. Abul Khaizuran had begun to laugh.

"I'm glad you are going to Kuwait, because you will learn many things there. The first thing you will learn is: money comes first, and then morals."

When Abul Khaizuran left him, having arranged to meet him again in the afternoon, he had lost, yet again, those wonderful sensations which had purified him inside throughout the morning. In fact it surprised him that the letter he had written to his mother could give him that marvellous feeling which made his disappointment appear less important than it really was. A silly letter, which he had written under the influence of a feeling of loneliness and hope on the roof of a miserable hotel at the end of the world. What was so extraordinary about it? Did he think his mother didn't know the whole story? What did he want to say? Did he want to convince her that her husband's desertion of her and her children was a fine and natural thing? Then why all that talk? He loved his father with a great and unshakeable love. But that changed nothing of the terrible truth, the truth that proclaimed that his father had fled . . . fled . . . fled. Just as Zakaria had done, when he got married and sent him a short letter, telling him that his turn had come and he must leave that stupid school, which taught nothing, and plunge into the frying pan with everyone else.

All his life Marwan had found himself at odds with Zakaria. In fact, they hated each other. Zakaria had been quite unable to understand why he had to spend ten years providing for the family while Marwan went off to school every day like a baby. He, Marwan, wanted to become a doctor. He used to tell his mother that Zakaria would never understand what it meant for someone to get an education, because he had left school when he left Palestine, and since then he had plunged into the frying pan, as he liked to say.

And here he was now, having married without telling anyone except Marwan, as though he wanted to confront him with his conscience. But what choice had he left him? Nothing except to leave the school, to plunge into the frying pan and stay there from now until eternity.

All right! All right! In a few days he would reach Kuwait. It would be better if Zakaria helped him, but if he pretended not to know him, he would find out how to start off, as many others had done. He would send every penny he earned to his mother, and overwhelm her and his brothers and sisters with gifts till he made the mud hut into a paradise on earth and his father bit his nails with regret.

Yet he couldn't hate his father so much, for the simple reason that his father still loved them all. Marwan had been completely convinced of that when he went to say good-bye to his father before he left. He did not tell his mother that he was going to Shafiq's house, or she would have been beside herself. His father said to him there:

"Marwan, you know that I have had no choice in the matter. It is something that has been decreed for us since the beginning of creation."

Shafiq said:

"We suggested to your mother that she should come and live here but she didn't agree. What more do you want us to do?"

She was sitting on a carpet of goatskin. The stick was lying beside her, and he thought: "I wonder where her thigh ends?" Her face was beautiful, but hard-featured like the faces of all those who are incurably ill, and her lower lip was twisted as though she were about to cry.

His father said:

"Take this. It is ten dinars; you may need them. You will write to us, won't you?"

When he stood up, Shafiq raised her arms in the air, praying for his success. Her voice was hoarse, and when he turned to her before going through the door, she broke down and sobbed. His father said to him:

"May God send you success, Marwan, you brave boy."

And he tried to laugh. He couldn't, so he began rubbing the boy's back with his large, hard hand, while Shafiq picked up her stick and stood up with a quick movement. She had stopped crying.

Marwan shut the door behind him and walked away. He could still hear Shafiq's stick tapping the tiles monotonously, but as he turned the corner the sound died away.

THE DEAL

Marwan brought his companion Assad to the meeting with Abul Khaizuran. They arrived a little late and found Abul Khaizuran

waiting for them, sitting with Abu Qais on a big concrete seat on the pavement of the street, which ran parallel to the Shari.

"The whole group's here together now, isn't it?" Abul Khaizuran laughed loudly, striking Marwan on the shoulder with one hand and stretching out the other to shake hands with Assad.

"So this is your friend. What's his name?"

Marwan answered curtly:

"Assad."

"Let me introduce you to my old friend, Abu Qais. Now the group's complete. It doesn't matter if one more comes too, but already we have enough, now."

Assad said:

"You seem to me to be a Palestinian. Are you the one who's undertaking to smuggle us?"

"Yes, I am."

"How?"

"That's my affair."

Assad laughed sarcastically and then said slowly, bringing out each word forcefully:

"No. It's *our* affair. You must explain all the details to us. We don't want to have problems from the start."

Abul Khaizuran said in a decisive tone:

"I'll explain all the details to you when we've come to an agreement, not before."

Assad replied:

"We can't agree before we know the details. What do the others think?"

Nobody answered, so Assad repeated the question.

"What does Abu Qais think?"

Abu Qais replied:

"I think as you do."

"What's your opinion, Marwan?"

"I'm with you."

Assad spoke forcefully:

"Very well, let's be brief. It seems to me that old Abu Qais has no knowledge of this kind of thing, and as for Marwan, it's his first

experience. I'm an old hand at this game. What is your opinion if I negotiate on your behalf?"

Abu Qais raised his hand in the air to show his agreement, and Marwan nodded. Assad turned to Abul Khaizuran:

"You see, they've made me responsible. Let me tell you something. We come from the same country. We want to earn money and so do you. Fine. But the whole thing must be quite fair. You must explain every step to us in detail, and tell us exactly how much you want. Of course, we'll give you the money after we arrive, not before."

Abu Qais remarked:

"Assad's quite right. We must be quite clear about things. If you start by making conditions, you end up satisfied, as the saying goes."

Abul Khaizuran took his hands out of his pockets and put them on his hips. He let his gaze wander slowly and coldly over all their faces, until it settled on Assad.

"First of all, you'll each pay ten dinars. Agreed?"

Abu Qais said:

"I agree."

Assad protested:

"Please. You have made me responsible, so let me speak. Ten dinars is a large sum. A professional smuggler takes fifteen. Then—"

Abul Khaizuran interrupted him.

"So we're disagreeing before we've started. That's what I was afraid of. Ten dinars, and not a penny less. Good-bye."

He turned his back and took two slow steps before Abu Qais caught up with him, shouting:

"Why have you lost your temper? It's a matter of question and answer, and agreement is the brother of patience."

"Very well. We'll give you ten dinars. But how will you take us?"

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. Listen!" Abul Khaizuran sat on the concrete seat with the three standing round him. He explained to them, with the help of his long hands:

"I have a lorry that is licensed to cross the frontier. Now you must realize it's not mine. I'm a poor man, poorer than any of you, and I'm only connected with that lorry because I drive it. Its owner

is rich and well known, and so it doesn't wait long at the frontier or get searched. The owner of the lorry is well known and respected, the lorry itself is well known and respected, and consequently the driver of the lorry is well known and respected."

Abul Khaizuran was an excellent driver. He had served in the British army for more than five years before 1948. When he left the army and joined the Freedom Fighters, he had the reputation of being the best lorry driver one could find. That was why the commandos in Al-Tira invited him to drive an old armored car that the village had captured after a Jewish attack. Although he had no experience of driving armored cars, he did not disappoint those who stood on both sides of the road, watching him as he climbed through the small armor-plated door and disappeared for a few minutes, after which the motor roared into action and the vehicle set off slowly down the narrow, sandy road. But it soon broke down, and none of Abul Khaizuran's efforts succeeded in putting it into running order again. If the villagers were greatly disappointed, Abul Khaizuran was still more so, but all the same he had increased the sum of his experiences in the world of mechanics. And who could say that this particular experience hadn't helped him when he joined the drivers working for Al-Haj Rida in Kuwait?

One day he had managed to drive a huge water tanker along a muddy salt road without its sinking into the earth and breaking down like all the other lorries in the convoy. Haj Rida had gone out into the desert with a number of his men for some days' hunting. But the spring was treacherous, and as they were returning, the road appeared firm and white, which encouraged the drivers to start along without hesitation. Then all the vehicles, big and small, began to sink into the mud one after the other. But Abul Khaizuran, who was driving his huge lorry behind them all, skillfully continued advancing, without stopping for a second. When he caught up with Haj Rida's car, whose wheels were three-quarters sunk in mud, he stopped his lorry. Getting out, he went up to Haj Rida, saying:

"How would Haj Rida like to get into my lorry? It'll take more than four hours to extricate these cars, and by then Haj Rida will have reached home."

Haj Rida replied:

"Splendid. The noise of your lorry's motor is kinder to the system than stopping here four hours."

Abul Khaizuran drove his huge lorry for six hours over that treacherous ground, which looked hard and white because of a fine film of salt that had dried on the surface. The whole of the way he was moving the steering wheel lightly and quickly to left and right so that the two front wheels could open a path slightly wider than necessary.

Haj Rida was delighted with Abul Khaizuran's skill, and mentioned it to all his friends for months. He was even more delighted when he learned that Abul Khaizuran had refused several offers of work elsewhere, made to him after the story became known. He asked to see him and congratulated him, and then he increased his wages a little. What was more important was that Haj Rida imposed a condition that Abul Khaizuran should be an obligatory companion on every hunting trip or long journey.

A week earlier Haj Rida had set off with a convoy of lorries on a hunting trip he had organized specially for some guests staying with him. He had asked Abul Khaizuran to drive the big water tanker, which would accompany the convoy the whole way to ensure a supply of water for the entire journey, lasting more than two days. The convoy had driven far into the desert, when suddenly Haj Rida decided to follow a different route on the return journey, which would bring him to Al-Zubair, and then from Al-Zubair he could take the main road to Kuwait. Abul Khaizuran could have been in Kuwait by now with the rest of the convoy if his lorry hadn't developed a small fault that had kept him in Basra two days longer to have it repaired, before catching up with those who had gone on ahead.

"So you want to put us inside the water tank on your lorry when you drive back?"

"Exactly. I said to myself: 'Why not seize the opportunity to earn an honest penny, while you're here, and as your lorry does not get searched?'"

Marwan looked at Abu Qais and then at Assad. They both looked at him in their turn, questioning.

"Listen, Abul Khaizuran, I don't like the sound of this game. Can you imagine it? In heat like this, who could sit in a closed water tank?"

"Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. This isn't the first time. Do you know what will happen? You'll get into the tank five minutes from the frontier, and fifty meters beyond it you'll climb out. We'll repeat the performance for another five minutes at Mulla on the Kuwait border, and then suddenly you'll find yourselves in Kuwait!"

Assad shook his head and stared at the ground, grimacing with his lower lip. Marwan had begun to play with a dry twig, while Abu Qais went on staring at the tall driver. Suddenly Marwan asked:

"Is there any water in the tank?"

"Of course not. What are you thinking of? Am I a smuggler or a swimming teacher?" It seemed that Abul Khaizuran liked the idea, for he started to chuckle, hitting his thighs with his hands and turning round. "What are you thinking of? Am I a swimming teacher? Listen, my boy, the tank hasn't seen any water for six months."

"I thought you were carrying the water for a hunting expedition a week ago," said Assad quietly.

"Oh well . . . you know. You know what I mean."

"No. I don't know."

"I mean for six days. One exaggerates sometimes. Now, are we agreed? Let's bring this momentous meeting to an end."

Abu Qais stood up, preparing to say the decisive word. But before he spoke he let his eyes wander over them all and then waited a little, looking at Assad as though he were imploring his help. He went up to Abul Khaizuran.

"Listen, Abul Khaizuran, I'm a simple man and I don't understand all these complications. But that story of the hunting expedition . . . I didn't like it. You say you carried water for Haj Rida, and now you say that the tank of your lorry hasn't had sight or smell of water for six months. I'll tell you the truth, and I hope you won't be angry. I doubt whether you have a lorry at all." Abu Qais turned to the others and continued in a sad tone of voice: "I prefer to pay fif-

teen dinars and go with a smuggler by the desert road. I don't want any more problems."

Abul Khaizuran laughed, saying loudly:

"Go and see what it's like . . . do you think I don't know those smugglers? They leave you in the middle of the road and melt away like a lump of salt. And you, in turn, will melt away in the August heat without anyone knowing. Go on, go and see what it's like. Many have tried before you. Would you like me to show you the way? Why do you think they take the money from you first?"

"But I know many people who've arrived there by way of the smugglers."

"Ten percent at the most. Go and ask them, and they will tell you that they finished the journey without a smuggler or a guide, and that their luck helped them to survive."

Abu Qais froze in his place. For a moment it seemed he would fall. Marwan noticed that Abu Qais resembled his father closely, and he looked away from him, no longer able to concentrate his mind on a single subject. Abul Khaizuran went on, shouting:

"You must decide quickly! I've no time to waste. I swear to you on my honor—"

Assad quietly interrupted him:

"Leave the subject of honor for another time. Things go better when a man doesn't swear by his honor."

Abul Khaizuran turned to him:

"No, Mr. Assad. You are an intelligent, experienced man. What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About everything."

Assad smiled, noticing that Abu Qais and Marwan were waiting to hear his decision. He started speaking slowly and sarcastically:

"First, excuse us from believing the story of the hunting expedition. It seems to me that Haj Rida and you, sir, are involved in smuggling. I beg your pardon, let me finish. Haj Rida believes that smuggling people on the return journey is a trivial matter, so he leaves it to you—while you in turn leave him the smuggling of

more important things, for a reasonable share of the profits. Or do you think he doesn't know you smuggle people on the return journey?"

Abul Khaizuran smiled broadly, showing his clean white teeth again. He seemed not to want to answer Assad. Marwan blurted out:

"And the story of the hunt?"

Assad replied:

"The story of the hunt is cooked up for the frontier guards, not for us. But Abul Khaizuran sees no harm in telling it. . . ."

Abul Khaizuran smiled more broadly than before and began to exchange glances with the men, without saying a word. For a moment he looked like an idiot. Abu Qais remarked:

"But what does Haj Rida smuggle? You said that he's rich."

They all looked at Abul Khaizuran, who suddenly stopped smiling, his face again taking on an expression of carelessness and authority. He spoke decisively:

"And now, that's enough chatter. You mustn't think, Mr. Assad, that you're so clever. What have you decided?"

Assad said quietly:

"Personally, I'm only interested in reaching Kuwait. I'm not concerned with anything else. That is why I shall travel with Abul Khaizuran."

Marwan said excitedly:

"I will go along with you both."

Abu Qais said:

"Do you think that I'm capable of accompanying you? I'm an old man."

Abul Khaizuran laughed violently, then linked his arm with Abu Qais's. "Aha! Ah, Abu Qais, who's given you the idea that you're so old? Umm Qais, perhaps? You must come with us."

They had walked a few steps forward and left Marwan and Assad standing by the big concrete seat. Abul Khaizuran looked back over his shoulder and shouted:

"Abu Qais will sleep in the lorry with me. I'll come and sound my horn in front of the hotel tomorrow morning, early."

THE ROAD

It was not too uncomfortable riding on the back of the huge lorry. Although the sun was pouring its inferno down on them without any respite, the breeze that they felt because of the lorry's speed lessened the intensity of the heat. Abu Qais had climbed up on top with Marwan, and they sat side by side on the edge of the tank. They had drawn lora, and it was Assad's turn to sit beside the driver for the first part of the journey.

Assad said to himself: "The old man will be last to sit in the shade here. But it doesn't matter; in any case the sun is still bearable now. At midday the old man will be lucky."

Abul Khaizaran spoke suddenly, raising his voice so that Assad could hear over the roar of the motor:

"Just imagine! In my own mind I compare these hundred and fifty kilometers to the path that God in the Quran promised his creatures they must cross before being directed either to Paradise or to Hell. If anyone falls he goes to Hell, and if anyone crosses safely he reaches Paradise. Here the angels are the frontier guards."

Abul Khaizaran burst out laughing as though he were not the person who had made the remark, then he began to hit the steering wheel with both hands and shake his head. "You know, I'm afraid the goods will perish, up there. . . ."

He indicated by a movement of his neck where the old man was sitting with Marwan on the tank, and laughed violently. Assad asked quietly:

"Tell me, Abul Khaizaran. Have you ever been married?"

"Me?" he asked in surprise, and his thin face became veiled in sadness as though he hadn't been laughing a moment before. Then he replied slowly: "Why do you ask?"

"For no particular reason. I was thinking that you have a splendid life. No one to drag you in any direction. You can fly off alone wherever you like . . . you can fly off alone."

Abul Khaizaran shook his head, then he narrowed his eyes to meet the sunlight that had suddenly struck the windscreen. The light was shining so brightly that at first he could see nothing. But he felt a terrible pain coiled between his thighs. After a few mo-

ments he could make out that his legs were tied to two supports that kept them suspended, and that there were several men surrounding him. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them as wide as he could. The circular light above his head hid the ceiling from him and blinded him. As he lay there, tied firmly in that strange fashion, he could only remember one thing that had happened to him a moment before, and nothing else. He and a number of armed men were running along when all hell exploded in front of him and he fell forward on his face. That was all. And now, the terrible pain was still plunging between his thighs and the huge round light was hanging over his eyes and he was trying to see things and people, narrowing his eyes as much as he could. Suddenly a black thought occurred to him and he began to scream like a madman. He couldn't remember what he said then, but he felt a hand covered with a slippery glove placed over his mouth with a violent movement. The voice reached him as though it were coming through cotton:

"Be sensible. Be sensible. At least it's better than dying."

He didn't know if they could hear him as he shouted through his teeth, while the slippery hand covered his mouth. Or was his voice lost in his throat? At any rate, he could still hear the same voice as though someone else was shouting in his ear:

"No. It's better to be dead."

Now . . . ten years had passed since that horrible scene. Ten years had passed since they took his manhood from him, and he had lived that humiliation day after day and hour after hour. He had swallowed it with his pride, and examined it every moment of those ten years. And still he hadn't yet got used to it, he hadn't accepted it. For ten long years he had been trying to accept the situation? But what situation? To confess quite simply that he had lost his manhood while fighting for his country? And what good had it done? He had lost his manhood and his country, and damn everything in this bloody world.

No, he couldn't consent, even after ten years, to forget his tragedy and get used to it. He couldn't even accept it when he was under the knife and they were trying to convince him that it was better to lose one's manhood than one's life. O God of devils! They

don't even know that, they don't know anything, and then take it on themselves to teach people everything. Hadn't he accepted it, or was he incapable of accepting? From the first few moments he had decided not to accept; yes, that was it. Moreover, he couldn't entirely picture what had happened, and so he had fled from the hospital instinctively and blindly, before he had completely recovered. It was as though his flight could bring things back to normal again. He had needed a long time merely to accustom himself just to being alive, but had he succeeded? No, not yet. Each time he was asked, casually, "Why haven't you got married?" the same feeling of pain plunging between his thighs came back to him, as though he were still lying under the bright round light with his legs suspended in the air.

The light blazed so piercingly that his eyes began to water. Assad stretched out his hand at that moment and brought down the long sun shield to shade Abul Khaizuran's face.

"Yes, that's better. Thanks. Do you know, Abu Qais is a lucky man."

Assad realized that Abul Khaizuran wanted to change the subject of marriage, which his question had raised, so he simply responded:

"Why?"

"If he'd been fated to go with the smugglers, it would have been nothing less than a miracle if he'd reached Kuwait." Hunching his arms around the steering wheel, Abul Khaizuran rested his chest on them: "You don't know how things are here. None of you know. It's me you should ask, me. I know as many stories as there are hairs on a cat."

"The fat man seems kindhearted. I liked him."

Abul Khaizuran bent his head and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, which was lying on the wheel. Then he said:

"Ah! The fat man doesn't cross the frontier with you, and he doesn't know what happens."

"What does happen?"

"I have a cousin called Hasanain, who was smuggled across the border once. After more than seven hours' walking, darkness fell.

Then the smuggler pointed to a cluster of far-off lights, saying: 'There's Kuwait. You'll reach it when you've walked for half an hour.' Do you know what happened? That wasn't Kuwait, it was a remote Iraqi village. I can tell you thousands of stories like that. Stories of men who became like dogs as they looked for one drop of water to moisten their cracked tongues with. What do you think happened when they saw bedouin encampments? They bought a mouthful of water in exchange for all the money or wedding rings or watches they owned. People say Hatim* was a bedouin. But I think that's a complete lie. That time has passed, Abu Saad, it has passed. But you don't realize it. You think that the fat man has the power to do everything. I know someone who survived alone in the desert for four days; when a car picked him up on the road to Al-Jahra he was at his last gasp. Guess what he did! He wanted just one thing out of life; he wanted to go back to Basra as soon as he recovered, even if it meant going back through the desert. Do you know why? He told me he wanted to go back there to get his hands round the fat man's neck and throttle him, and then let all hell break loose. He'd started out with two friends of his youth, from Gaza, across Israel, across Jordan, across Iraq. Then the smuggler abandoned them in the desert, before they had crossed the Kuwaiti border. He had buried his two friends in that unknown region and was carrying their identity cards in the hope that he would reach Kuwait and send them to their families. He didn't want anyone to give him advice; he said he didn't want to forget or forgive. After less than a month had passed, he retraced his steps to Iraq, but he was arrested, and now he is spending his second year in a miserable prison. What are you thinking of? You come to us straight from school like babes, thinking that life is easy. Do you suppose that Abu Qais wasn't gambling with his life? And he would have been the loser. I'm as sure of that as I am of this damned sun. Tomorrow, when you get to Kuwait, you'll speak well of me and say: 'Abul Khaizuran was telling the truth,' and you'll thank God a thousand times because I rescued

* Hatim, of the bedouin tribe of Taiy, is proverbial among the Arabs for his limitless generosity and hospitality. (Et.)

you from the claws of the fat man. Have you ever in your life seen a skeleton lying on the sand?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked you: have you ever in your life seen a skeleton lying on the sand?"

"No."

Abul Khaizuran gave a sharp turn to the steering wheel to avoid a wide rut in the sand, and then the lorry began to jog and jolt over a road like an extended flight of steps. Assad felt his entrails were almost leaping past his chattering teeth out of his mouth.

"You would have seen many if you'd gone with the smugglers. And in any case, it won't mean anything."

"Why?"

"Because you'll be too busy to think about it, or, as Hasanain said, you won't want to think about it."

Assad merely smiled stupidly, not knowing what he ought to do. Then, nudging Abul Khaizuran in the ribs, he asked:

"Then why do you smuggle?"

"Me? Smuggle?"

Assad laughed and hit Abul Khaizuran's thigh with his hand.

"Then what do you call this?"

"Shall I tell you the truth? I want more money, more money, much more. And I find it difficult to accumulate money honestly. Do you see this miserable being which is me? I have some money. In two years I'll leave everything and settle down. I want to relax, to stretch out, to rest in the shade, thinking or not thinking. I don't want to make a single movement. I've had more than enough exhaustion in my life. Yes indeed, more than enough."

Abul Khaizuran quickly switched off the motor, opened the door and jumped down. He started shouting: "Now the serious part is beginning. Come on! I'll open the cover of the tank for you. Ha! The climate will be like the next world inside there."

He climbed lightly up the small iron ladder and set to work on the round cover of the tank. Marwan thought slowly: "He has strong arms." They were dripping with sweat, while his shirt was completely soaked and his face appeared daubed in mud.

The cover opened with a sound like an explosion, and Abul Khaizuran lifted up the edge of the metal disk, till it was vertical over its hinge and its inside could be seen, red with rust. Abul Khaizuran sat beside the opening, with his legs hanging down wide apart, and began to mop his sweat with the red handkerchief with which he covered the back of his neck, under the collar of the blue shirt. He was panting.

"I advise you to take your shirts off. The heat's stifling, terrifying, and you'll sweat as though you were in an oven. But it's only for five or seven minutes, and I'll drive as fast as I can. Inside there are iron girders, one in each corner, and I would rather you held on to them tightly, or else you'll roll around like balls. Of course you must take your shoes off."

They all remained standing on the ground, motionless. Abul Khaizuran got up and then jumped down, trying to laugh.

"One could sleep inside if the weather were a little kinder."

Abu Qais looked at Marwan and they both looked at Assad. Under the pressure of those glances, he took a couple of small steps forward, and then came back and stood still again, while Abul Khaizuran watched him.

"I advise you to hurry up a little. We're still in the early morning, but soon the inside of the tank will become a real oven. You can take a water bottle with you, but don't use it when you feel the lorry's standing still."

Marwan made up his mind and walked quickly up to the iron ladder. But Assad rushed to climb it before him, and then leaned over the uncovered opening. He put his head down into the tank for a few minutes, and brought it out again:

"This is hell. It's on fire."

Abul Khaizuran spread out his hands, saying:

"I told you that before."

Marwan too had climbed up and poked his head through the opening, taking it out again with a look of disgust and fear on his face. Abu Qais got up beside them, panting. Abul Khaizuran shouted up from below:

"Do you know what to do if any of you wants to sneeze?"

Assad smiled wanly, while Marwan looked down, and Abu Qais seemed not to understand the question.

"Hold your finger straight under your nostrils like this," Abul Khaizuran imitated the gesture, and his face looked ridiculous. Walking forward, Assad said:

"I don't think any of us will sneeze in this oven. Don't be worried on that score." Assad put his hands on his hips and stood beside the opening of the tank, with his head bowed, as though he wanted to see what was inside; meanwhile Abu Qais took off his shirt and carefully rolled it up, putting it under his arm. His chest appeared, covered with grizzled hair, and his protruding shoulder blades could be seen. He sat on the edge of the opening, dangling his legs inside. He threw his shirt in first, then slipped down, slow and straight, supporting himself on his arms, which were braced over the edge of the opening, until his feet touched the bottom and he let his arms go, sliding his body down carefully. His head was swallowed up and his arms disappeared.

Assad bent down and shouted:

"How do things look?"

A resounding voice echoed from inside, as though from a great depth.

"It's a cursed well. Come on!"

Assad looked at Marwan, who had taken off his shirt and stood waiting while Abul Khaizuran again climbed the ladder.

"Whose turn?"

"Mine." Marwan went up to the opening, and turned his back to it. He let his legs down first, leaning his stomach on the edge. His whole body slid skilfully down, and his two hands remained for a moment holding on to the frame of the opening before they disappeared.

Assad followed his companions without taking off his shirt, and when the opening hid him from sight, Abul Khaizuran bent down trying to see what it was like inside. But he couldn't make out anything, for each time he looked, his body blocked out the light from the opening and it was impossible to see. At last he shouted: "Well!"

A resonant voice replied:

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up! We're almost suffocating." Abul Khaizuran quickly closed the cover and turned its curved handle twice. He jumped down and rushed to his seat. Before the cab door was shut the lorry had begun to eat up the road.

In those few minutes there was only one thought in Abul Khaizuran's mind. The rutted road, like an extended flight of steps, was shaking and jolting the lorry ceaselessly and mercilessly. This shaking was enough to turn eggs into omelettes more quickly than an electric whisk could. It didn't matter as far as Marwan was concerned: he was a boy. And it didn't matter to Assad, who was strongly built. But what about Abu Qais? No doubt his teeth were chattering like those of a man almost freezing to death, with the difference that here there was no frost.

Abul Khaizuran could eliminate some of the shaking if he increased his speed, if he made this infernal tank travel at one hundred and twenty instead of the ninety the speedometer was indicating now. But if he did so, who could guarantee that the lorry wouldn't overturn on a bloody road like this? It didn't matter if the lorry overturned, since it wasn't his, but what if it came to rest on its roof? And who knew if the engine would bear that kind of speed in weather like this, on this sort of terrain? They always put high numbers on the speedometer that it's not wise for a skilful driver to get up to.

He didn't slow down when he reached Safwan, nor, as he turned into the square, making for the police post on the left, did he raise his foot a hair's breadth from the accelerator. He swept around, sending up dust in a wide circle, and only lifted his foot when he sharply pressed the brake, in front of the entrance. He shot inside like an arrow.

The customs square at Safwan is broad and sandy, with one large, isolated tree in the middle whose long drooping leaves throw a wide shadow in the square. Round it stand rooms with low wooden doors, which are occupied by crowded offices and men who are always busy. As Abul Khaizuran's tall figure rushed across the square, he noticed nothing except some women sitting in the shade of the tree, wrapped in their veils. One or two children were standing by the water tap, and the watchman was sleeping on his old cane chair.

"Abul Khaizuran's in a hurry today."

"Yes. Haj Rida's waiting. If I'm late he'll sack me."

"Haj Rida won't sack you. Don't worry. He won't find another young man like you."

"Ah, the world's as full of young men as it is of mushrooms. If he made one gesture, they would be all over him like flies."

"What've you got with you?"

"Arms. Tanks. Armored cars. And six planes and two guns."

The man broke into a hearty laugh. Abul Khaizuran lightly slid the papers away from under his hands and darted outside. Entering another room he said to himself: "The most difficult part's over." After a minute he came out of the other room, and in less than the twinkling of an eye he was switching on the engine, rendering the silence that had settled over Safwan, and setting off again.

While the lorry sped away like an arrow, leaving a trail of dust behind it, Abul Khaizuran streamed with sweat, which traced a network of channels over his face, meeting at his chin. The sun blazed brightly and the wind was hot, and carried a fine dust like flour. "Never in my life have I seen such awful weather." He undid the buttons of his shirt and his fingers touched the thick hair on his chest, which was soaked. The road had flattened out, and the lorry no longer jolted as before, so he accelerated. The speedometer leapt forward like a white dog tied to a tent peg.

He peered forward, his eyes drowned in sweat, and made out the edge of the little hill. Behind that hill Safwan would be hidden, and it was there that he must stop.

He pressed harder on the accelerator so that the lorry would climb the hill without slowing down. He felt his leg muscles were knotted into a ball and about to tear. The ground sped past and the lorry roared. The glass blazed and the sweat burned his eyes. But the top of the hill still seemed as far away as eternity. O almighty, omnipotent God! How could the top of a hill arouse all these feelings, which surged through his veins and poured their fire onto his dust-stained skin as salt sweat. O almighty God, you who have never been with me, who have never looked in my direction, whom I have never believed in, can you possibly be here this time? Just this time?

He blinked several times to clear the sweat from his eyelids, and when he opened his eyes the hilltop stood in front of him. He climbed to the top, stopped the engine, and let the lorry roll along a little before he stopped it and jumped from the door to the back of the tank.

Marwan emerged first. He raised his arms, and Abul Khaizuran roughly pulled him out and left him lying on top of the tank. Abu Qais pushed his head out and tried to climb up but it was beyond him. So he got his arms out and let Abul Khaizuran help him. Assad was able to climb through the opening. He had taken his shirt off.

Abul Khaizuran sat on top of the hot tank. He was panting, and he seemed to have aged. In the meantime Abu Qais had slipped slowly down over the wheels and lay in the shadow of the lorry face down. Assad stood for a moment, breathing deeply. He seemed to want to say something but couldn't. Finally he panted:

"Oh! It's so cold here."

His face had become red and damp. His crousers were soaked with sweat, and his chest, which had marks left by rust, looked as though it were spattered with blood. Marwan got up and came down the iron ladder, exhausted. His eyes were reddened, and his chest was dyed with rust. When he reached the ground, he rested his head on Abu Qais's thigh, slowly stretching out his body beside the wheel. Assad followed him a moment later, and then Abul Khaizuran. They sat resting their heads on their knees, their legs bent. Abul Khaizuran spoke after a while:

"Was it terrible?"

No one answered him. His gaze wandered over their faces, which seemed to him yellow and mummified. If Marwan's chest had not been rising and falling and Abu Qais's breathing an audible whistle, he would have thought they were dead.

"I told you seven minutes. And all the same, the whole thing didn't take more than six."

Assad glared at him, Marwan opened his eyes without focusing on anything in particular, and Abu Qais turned his face away.

"I swear to you on my honor! Six minutes exactly. Look! Why don't you want to look? I told you so, I said it from the beginning,

and now you think I'm lying to you. Here's the watch. Look! Look!"

Marwan raised his head, propped himself up on his arms, and began looking in Abul Khaizuran's direction with his head slightly tilted back. He appeared not to see him clearly.

"Have you tried sitting there for six minutes?"

"I told you . . ."

"It wasn't six minutes."

"Why don't you look at your watch? Why don't you? It's on your wrist. Come on, look! Look! And stop staring at me like an idiot."

Abu Qais spoke:

"It was six minutes. I was counting the whole time. From one to sixty, a minute. That's how I reckoned. I counted six times. The last time I counted very slowly."

He was talking haltingly, in a low voice, and Assad asked:

"What's wrong with you, Abu Qais? Are you ill?"

"Me? Me? Ah . . . no. But I'm breathing my share of air."

Abu Khaizuran stood up and brushed the sand from his trousers. He set his hands on his hips and began to look from one to the other of the three men.

"Come on. We mustn't waste any more time. You have another Turkish bath in front of you in a few minutes' time."

Abu Qais stood up and went over to the driver's cab, and Assad climbed the iron ladder, but Marwan stayed sitting in the shade. Abu Khaizuran asked:

"Don't you want to get up?"

"Why can't we rest a little?"

Assad shouted down:

"We'll have a long rest when we arrive, not before. Come on." Abul Khaizuran gave a loud laugh. He struck Marwan on the shoulder with his hand and said:

"Come and sit beside Abu Qais. You are thin and won't bother us much. And you look very tired."

Climbing up, Marwan sat beside Abu Qais. Abul Khaizuran shouted loudly before he closed the door:

"Put on your shirt, Assad, or you'll be roasted in the sun."

Marwan murmured in a weak voice to Abul Khaizuran:

"Tell him to leave the oven door open and perhaps it will cool down."

Abul Khaizuran cried cheerfully:

"And leave the tank door open."

The engine roared and the big lorry began to trace a misty line across the desert, which rose and then dissolved in the heat.

☞ SUN AND SHADE

The lorry, a small world, black as night, made its way across the desert like a heavy drop of oil on a burning sheet of tin. The sun hung high above their heads, round, blazing, and blindingly bright. None of them bothered to dry their sweat any longer. Assad spread his shirt over his head, bent his legs, and let the sun roast him without resistance. Marwan leaned his head on Abu Qais's shoulder and closed his eyes. Abu Qais stared at the road, tightly closing his lips under his thick gray moustache.

None of the four wanted to talk anymore, not only because they were exhausted by their efforts, but because each one was swallowed up in his own thoughts. The huge lorry was carrying them along the road, together with their dreams, their families, their hopes and ambitions, their misery and despair, their strength and weakness, their past and future, as if it were pushing against the immense door to a new, unknown destiny, and all eyes were fixed on the door's surface as though bound to it by invisible threads.

We'll be able to send Qais to school and buy one or two olive shoots. Perhaps we'll build a cottage to live in, which will be ours. I'm an old man; I may arrive or I may not. And do you think that the life you lead here is better than death? Why don't you try, as we do? Why don't you get up off that cushion and set out through God's world in search of a living? Will you spend the whole of your life eating the flour ration for one kilo of which you sacrifice all your honor at the doors of officials?

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring remorselessly.

Shafiq is an innocent woman. She was an adolescent when a mortar bomb smashed her leg and the doctors amputated it from the top of the thigh. And his mother didn't like anyone to talk about his father. Zakaria has gone. There, in Kuwait, you'll find everything out. You'll learn everything. You're still a boy, and you know no more of life than a babe in arms knows of its house. School teaches nothing. It only teaches laziness. So leave it and plunge into the frying pan with the rest of humanity.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring with an intolerable noise.

Perhaps it was buried in the ground, the bomb he trod on as he was running; or maybe it was thrown in front of him by a man hidden in a nearby ditch. None of that is important now. His legs were suspended in the air and his shoulders were still on the comfortable white bed, and the terrible pain was still plunging between his thighs. There was a woman there, helping the doctors. Whenever he remembered it, his face was suffused with shame. And what good did patriotism do you? You spend your life in an adventure, and now you are incapable of sleeping with a woman! And what good did you do? Let the dead bury their dead. I only want more money now, more money.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its engine roaring loudly.

The policeman pushed him in front of the officer, who said to him: "You think you're a hero when the donkeys carry you on their shoulders, demonstrating in the street." He spat in his face, but Assad didn't move as the saliva ran slowly down his forehead and gashed on the tip of his nose in a nasty viscous mess. They led him out, and when he was in the corridor he heard the policeman who was grasping his shoulder say in a low voice: "Damn this uniform!" Then he let him go, and Assad ran off. His uncle, wishing to marry him off to his daughter, wanted him to make a start in life. Otherwise he would never have collected fifty dinars in the whole of his life.

The lorry traveled on over the burning earth, its roaring engine a gigantic mouth devouring the road.

The sun in the middle of the sky traced a broad dome of white flame over the desert, and the trail of dust reflected an almost blind-

ing glare. They used to be told that someone wasn't coming back from Kuwait because he'd died; he'd been killed by sunstroke. He'd been driving his shovel into the earth when he fell onto one knee and then on both. And then what? He was killed by sunstroke. Do you want him buried here or there? That was all, sunstroke. It was quite right. Who called it "sunstroke"? Wasn't he a genius? This desert was like a giant in hiding, flogging their heads with whips of fire and boiling pitch. But could the sun kill them and all the stretch imprisoned in their breasts? The thoughts seemed to run from one head to another, laden with the same suspicions, for their eyes suddenly met. Abul Khaizuran looked at Marwan and then at Abu Qais, whom he found staring at him. He tried to smile, and failed, so he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, murmuring:

"This is the Hell that I have heard of."

"God's Hell?"

"Yes."

Abul Khaizuran reached out his hand and turned off the engine; then he slowly got down, followed by Marwan and Abu Qais, while Assad remained perched above them.

Abul Khaizuran sat in the shade of the lorry and lit a cigarette. He said in a low voice:

"Let's rest a little before we begin the performance again."

Abu Qais asked:

"Why didn't you set out with us yesterday evening so that we would be saved by the cool of the night from all this trouble?"

Without raising his eyes from the ground, Abul Khaizuran replied:

"The road between Safwan and Mutlaa is full of patrols at night. During the day no patrol can run the risk of making a reconnaissance in heat like this."

Marwan remarked:

"If your lorry is sacrosanct and never searched, why can't we stay outside that terrible prison?"

Abul Khaizuran replied sharply:

"Don't be silly. Are you so afraid of spending five or six minutes inside? We've done more than half the journey, and only the easiest

part is left." He stood up, went over to the water skin hanging outside the door, and opened it. "I'll put on a splendid lunch for you when we arrive. I'll have two chickens killed . . ." He raised the water skin and poured the water into his mouth until it began to trickle out at the corners onto his chin and his wet shirt. When he had quenched his thirst he poured the rest of the contents over his head, letting the water run down over his forehead, neck, and chest, which gave him an extraordinary appearance. He hung the water bottle outside the door again, spread his big hands and cried:

"Come on, you've learned the art well. What time is it now? Half past eleven. Think, in seven minutes at the outside I'll open the cover for you. Remember that, half past eleven."

Marwan looked at his watch and nodded. He tried to say something but it was beyond him, so he took a few steps over to the iron ladder and began to climb it.

Assad rolled up his shirt and plunged into the opening. Marwan hesitated a little and then followed him, leaning with his stomach on the edge and then skiffily sliding down with a sharp movement. Abu Qais shook his head, saying: "Seven minutes?"

"At the outside!"

Abul Khaizaran patted Abu Qais on the shoulder and looked straight into his eyes. They stood there together streaming with sweat, neither of them able to speak.

Abu Qais climbed the ladder with firm steps, and let his legs down through the opening. The two younger men helped him down.

Abul Khaizaran closed the cover and turned the curved metal handle twice before jumping quickly down and rushing to his seat.

Only a minute and a half later he had driven his lorry through the big open gate in the barbed-wire fence round the post of Mulla. He brought it to a stop in front of the wide steps leading to the tiled one-story building flanked on both sides by small rooms with low, closed windows. Opposite it were a few stalls selling food, and the noise of air conditioners filled the air.

There were only one or two cars parked waiting at the edge of the big square. The silence hung heavy and unbroken, except for the hum of the air conditioners attached to all the windows looking

out onto the square. Only one soldier was standing in a small wooden hut beside the wide flight of steps.

Abul Khaizaran hurried up the steps and made for the third room on the right. Immediately he opened the door and went in, he felt, from the glances directed at him by the officials, that something was going to happen. But he didn't pause, pushing his papers in front of the fat official sitting in the center of the room.

"Aha! Abu Khaizarana!" shouted the official, as he slid the papers to one side with deliberate carelessness, and crossed his arms on the metal desk. "Where have you been all this time?"

Abul Khaizaran panted:

"In Basra."

"Haj Rida asked after you more than six times."

"The lorry had broken down."

The three officials in the room broke into loud laughter and Abul Khaizaran turned round, at a loss. Then he fixed his eyes on the fat man's face.

"What is it that amuses you this morning?"

The three officials exchanged glances and then burst out laughing again. Abul Khaizaran said tensely, shuffling from one foot to the other:

"Now, Abu Baqir, I've no time for jokes. Please . . ."

Stretching out his hand he moved the papers closer in front of the official, but again Abu Baqir pushed them away to the edge of the desk, folded his arms and smiled wickedly.

"Haj Rida asked about you six times."

"I told you, the lorry was not working. And Haj Rida and I can come to an understanding when we meet. Please sign the papers. I'm in a hurry."

He slid the papers closer again, but once more Abu Baqir pushed them away.

"Your lorry wasn't working?"

"Yes. Please! I'm in a hurry."

The three officials looked at one another and quietly gave a knowing laugh. The desk of one of them was completely bare except for a small glass of tea; the other had stopped working to follow what was happening.

The fat man called Abu Baqir said, belching:

"Now, be sensible, Abu Khaizurana. Why do you hurry your journey in terrible weather like this? The room here's cool, and I'll order you a glass of tea. So enjoy the comfort."

Abul Khaizuran picked up the papers, took the pen lying in front of Abu Baqir and went round the table to stand beside him. He pushed the pen towards him, nudging his shoulder with his arm.

"I'll spend an hour sitting with you when I come back, but now let me leave, for Baqir's sake and Baqir's mother's sake. Here!"

Abu Baqir, however, did not move his hand but continued to stare stupidly at the driver, on the point of bursting out laughing again.

"Ah, you devil, Abu Khaizurana! Why don't you remember that you are in a hurry when you are in Basra? Eh?"

"I told you, the lorry was in the garage."

Again he pushed the pen towards Abu Baqir, but he didn't move.

"Don't lie, Abu Khaizurana, don't lie! Haj Rida has told us the story from A to Z."

"What story?"

They all exchanged glances, as Abul Khaizuran's face turned white with terror, and the pen began to tremble in his hand.

"The story of that dancer. What's her name, Ali?"

From the other side of the empty desk, Ali answered: "Kawkab."

Abu Baqir hit his desk with his hand and gave a broad smile.

"Kawkab, Kawkab. Abu Khaizurana, you devil. Why don't you tell us what you get up to in Basra? You make out to us that you are a decent, well-behaved fellow, and then you go to Basra and commit mortal sins with that dancer, Kawkab. Yes, Kawkab, that's the name."

"What's all this rubbish about Kawkab? Let me go before Haj Rida gives me the sack."

Abu Baqir replied:

"Impossible, Tell us about this dancer. The Haj knows the whole story and he's told it to us. Come on."

"If Haj Rida's told it to you, why do you want me to tell it again?"

Abu Baqir stood up and gave a bull-like roar.

"Ah! So it's true. It's a true story." He walked round the desk and came to the middle of the room. The story of depravity had excited him. He had thought about it day and night, endowing it with all the obscenity created by his long, tormenting deprivation. The idea that a friend of his had slept with a prostitute was exciting, and worth all those dreams.

"You go to Basra and make out that the lorry isn't working, and then you spend the happiest nights of your life with Kawkab. Good heavens, Abu Khaizurana! Good heavens, you devil! But tell us how she has shown her love for you. Haj Rida says that she loves you so much that she spends her money on you and gives you checks. Ah, Abu Khaizurana, you devil!"

He came up to Abul Khaizuran, his face red. Obviously, he'd enjoyed himself thinking about the story as Haj Rida had told it to him over the telephone. He leaned over and whispered hoarsely in his ear:

"Is it your virility? Or aren't there many men about?"

Abul Khaizuran laughed hysterically and shoved the papers at Abu Baqir's chest. He picked up the pen and began signing them automatically, shaking with suppressed laughter. But when Abul Khaizuran stretched out his hand to take them, Abu Baqir hid them behind his back, warding off Abul Khaizuran with his other arm.

"Next time I'll go with you to Basra. Agreed? You'll introduce me to this Kawkab. Haj Rida says she's really beautiful."

Abul Khaizuran said in a trembling voice as he stretched out his arm, trying to reach the papers:

"I agree."

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

Abu Baqir collapsed into renewed laughter, shaking his round head as he went back to his desk, while Abul Khaizuran rushed outside with his papers, pursued by Abu Baqir's voice:

"You devil, Abu Khaizurana! He's deceived us for two years, but now he's been shown up. Ah, you devil, Abu Khaizurana!"

Abul Khaizuran burst into the other room, looking at his watch. A quarter to twelve. The signing of the other papers didn't take more than a minute. When he shut the door after him the heat lashed him again, but he took no notice, jumping down the wide steps two at a time until he stood in front of his lorry. He looked at the tank for a moment and he had the impression that the metal was about to melt under that fearful sun. The engine responded to the first touch, and he instantly closed the door, not waving to the guard. The road now was completely level and he had a minute or a minute and a half before he could round the first bend, hiding him from the post. He was forced to slow down a little when he met a large lorry, but then he put his foot down till the vehicle was going at top speed. When he reached the bend the wheels set up a screech like a howl and almost touched the sand verge as they made their enormous turn. There was nothing in his mind but terror, and he thought he would collapse over his steering wheel in a faint. The wheel was hot and he felt it scorch his hard hands, but he didn't slacken his hold on it. The leather seat burned under him and the glass windscreen was dusty and blazed with the sun's glare.

A loud hiss came from the wheels as though they were flaying the asphalt. Did you have to talk so much rubbish, Abu Baqir? Did you have to spew up all your filth onto my face and theirs? The curse of almighty God be upon you. The curse of almighty God, who doesn't exist anywhere, be visited upon you, Abu Baqir! And on you, Haj Rida, you liar! A dancer? Kawkab? God damn you all!

He stopped the lorry sharply, and climbed over the wheel to the roof of the tank. When his hands touched the metal roof he felt them burn, and couldn't keep them there. He moved them away and leaned his elbows, in their sleeves, on the metal roof, crawling to the angular lock. He took hold of it with a corner of his blue shirt and turned it, so that it burst open and the rusty metal disk stood vertical over its hinge.

As he let go of the disk he caught sight of the heads of the watch on his wrist. They pointed to nine minutes to twelve. The round glass had cracked into little pieces. The uncovered opening yawned empty for a moment. Abul Khaizuran's face, drawn to it, twitched

compulsively, his lower lip trembling as he panted for breath, overcome with terror. A drop of sweat from his forehead fell onto the metal roof of the tank and immediately dried. He put his hands on his knees, bent his soaked back until his face was over the black hole, and shouted in a dry, grating voice:

"Assad!"

The sound reverberated in the tank and almost pierced his eardrums as it came back to him. Before the echo of the rumble that his first cry had set up had died away, he shouted again:

"Hey there!"

He put two firm hands on the edge of the opening and, supporting himself on his strong arms, slid down inside the tank. It was very dark there, and at first he couldn't make out anything, but when he moved his body away from the opening a circle of yellow light fell into the depths and showed a chest covered with thick gray hair that began to shine brightly as though coated with tin. Abul Khaizuran bent to put his ear to the damp gray hair. The body was cold and still. Stretching out his hand, he felt his way to the back of the tank. The other body was still holding on to the metal support. He tried to find the head but could only feel the wet shoulders; then he made out the head, bowed on the chest. When his hand touched the face, it fell into a mouth open as wide as it could go.

Abul Khaizuran had a choking sensation. His body had begun to run with sweat at such an amazing rate that he felt he was coated in thick oil, and he couldn't tell whether he was trembling because of this oil covering his chest and back or whether it was caused by fear. Bending down, he felt his way to the opening, and when he put his head through it, Marwan's face came into his mind for some reason, and wouldn't go away. He felt the face take possession of him from within, like a fresco shimmering on a wall, so he started to shake his head violently as he slipped down from the opening and the merciless sun burned it. He stood for a moment breathing in fresh air. He couldn't think of anything. Marwan's face had surged up to take complete possession of his mind, like a spring that bursts from the earth and sends its water high into the air. When he reached his seat he remembered Abu Qais, whose shirt was still lying on the seat beside him. He took it in his long fingers and threw

it far away. He switched on the lorry's motor and it began to roar again, as the lorry made its slow, majestic way down the slope.

He turned round to look through the small, wire-netted window, and saw the round disk open, standing straight over its hinge, with its inside corroded with rust. Suddenly the metal disk disappeared behind drops of salt water, which filled his eyes. He had a headache and vertigo such as he had never felt before. Were those salty drops tears, or sweat running from his burning forehead?

THE GRAVE

As darkness fell, Abul Khaizuran drove his lorry away from the sleeping city. Pale lights trembled along the side of the road, and he knew that those lamp-posts that were retreating in front of the window would come to an end shortly, when he had left the city far behind him. The darkness would be unbroken. The night was moonless, and the edge of the desert would be silent as the grave.

He turned his lorry off the asphalt road and drove along a sandy track that led into the desert. He had made up his mind at noon to bury them, one by one, in three graves. Now he felt consumed with exhaustion, as though a drug had been injected into his arms. He had no strength to work, and he wouldn't be capable of wielding a spade for long hours to dig three graves. Before he went to take his lorry out of Haj Rida's garage, he told himself that he wouldn't bury them. He would throw the three corpses into the desert and return home. But now he wasn't pleased with the idea. He didn't like to think that his companions' bodies should be lost in the desert, at the mercy of birds and beasts of prey, and that there would be nothing left of them after a few days except white bones lying on the sand.

The lorry moved over the sandy track with a muted noise, while he went on thinking. He wasn't thinking in the strict sense of the term, but a series of disconnected scenes was passing ceaselessly through his brain, incoherent and inexplicable. He could sense exhaustion creeping through his limbs like straight columns of ants.

A breeze sprang up and carried to his nostrils a smell of putrefaction. He said to himself: "The municipality piles up the rubbish here." Then he reflected: "If I dumped the bodies here they would be discovered in the morning and buried under official auspices."

He turned his steering wheel and followed the tracks of many wheels that had dug their path through the sand before him, and then he switched off the headlamps, advancing slowly by the light of the side-lamps alone. When the black heaps of rubbish rose up in front of him, he switched off the side lamps. The air around him filled with the putrid stench, but he soon got used to it. Then he stopped his lorry and climbed down.

Abul Khaizuran stood beside his lorry for a few moments to make sure that no one was watching him, then he climbed up onto the back of the tank. It was cold and damp. He turned the curved metal handle slowly and pulled the iron disk up so that it burst open with a sharp explosion. Supporting himself on his arms, he slid lightly down inside. The first corpse was cold and firm, and he tossed it over his shoulder. He pushed the head out of the opening first and then, holding the corpse by its legs, he lifted it and threw it upwards, hearing the heavy sound it made as it slid over the edge of the tank, and the muffled bump as it struck the sand. He had great difficulty in prising the hands of the other corpse away from the iron support, but then he pulled it by its legs to the opening and threw it out over his shoulder, straight and stiff. He heard it strike the earth. The third corpse was easier than either of its companions.

He jumped down, slowly closed the opening, and climbed down the ladder to the ground. There was thick darkness everywhere, and he was relieved that he would be saved by it from seeing the faces. Holding them by their feet, he dragged the corpses one by one and threw them onto the end of the road, where the municipality's dustcarts usually stopped to dump their rubbish, so that the first driver arriving in the morning would easily have an opportunity to see them.

He climbed into his seat, turned on the engine and slowly reversed, trying his utmost to mingle the tracks of his lorry's wheels with those of others. He had decided to drive back to the main road

in reverse, in order to confuse the traces completely. But a thought occurred to him when he had covered some distance, and he switched off the engine again, walked back to where he had left the bodies, and took the money from their pockets. He also removed Marwan's watch. Then he retraced his steps to the lorry, walking on the edge of his soles.

As he returned to the lorry and lifted one leg up, a sudden thought flashed into his mind. He stood rigid in his place, trying to do or say something. He thought of shouting, but immediately realized what a stupid idea that was. He tried to finish climbing into the lorry, but didn't feel strong enough. He thought that his head would explode. All the exhaustion which he felt suddenly rose to his head and began to hum in it, and so he put his head in his hands and began to pull his hair to expel the thought. But it was still there, huge and resounding, unshakable and inescapable. He turned to look back to where he had left the corpses, but he could see nothing, and that glance simply set the thought ablaze so that it began to burn in his mind. All at once he could no longer keep it within his head, and he dropped his hands to his sides and stared into the darkness with his eyes wide open.

The thought slipped from his mind and ran onto his tongue: "Why didn't they knock on the sides of the tank?" He turned right round once, but he was afraid he would fall, so he climbed into his seat and leaned his head on the wheel.

"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say anything? Why?"

The desert suddenly began to send back the echo:

"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why?"

THE LAND OF SAD ORANGES



WHEN WE SET OUT FROM JAFFA FOR ACRE, THERE WAS nothing tragic about our departure. We were just like anybody who goes to spend the festival season every year in another city. Our time in Acre passed as usual, with nothing untoward. I was young then, and so I probably enjoyed those days because they kept me from going to school. But whatever the fact of the matter, the picture gradually became clearer on the night of the great attack on Acre. That night passed, cruel and bitter, amidst the despondency of the men and the prayers of the women. You and I and the others of our age were too young to understand what the story meant from beginning to end, but that night the threads began to grow clearer. In the morning, when the Jews withdrew, threatening and fuming, a big lorry was standing at the door of our house. A simple collection of bedding was being thrown into it, from here and there, quickly and feverishly. I was standing leaning against the ancient wall of the house when I saw your mother climb into the lorry, followed by your aunt and the children. Your father started tossing you and your brothers and sisters into the lorry, and on top of the belongings, and then he seized me from my corner and lifted me over his head into the iron rack on the roof of the driver's cab, where I found my brother Riyad sitting quietly. The lorry was already moving off before I had settled myself into a comfortable position. Beloved Acre was already disappearing behind the bends in the road going up to Ras Naqura.

It was rather cloudy, and a chilly feeling invaded my body. Riyad was sitting quite quietly, with his legs hanging over the edge